**Jim Tuckerman’s Angel**

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Jim Tuckerman wanted to see angels more than he wanted anything else on God’s green earth.

He couldn’t easily explain why. When his friends or family would ask him what was so goddamned special about angels, he got tongue-tied and awkward, but would eventually, with the proper coaxing, manage a few fragmentary sentences about how glorious God’s own messengers must be, and how wonderful it was that God sent them among ordinary folks.

Whereupon Jim’s mother would either sniff disdainfully or growl angrily, depending on her mood, and point out that the Good Book said that God had created Man in His own image, and while Man had fallen from his high estate back when Eve pussywhipped Adam into eating the wrong thing, it still seemed to her that angels that were created just as God’s errand boys wouldn’t be half so magnificent as a good-looking young man in tight jeans.

“Bunch of half-assed things, neither man nor woman,” she said. “You want to see folks can’t make up their mind whether they’re pitching or catching, you just go on out to San Francisco and cruise the streets a bit, you’ll see plenty. And I figure angels probably aren’t much better. You’ll notice God never wastes much time talking to them in the Bible; no, He knows that men are a hell of a lot more interesting, got more to ’em, than the bunch of dickless choirboys He’s got fetchin’ and carryin’ for Him!”

“The Bible’s for men and women, Ma,” Jim said. “That’s why it’s about us and not the angels. They don’t need an instruction book to know what God wants of them; they’re God’s will made manifest. That’s why I want to see ’em, meet them and talk with them; they know God better than we do.”

“Hmph.”

Jim didn’t try to convince his mother of anything; he knew her better than that. She’d settled her mind on its path a long time ago, probably when he was still in diapers, and he couldn’t see her turning aside from it for anything short of the Second Coming — and at least she wasn’t expecting that to happen next Tuesday, the way Aunt Aimee was.

But he wasn’t letting her turn him aside, either. He looked around at the world God had created, the cast-aside world that God had left to Adam and Eve after they disappointed Him so much, and he saw the glory and wonder of it all, the magnificence of the vast blue sky and the bright green leaves, the smell of woodsmoke or wisteria or a pretty woman, the sound of the birds in the trees and the water in the creek, and it was all so beautiful he could scarcely stand it — and this was the fallen world, while the Lord’s angels never fell. How much more beautiful would they be, then?

Jim knew that for a lot of folks, God and His angels were something you talked about on Sunday mornings that didn’t have a thing to do with the everyday world. But Jim didn’t see it that way. He knew other people didn’t see any angels, but he didn’t let that stop him. He was pretty sure, from what the other fellows said, that he saw things not everyone saw — that he saw more than most people. He hoped that meant that he might be able to see an angel where other men wouldn’t, because he needed to see one.

Angels were the only glimpse of Heaven a man could hope for while he lived, and Jim wasn’t anywhere near sure enough of himself to think he’d be seeing anything but flames once he died. He knew he was a shiftless fool, since everyone had told him as much every day of his life, and he didn’t see as how there’d be room for such a one in God’s Heaven. Oh, Jesus loved him, he knew that, had been told it since before he could talk, but Jim didn’t figure that meant he wouldn’t catch Hell for his sins when he died, any more than old Ticker hadn’t caught Hell from Jim when he’d dig out under the fence to chase rabbits. Despite that Jim loved the old dog, he’d whacked Ticker across the nose and tied him up when he misbehaved and left him to whimper, and Jim wasn’t expecting anything kinder from God when his time came. A man should know better than a dog how to behave.

With that in mind, Jim didn’t think he’d be singing hymns in Heaven for eternity. He was pretty sure he was bound the other way. He accepted that, but before he went he wanted to get a look at what he’d be missing, and here on Earth that could only mean an angel.

He didn’t explain this all to his friends, for fear they’d tell him what a fool he was. He’d been talked out of a good many things in his life, and usually he wished later that he hadn’t been, and he wasn’t going to let that happen with this. It was too important. It was so important, in fact, that he didn’t intend to just quietly wait around home in hopes an angel would stop by Ballard, Kentucky on business. He intended to go out looking for one.

He didn’t tell his friends that, either.

Angels went everywhere, of course, going about the Lord’s business; everyone had a guardian angel watching over him. That was what Preacher Bill said, and Jim had never heard anyone question it. God’s messengers had errands to attend to in every corner of the world.

Jim hadn’t seen any of them, though, and he’d been looking. He wasn’t sure whether they were invisible even to him, or moved so quick he never caught a glimpse of them, or watched from afar with telescopic vision like Superman in the comics, but he never saw them.

He wanted to see one. It wasn’t enough to know they were there; he wanted to see one.

He’d tried praying for a glimpse, but as yet he hadn’t got an answer, unless the answer was “no.” God helps those who help themselves, though, so he wasn’t going to just wait. He was going looking.

He’d thought it out. Angels were God’s messengers, watching over people. Didn’t it follow, then, that there’d be more angels, and more of a chance of seeing one, if he was somewhere with more people in it? Ballard, population 115, was not exactly bustling.

So one day in August he drove the old Dodge 150 out of the barn, called to his mother, “Goin’ into town, Ma. Not sure when I’ll be back,” and headed up the highway past Winchester to the interstate. He had a few hundred dollars he’d saved up stuffed in his pants, and a bag of clothes and the like tossed in the back of the pick-up, and when he got to I-64 he headed east, because everyone knew it was more crowded back east on the coast than it was anywhere else.

It didn’t look more crowded at first, there where I-64 headed up into the mountains and through the Daniel Boone National Forest, but he knew he’d get to the real east eventually, and come out in Washington or New York or someplace like that.

He drove up past Ashland and Huntington and on to the east, staying on I-64 clear across West Virginia and into Virginia, where I-81 came in from the south. He drove past mile upon mile of rich green country, tall straight trees and fine green fields, all washed in God’s golden sunlight, and he marveled at the beauty of it all. The world was lush and lovely, and he gloried in it as he drove.

When I-64 split off from I-81 again and turned toward Richmond he stayed on I-81, because the signs said that could get him to Washington DC, and he thought that if ever there was a place on God’s Earth that needed angels, it must be Washington. Those senators and presidential staffers and all surely needed the Lord’s guidance to keep God’s country in its proper order, and wouldn’t there be angels to bring that guidance to hand?

By then he’d driven the day through. The sky was dark now, and he was tired, and the right headlight on the Dodge didn’t work the way it ought, so he followed the signs to a motel in New Market and got himself a room, and bought himself supper at the family diner across the road.

After he’d eaten he went back to the motel and sat in his room reading the Bible — the story of Lot, mostly. When he finished the chapter he said his prayers and went to bed.

In the morning he got up and got himself showered and dressed, and went out to the Dodge with his bag in one hand, but he didn’t get behind the wheel right at the first, because there was a man on the ground between Jim’s pick-up and the next car over, which was an old blue Chevy with taped-on plastic where the passenger side window should have been. The man had one hand under the Chevy, and his head pushed up to the underside of the Chevy.

He looked up at the sound of Jim’s footsteps, and Jim recognized his face as one he’d seen at supper the night before. It was a handsome face, with a narrow jaw and deep-set eyes.

“Got some trouble there?” Jim asked.

“’Fraid I do,” the man said. “The engine turns over fine, but there’s no power to the wheels. I was thinkin’ it might be a busted driveshaft.”

“More like to be the transmission gone bad,” Jim said. “Not that that’s so very much better.”

“You’re probably right about that,” the man said. He glanced at the Dodge. “That your truck?”

“Yessir.”

“And I’m blockin’ you, aren’t I? Sorry ’bout that.” He rolled over and sat up. Then he looked up at Jim again from where he sat. “You wouldn’t happen to be on your way to DC, would you?”

“I might be,” Jim admitted. “Why?”

“I got no right to ask you this, and if it’s any bother you just tell me no, but I sure could use a lift. I’ve got a job interview in Washington this afternoon, and there’s no way this heap is gonna get me there.” He slapped the Chevy. “Probably be a week’s work to get her runnin’ again, and that’s assuming they can get the parts and they’ll trust me to pay ’em, which frankly, I wouldn’t. Hell, the repairs are probably gonna cost more than the damn thing’s worth.” He got to his feet, and said, “What do you say?”

Jim had to think about this a little. Ma had always told him he was too trusting of strangers, but giving a man a helping hand was the Christian thing to do, and it wasn’t as if Jim had anything much this fellow was likely to be after stealing. The Dodge was in better shape than the Chevy, but not by much, and the stranger couldn’t know about the cash in Jim’s pants; if he was looking to rob someone, he wouldn’t have picked Jim.

He wasn’t any sort of pervert or anything, either, Jim was pretty sure. He didn’t look a bit like Ma’s descriptions; wasn’t a touch of make-up on him, and his clothes were just good decent clothes, no leather or silk.

And it could be that the Lord had put this man in his path for a reason. After all, God knew what Jim was up to, and why wouldn’t He want to give Jim a hand? Sure, Jim was hellbound, but that didn’t mean God wouldn’t cut him a break while Jim was still drawing breath. Jesus loved him, after all.

“I could do that,” Jim said.

“Awright! Thank you, friend! I’ll pay my share of the gas. Let me get my gear and turn in my key, and we can go soon as you’re ready.”

“All right. I’ll be turning in my key, too.” Jim had been thinking about maybe getting himself some breakfast, but now he thought he’d put that off a bit.

Jim tossed his bag in the back of the Dodge, then went back to check on his room and make sure he hadn’t left anything; then he went to the office to drop off the key, and got there just as the other man stepped up to the counter.

A moment later the two of them walked out to the truck together. The rider tossed his big old backpack in the back, next to Jim’s bag, then held out a hand and said, “My name’s Nick Lichtman.”

“Jim,” Jim said, shaking the offered hand quick and firm.

Then the two headed for the two doors. Jim climbed behind the wheel, while Nick slid into the passenger seat. “It’s real generous of you to give me a lift,” Nick said. “I could really use this job.”

“It’s not so much,” Jim said. “What line of work are you in?”

“Reclamation,” Nick said. “Been working freelance these last few years, but I’m hoping to get a government job — I wouldn’t mind having a pension and a health plan. What about you?”

“My folks have been farming for nigh onto a hundred years, out in Ballard, Kentucky,” Jim said. “Corn and tobacco, mostly.” He started the engine.

“A son of the soil, huh? Lot of hard work, farming.”

“Can be,” Jim acknowledged, as he shifted into reverse.

“So what takes you to the nation’s capital?”

Jim concentrated on getting out of the parking space and didn’t answer.

Nick seemed to take the hint, and shut up, at least for the moment. He let Jim get out of the parking lot and up the state road and onto the interstate in peace.

That seemed to be all the quiet he could stand, though. “Where you bound in DC?” he asked. “My interview’s on 14th Street, right downtown.”

“Don’t rightly know,” Jim said, concentrating on the traffic. He wasn’t used to driving as fast as folks did on this side of the mountains.

“You’re not after work, then? Nor visiting family?”

“Nope.”

“Not much of a talker, are you?” he said.

Jim glanced at him. “Don’t suppose I’ve much to say just now,” he said. “I’m keeping my mind on the driving.”

“In my experience, a man who don’t talk’s got something he wants to keep to himself, and he’s afraid it’ll slip out if he opens his mouth.”

“Can’t say as that’s been my experience. Might be any number of reasons to keep a mouth shut.” He glanced at the eighteen-wheeler in the rear view mirror; it was coming up fast behind them, and he wasn’t sure whether he’d best get out of its way, or just let it pass.

“But when a man answers a civil question with a bunch of dodges, I think there’s something he doesn’t want to say. Why are you going to Washington?”

“Don’t see as it’s any of your business,” Jim said.

“It’s not, but you’re doin’ me a favor as it is, I know that, so I was thinkin’ I might do you one in return. You said you didn’t know just where you were going in Washington; if you tell me what you’re after, I might be able to help you out with that. I’ve been there before, know the city pretty well. I can tell you the best route to the White House, if that’s what you want to see.”

“It’s not.”

“But you’re lookin’ for something, aren’t you?”

Jim sighed. “I am,” he admitted.

“What is it?”

Jim remembered his earlier thought, that the Lord might have put this fellow Nick in his path for a reason. Besides, what was he going to do if he thought Jim was crazy? He was in Jim’s truck, after all, and the .38 under the seat was on Jim’s side.

“I’m looking for an angel,” he said.

Nick considered that carefully for a moment before replying. He looked Jim over, then looked out the windshield at the highway for a bit, then looked at Jim again.

“There’s them that if they said that, I’d think they meant someone with money to invest, but you don’t strike me as that kind,” Nick said. “There’s them I’d think meant they were lookin’ to get laid, but you don’t seem one of those, either. I’m thinkin’ you mean it just the way you said it — you want to see one of God’s own angels, and not any sort of human being at all.”

“That’s right,” Jim said, a trifle uneasy at how Nick was taking this.

“Not a dead friend or relative?”

Jim snorted. “Dead souls ain’t angels,” he said. “Anyone who thinks that ain’t read the Good Book or paid attention in Bible school. The dead in Heaven are saints, not angels. Angels are God’s messengers, made before Man.”

Nick nodded and looked out at the road again. “I know that. Just makin’ sure you did.”

“’Course I do.”

The eighteen-wheeler roared past them in the left lane, and Jim gripped the wheel to keep the Dodge straight on the highway.

A moment later Nick said, “How do you know haven’t seen an angel?”

“What?”

“Well, they can look human if they want to, can’t they? That’s in the Bible, that some have entertained angels unawares. And the ones who visited Lot in Sodom, they were beautiful, but the Sodomites thought they were human.”

Jim frowned, remembering what he’d read the night before. Nick was right, but still...

“Then I haven’t seen an angel, have I? Just an angel’s disguise.”

“It’s still an angel.”

“It’s not what I’m looking for.”

“So you want to look on beauty bare, is that it?”

Jim glanced at him. “You could say that,” he said.

“Are you sure? Remember that a lot of the angels in the Bible were terrible to look upon — half the time the first thing they say is ’Fear not.’ You really want a look at something like that?”

“Yes, I truly do,” Jim said, letting up on the gas so as not to gain on the eighteen-wheeler on the upgrade they’d just hit.

“Why?”

“Because I reckon it’s the closest I’ll ever get to looking on the face of God.”

Nick didn’t answer that right away, but just looked at Jim, his expression growing thoughtful.

“Not optimistic about your post-mortem prospects, I take it?”

Jim glanced at him. “What?”

“Not expecting anything good when you die?”

Jim looked back at the road before answering. This fellow was smart, maybe smarter than Jim entirely liked.

“No reason I should,” he said.

Nick nodded. “Well, you’d know that better than I.”

For a moment neither man spoke; then Nick asked, “Why Washington?”

“It’s a big city. Lots for angels to do.”

“You think more people means a better chance of findin’ an angel? Seems to me that’s huntin’ a needle in a haystack.”

“God’s got a plan for us all,” Jim said. “Seems to me He’d send His angels to keep an eye on that plan.”

“God sees every sparrow’s fall, though. He and His angels would be everywhere.”

“Not that I’ve seen. People have guardian angels, though. I reckon if I get around enough people, I’ve got a better chance of spotting me an angel.”

Nick considered that for a moment, then shook his head. “I don’t think it works like that. I never heard of anyone seein’ guardian angels in New York, ’less you mean those punks with the berets.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Jim said. “But if I don’t look in the cities, where do I look?”

“I don’t know,” Nick admitted. “I never heard of anyone went lookin’ for angels and found ’em. I’m not sure you can see ’em.” He grimaced. “Not what you wanted to hear, I suppose.”

“Can’t say that it is. But I see things other folks don’t, sometimes, so I’m thinking I might see an angel if there’s one to be seen.”

“But you haven’t seen one yet.”

“Nope.”

“So you don’t know if you can?”

“Not for certain, but my heart says I can.”

They drove on in silence for some time then, making the turn to the east onto I-66 through Front Royal. They’d gone another ten miles when Nick spoke.

“Seems to me,” he said suddenly, “that you gotta look at this logically. You been thinkin’ about guardian angels, but hardly anyone ever seen one of those, at least not and known it. But there’s other angels.”

“Don’t know how to find them either, though,” Jim said gloomily.

“But there’s one angel that you know where he’s gonna be, sooner or later. And it’s one that doesn’t bother with disguises.”

Jim glanced at him. “There is?”

“The angel of death.”

Jim didn’t answer right away; he took his time to think about that.

Finally, though, he said, “No man knows the hour of his passing, so where do you reckon I’d find the Angel of Death?”

“A hospital,” Nick said. “The terminal ward. Maybe the emergency room.”

Jim considered that long and hard, and had to admit there was some promise to the idea.

“You don’t hear much about people seein’ the angel of death in the E.R.,” Nick mused, “but then, they aren’t lookin’.”

“Might be there’s a good reason for that.”

“People don’t much like to think about death, that’s for sure.”

That wasn’t what Jim had meant, but he didn’t say so.

They drove on in silence again for some time after that.

Finally, though, as they were cutting through Arlington and the Washington Monument was just visible ahead on the left, gleaming white in the sun, Jim said, “I don’t suppose you’d know much about hospitals in Washington?”

“Not a lot,” Nick admitted. “There’s one at Georgetown University.” He pointed past the monument.

Jim nodded. “Where’d you say your appointment is at?”

“Fourteenth Street, just across the bridge. Stay straight on this highway across the river — it changes number, but don’t let that throw you, and as soon as you’re across the river the highway curves to the right, but you bear left onto Independence Avenue and then turn left again onto 14th, and it’s just a few blocks up.”

A few minutes later they were indeed on Independence Avenue, and Jim saw a sign for 14th Street. They were driving through the largest city Jim had ever seen. “It looks like something off the television,” he said.

“Well, yeah,” Nick said. “Can you pull over up ahead there? I think that’s the building.” He pointed.

Jim managed to maneuver the Dodge over to the curb without causing a collision or encouraging much honking, and let Nick out. He fetched his pack from the back, then leaned back in and said, “Thanks for the ride. You serious about findin’ a hospital?”

“Reckon I am.”

“Well, if you go on up 14th across the Mall, then turn left on Pennsylvania Avenue up ahead, that’ll take you into Georgetown, and maybe there’ll be signs.”

“I’ll give it a try, then. Good luck.” He waved, and pulled back into traffic.

When he looked back on it later, Jim was amazed he managed to get anywhere in that city without getting the pick-up’s fenders more banged up than they already were. There were more cars in every block than in all of Ballard, more on every street than he’d seen in all his life, and about half of them were apparently being driven by crazies. Somehow, though, he got through it without hitting a thing.

He thought maybe his own personal guardian angel might have a thing or two to do with it, but he never did see any such being. If there was an angel at work, it was doing its best to stay out of sight. God’s handiwork wasn’t so obvious as that here. Man’s creations were everywhere, but except for a few trees and the sky above, the hand of the Lord was less evident.

But God had created Man in His image, and that image was everywhere. The streets were crowded with more people than Jim had ever seen. It was greatly distracting, and it took him more than an hour to find his way from one blue H sign to the next and finally to a hospital.

He wasn’t entirely sure whether this was the Georgetown University one that Nick had mentioned, or another, but it didn’t much matter — it was a hospital. He found a place to park the Dodge and walked into the hospital lobby.

There he stopped to look around, wondering where he might best go to have a chance of seeing the Angel of Death. No man knows the hour of his passing, as he’d told Nick, but Jim was sure that in a big place like this, full of the sick and injured, someone must die pretty much every day, and it was just a matter of finding the right person and staying by him until the Angel came for him.

There was a directory on the wall near the elevators; Jim went to take a look. He thought the cancer ward might be a good place to start, but when he read the list he didn’t see cancer; he saw any number of long names he didn’t know, like endocrinology and oncology, and he guessed one of those must be a doctor’s word for cancer, but he didn’t know which.

But there was an emergency room, and that was probably as good a place as any to look.

He almost expected someone to stop him and ask what he was doing there, or demand to see a visitor’s badge, or some such a thing, but no one did; he walked down the corridor and through the sliding glass door into the emergency room and looked around.

There were empty beds in darkened alcoves, and people in beds behind screens or curtains, and doctors and nurses dressed in white. It was quiet — not at all like the emergency rooms he had seen on TV, but of course those had been made-up stories about exciting times, not about ordinary days.

He stood for awhile, trying to decide what he should do. He felt a bit like a vulture, standing there hoping someone would die; it didn’t seem right.

But then, maybe he might see another sort of angel here. Guardian angels must be busy in a place like this. He found a chair in an open area and sat for a time, taking it in, listening to the murmur of the nurses’ voices, and the louder words of the doctors, and the tapping of fingers on keyboards, and looking around, trying to understand what he was seeing.

No one troubled him; they were all busy with their own concerns and none of his.

After a time — he wasn’t sure how long, but it might’ve been an hour — he grew restless. He had been sitting there waiting for something to happen, and it wasn’t any better than waiting back home in Ballard. He got back on his feet and began walking along, looking at each occupied bed, or at the screens and curtains, hoping for some sign of God’s messengers.

As he did, a doctor hurried past, and then another, and he turned to see that they were gathering at the big glass door where a sign read Ambulance Entrance — stand clear.

Then he heard a siren, and the roar of an engine, and the squeal of tires, as the door slid open, and a big boxy red ambulance was pulling up, the doctors hurrying out to meet it. Men in heavy coats swung open the rear doors and began hauling out stretchers. Jim stared, his heart in his throat, as three stretchers were unloaded, their wheels unfolded, and then they were rolling into the emergency room, and a nurse was suddenly at his elbow asking, “Can I help you find someone, sir?”

“No,” Jim said, keeping his gaze fixed on the stretchers. “I was... I was on my way out and I saw...”

“Don’t get in anyone’s way,” the nurse said. Then she was hurrying toward the stretchers herself.

Two of the stretchers had been rolled away already, but the third was still by the door, with people clustered around it and doctors bent over, and then it was there, above the stretcher. Jim saw it, and he knew instantly what he was seeing.

The Angel of Death.

It was a darkness and emptiness that filled the room without being in it at all. It had no shape but it had great black colorless wings and blind, all-seeing eyes. For an instant Jim saw it, saw the utter all-consuming nothingness of it, like an endless hole in the universe, there above the body.

And beyond it, through it, so briefly that Jim could not be sure he really saw anything at all, was something that might have been a light, or might have been nothing at all.

Then it was gone, and the doctors were stepping away from the body, and someone was swearing repetitiously, saying the same two words over and over, and Jim felt tears on his cheeks.

He stared at the place where the angel had been.

It had been so quick. He hadn’t had anything like a good look at it.

He had seen an angel, right enough, but he hadn’t seen enough of it. He wanted a good hard look at it.

The stretcher with the corpse on it was rolled away, out of his sight somewhere, and the doctors were gone with it, and Jim stood staring at the big glass door. It had closed again, and the big red ambulance had driven away, without sirens or lights.

He reached up and dabbed at his eyes, blinking away the tears.

“Did you see what you came for?” a voice asked, a familiar voice, and Jim turned to see Nick Lichtman standing there behind him.

“Reckon I did,” Jim said. “What brings you here? Wa’n’t you getting interviewed?”

“I got interviewed,” Nick said. “They said to come back tomorrow, ten a.m., for a follow-up, which is promisin’, but it left me a bit at loose ends for the rest of today, y’know? So I thought I’d come see if you found the place and got what you were after.”

“I found it,” Jim said.

“Did you see your angel?”

“I saw it.”

Nick blinked. “Did you really?”

“I saw it,” Jim repeated, remembering that vast dark emptiness, and the tantalizing hint of something more, something beyond.

Nick stared at him. “I will be damned,” he said. “What did it look like?”

“Can’t rightly say. Big. Dark. Empty.”

“That doesn’t sound real attractive.”

Jim looked at Nick the way he’d look at a hound that wouldn’t back down when called off. “I wouldn’t think the Angel of Death ought to be real pretty,” he said.

But even as he said it, he knew he was wrong. The angel had been beautiful in its utter desolation, in its purity and simplicity. There were no complications to it, no uncertainties — it was exactly and entirely what it was, no more and no less, without doubts or reservations. Jim remembered his mother talking about the glories of a man’s body, and he supposed she had a point; certainly a woman’s body was beautiful in its complexity and contradictions, the combinations of softness and strength, the smooth surfaces that were actually an intricate mass of fluids and follicles and a hundred other things.

The angel had had none of that, no flesh, no real shape, nothing but a single iteration of divine will, absolute and infinite, and it had been terrible and beautiful.

Jim ached to look on it again, to drink in the sight of that essence.

“I suppose not,” Nick said. “Nothin’ pretty about death. So you’re satisfied? Ready to go back home to Kentucky?”

“No,” Jim said slowly. “Can’t say I am.” He wanted to see it again. He wanted to see what lay beyond it, whether there was really anything there at all, or whether he had imagined that because his mind could not comprehend so total an emptiness.

“No?” Nick looked around the emergency room. “What are you thinkin’?”

“It was too quick,” Jim said. “I didn’t get a good look at it. And it was almost like I could see something through it.” The words didn’t convey his meaning well, but human speech couldn’t.

Nick’s expression turned suddenly solemn. “Through it?”

“Yup.”

“You don’t just mean the wall, do you?”

“No.” Whatever he had or hadn’t seen within and beyond the angel, it was nothing there in the emergency room.

“Was it... you know, the light? The light?”

“Might’ve been. Couldn’t say for sure.” Jim hadn’t really thought about it in those terms. To reduce whatever he had glimpsed to human words like light, or Heaven, or Hell, or even the Face of God, seemed to diminish it somehow.

“You saw it?”

“Can’t say for sure. Thought I might’ve.”

“You mean it? You aren’t pullin’ my leg?”

“I’m not joking.” Jim’s expression left no room for doubt.

For a moment the two men stood silently thinking. Then Nick said, “There’s some would say you must be nuts.”

Jim smiled crookedly. “It’s a sad world, my Ma says, where people don’t know what they’re seeing, and if seeing angels means I’m crazy, I’d say she was right — that’s pretty sad. The Bible talks about people seeing angels, and people have seen ’em all along, now and again. I don’t reckon one’s got to be crazy.”

“Most people don’t see angels.”

“Most people aren’t looking.”

“So you saw the Angel of Death, and you want another look at it?”

“That’s about the way of it.”

“What’re you goin’ to do about it?”

“Hadn’t made up my mind as yet.”

“Gonna wait around here until someone else dies?” Nick glanced around at the quiet room — there were voices from somewhere off to the left, where the doctors were working on the others who’d been brought in by that ambulance, but this area was deserted for the moment. “Could take awhile.”

“It could,” Jim agreed.

Nick looked around again, then leaned close and whispered, “O’course, you could hurry things up a little.”

Jim blinked. “What?” Astonished, he looked at Nick’s face.

“You could find some poor bastard who hasn’t got very long, and help him along,” Nick said quietly. “Maybe a pillow over the face. So you won’t blink at the wrong time, or be in the john when it happens. Be a shame to sit with someone for days waiting for him to die, and then miss the show.”

“You... you’re saying I might kill someone?” The idea was horrible — but at the same time, the idea of seeing the Angel of Death again was horribly alluring.

It was a temptation, truly it was. Jim look at Nick.

“Someone who’s dying anyway,” Nick said. “You’d be putting him out of his misery, y’know? It’d be a kindness, really.”

Jim looked into Nick’s eyes — brown eyes, dark and deep-set. Jim looked into those eyes long and hard, and he saw what there was to see there, and he shivered.

He saw emptiness there, and darkness, and a deliberate hiding of any light that might lie beyond. There was a purity and simplicity to that darkness that was not quite like anything Jim had ever seen in a man’s eyes before.

He remembered his mother saying that men were more interesting than angels, that there was more to them, and he knew she’d been right.

“It’s not for us to play God,” Jim said.

“What?” Nick said, backing off a little from Jim’s gaze. “Okay, maybe that’s not such a great idea, killing someone, but just waiting...”

“You can stop now,” Jim said, interrupting him and looking away.

“What?”

“I know you. I’ve seen enough.” Jim looked up at the ceiling, at the off-white acoustic tile.

“Jim, I’m just tryin’ to be helpful...”

“You’re tempting me, Nick, and I don’t want that. I’ve seen enough. I’ll be going home now.” He started to turn away.

Nick caught his arm. “Home? But you wanted another look at the Angel of Death!”

“Reckon I’ve seen enough angels for now,” Jim said. “More than my share, I’m thinking.”

“One quick look at the Angel of Death?” Nick sounded almost angry. “That’s enough for you? I thought you’d said you’d been waitin’ all your life to see and angel, and you get half a glimpse, and you’re ready to pack it up and go home?”

“I’ve had more than a glimpse,” Jim said. “Seems to me I drove halfway across Virginia with an angel beside me.”

Nick frowned. “Your guardian angel, you mean? You think you needed an angel to protect you from me, because I suggested you might want to end the sufferin’ of some poor sick old man?”

Jim shook his head. “No, Nick,” he said gently. “I know who you are. I’ll be going now.”

“You think so, do you?” Nick’s voice was suddenly strong; he did not bother with further denials.

“I do, Nick. And I reckon I might have a better shot at Heaven than I thought, or you wouldn’t have troubled yourself with me.” He thrust out a hand to shake. “I thank you for that, Nick. A fallen angel is still an angel, and I reckon that one way or another every angel, fallen or not, is God’s will made manifest.”

Nick looked down at the hand, then back up at Jim’s face.

And then he vanished, without taking Jim Tuckerman’s hand, and he left nothing behind but the odor of brimstone.

*end*