



Death and the Angels

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A Fish Dinner

School children and parents were often unaware of the cruelty of their ways, or the anger they made simmer in a young child because of their teasing or lack of parenting skills. The old saying, 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,' is perhaps the biggest lie a child is ever taught in kindergarten. The pain from stick and stones fades quickly and rarely leaves scars. But words echo in the mind for a lifetime until the scourge of Alzheimer's or another dementia finally erases them from the brain cells.

Words hurt Donny Baker. The school kids called him Dumb Donny because he wore glasses and needed braces. He looked nerdy as a young child, and when adolescence finally began sculpting a man's body from a child's, the look didn't really go away so much as solidify into an adult nerdy look. His parents couldn't afford braces, and the large, front crooked teeth remained that way. The biggest challenge they presented, aside from social settings and getting dates, was eating sweet corn, and Donny learned to hate sweet corn, even the Green Giant brand from the can that was off the cob. Corn only reminded him of his looks and all the teasing. He refused to even touch corn bread or corn tortillas. He held a hatred for anything that reminded him of his appearance and the cruel teasing he had endured for years.

Home was not the sanctuary from teasing. His parents weren't much better than the kids at school. His father was never home; he was either working at the factory, at the bar after work, or chasing whatever female who would pay attention to him and the drinks he paid for. His mother simply stayed home and drank. It was a blessing they never had a second child. Donny figured it was his fault. Who would want a second child when their first turned out to be such a failure?

When he graduated high school, Donny went to trade school for a while trying to learn to be an auto mechanic. His dad thought it was a stupid idea and would remind his son what a failure he was putting Legos together. How could he assemble anything mechanical? Donny dropped out and got a job at Pete's Pets near Kissimmee, south of Orlando. It was there he found comfort in animals that loved him unconditionally, animals that never insulted him, or hit him, or teased him about his looks. Giving back love still remained a problem, so he stayed away from anything he could hold and cuddle, and raised fish.

His parents died young, the result of abusing their bodies with cigarettes and alcohol. When Donny was thirty-two, he had buried both parents, his mother last, sold their very modest home, auctioned off their belongings, and took the money and bought his own place a few miles outside of the small town of St. Cloud. He didn't want neighbors nearby, they only snooped and talked about you, and made too much noise when a person wanted quiet. He dug a huge pond in the back yard by hand, seventy feet wide and over 8 feet deep by the short dock. The task took three months, most of it working in the sweltering, humid summer heat; but each shovel full of dirt was tossed aside with muscle strength fueled by years of hurt and anger. The digging felt good, and when he was finished, he leaned against the shovel and beamed with pride at the finished hole.

The pond took days to fill with the hose. He added filtration equipment and a heating system, using some of the money he inherited, and then began adding Piranhas he raised in aquariums in his home. Donny studied everything he could find about the fish, and after a while, considered himself an expert. He studied about other animals that were sold at Pete's Pets, and customers looked up to him like he was a pet genius of sorts.

Piranhas had a bad and undeserved reputation, and for that reason, Donny could identify with them. Often portrayed as fish that hunt in huge schools that will strip a carcass down to the bone should an animal fall into the Amazon, they were often shy fish that preferred to hunt for food alone, or in groups of twenty or less. One fact was true, their mouths held razor sharp teeth designed to chomp off pieces of flesh in a single bite to be swallowed whole.

In the house he had numerous aquariums in which he also raised Piranhas. He quickly found they did better in small numbers unless the aquarium was large with sufficient hiding places. They also became cannibalistic in larger numbers. On more than one occasion, a tank housing four would suddenly have only three, with no trace whatsoever of the fourth, missing fish.

Piranhas are not the king of their jungle. They are hunted by larger fish, river dolphins, crocodile or caiman, river turtles and otters. While often quiet and aloof in the Amazon River and its tributaries, the locals can recall endless and true stories of horses, donkeys and men being devoured within minutes after wandering into a hungry school of fish. The red, churning water of such an event was an image no witness could ever forget.

Because of Donny's love of the Piranha, and his desire to get as close to them as possible, he sported the scars on most fingers to prove it. The tips of his left index and middle finger, and the tips of his right index finger were

missing. He thought the look simply went along well with the thin, black hair, buckteeth, an overbite and big ears.

Pete Skinner owned Pete's Pets. He was forty-nine and recently divorced from a woman who decided she had had enough of his obsession with anything that walked, jumped, slithered or swam. She wanted a normal life and a normal house that wasn't shared with 'critters' as she called them. She was sick and tired of finding frozen brine shrimp and other delicacies in the refrigerator, so she filed for divorce, took fifty percent of what they had, and moved to Pittsburgh to be closer to family. Pete was stocky from eating too much and moving too little. A few beers every evening helped the waistline grow over the years as well. He was a decent boss who treated Donny well. In many ways, he felt sorry for the younger man who seemed to not have a friend in the world. He kept to himself, never talked of going out with girls, but he treated the customers great, always willing to demonstrate his knowledge. In fact, Pete was certain that Donny knew more about the pets they sold than he did. He often invited Donny over for a simple dinner, but each time Donny turned down his invite. Still, he would ask on occasion.

"It's been a slow day," Pete said as he tidied up behind the counter. Pet stores were never known for excelling in cleanliness, especially the stand alone types that weren't inside a shopping center or mall.

"It's Monday," Donny acknowledged. "It always gets better later in the week." Donny was busy cleaning an aquarium that housed about a dozen South African tree frogs. They were colorful frogs, and some he knew, were extremely poisonous if accidentally eaten.

"Yeah, I suppose it does. I'll be glad when tourist seasons swings into full gear."

It was May, an awkward time for Florida. The snowbirds had gone north, and with school still in session, families and kids weren't vacationing yet.

"We're doing okay," Donny told him. He finished wiping the glass sides, and then replaced the lid over the aquarium. He tapped gently on the glass. "There you go little guys. All clean!" Donny smiled, grabbed the bucket and sponge and put them away in the back room.

The door opened and a doorbell sound chimmed to announce a customer had entered.

"Good afternoon!" Pete said with a wide grin. "How are you today?"

"Oh, just fine, thank you," the man said. He looked to be about Donny's age.

"What can I help you with, or would you prefer to look around? We

don't use high pressure tactics here. We sell little friends, not used cars." He smiled again.

"I'm looking for an interesting fish. My wife left me not too long ago, and I decided to get something she would never let me have."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, I mean your wife leaving you."

The man waved his comment away. "Don't worry about it. She was a nagging bitch anyway."

The comment took Pete by surprise. What did a person say to that? "What kind of fish are you looking for?" Pete finally asked.

"Something different and exotic," the man answered, as he looked around the store.

Donny returned from the back room after hearing the conversation. Any lead in to talk about Piranhas was welcomed. "Hello there," he said beaming. He always smiled with his mouth closed, which was difficult to do with buckteeth. It took a lot of training in front of the bathroom mirror, but he had perfected it a long time ago. "Interested in Piranhas?"

The man looked at Donny for a long time before answering. It was a stare of recognition. "Do I know you? You look familiar."

"Well, I'm not sure. How would you know me?" Donny suddenly felt uncomfortable. The conversation was moving toward social talk. He didn't want to be known or recognized. He wanted to be left alone.

"I don't know for sure." The man rubbed his chin briefly. "Where did you go to school?"

"High school?"

The man nodded. "Yeah, high school."

"In Orlando." He stopped and studied the man's face. He did look familiar.

"Not at Cypress Creek High School?"

"The one on Bear Crossing Road?" It was a stupid name for a road, and an even dumber response to a question.

"Yeah, that's the one. What year did you graduate?"

"Eighty-nine," Donny said slowly. Meeting anyone from his past was the same as thinking about it. He preferred the past stay dead and buried like his parents.

"You're kidding? Me too." The man smiled, walked up to Donny and held out his hand. "I'm Scott Morris." The two shook hands.

"Glad to meet you. I'm Donny, this is Pete," he said sheepishly, pointing to Pete Skinner.

After Donny released his hand, Scott stepped back a little and looked at Donny. “Donny Baker, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Donny wanted to run into the back room and hide. Scott was the star high school quarterback. He was a brains in class, good looking and dated half the cheerleaders. The two couldn’t be more opposite.

“Donny Baker,” the man said, saying the name slowly. “Well, how have you been all these years? What’s it been, fifteen years now? I haven’t seen you at any reunions.”

“I didn’t go to any. Guess I’ve been busy.”

“Hey, we’ve got to get together and talk. Most people I knew from Cypress Creek have left the area. After fifteen years, people lose touch.”

We were never in touch, you jock bastard, Donny thought. “We’ll have to do that. About that fish, do you like Piranhas?”

“You know, I’ve always been intrigued by those fish. Man eaters!” he said with a chuckle.

“They are amazing fish. Generally though, they have a bad reputation they don’t deserve. They mostly either stay to themselves, or in very small groups of less than twenty. In the wild they’re more likely to nibble on the fins or tail of a fish than to eat something whole.”

“Really?” Scott began to look very interested. Suddenly Donny was the smart one who knew all the answers, and Scott was the stupid one. Stupid Scott. It had a nice ring to it.

“Come over here and I’ll show you a few.” Donny lead Scott to a fifty-five gallon tank that housed two, large silvery Piranhas. “We have smaller ones too,” he added.

Scott bent down and studied the fish. “What do they eat, besides fingers,” he said with a chuckle. There was something about that laugh that Donny hated. It reminded him of high school, but he couldn’t recall exactly why.

“They do eat fingers, if you’re not careful.” He showed Scott his hand.

“Wow, they did that?”

“Both hands,” Donny added, holding up the other hand. “You really need to be careful. When these fish are hungry, they’ll eat each other.”

“That’s really cool. What do you feed them?”

“Smaller fish, small pieces of meat, frozen brine shrimp, things like that. They’re really pretty easy to care for.”

“Wow, they are cool looking. I’d love to have a few. Wouldn’t it be a blast to sit back, have a few beers and watch this thing devour some fish?”

“It doesn’t usually happen like that. They’re shy. They usually eat when

they know they aren't being watched."

"Oh really?" Scott stood straight. "Bummer. But they are cool looking."

"Do you need a tank set up too?"

"I'll need everything," Scott answered.

"I have quite a collection of Piranhas at home. In fact, I have a small pond of them in the back yard." He suddenly had an image flash through his mind, one of pushing Scott into a hungry school of Piranhas. He held back a wide grin, the kind that would bare his buckteeth.

"You're kidding? Wow, that would be a cool thing to see. Any neighbor cats ever fall in?" He chuckled again.

"Ah, no, no they don't." There was that laugh again. It was beginning to poke at old memories. "Perhaps you'd like to stop by, see the pond, have a beer and talk about old times."

Pete found his opening and jumped in. "Why don't you cut out early and show Scott your pond. I'm sure he'd find it very fascinating." Donny needed friends, and here was an opportunity. Perhaps this Scott fellow knew of some single girls.

Donny looked at Pete, and then checked his watch.

"Oh, don't worry about the time. You work hard. Cut out early and don't worry about losing anything on your paycheck," Pete told him.

"Really? Well, first let's see what Scott needs to buy."

Donny showed him all the equipment he might need. He ended up selling a fifty-five gallon aquarium, filtration system, heater, gravel, and other supplies for a total of four hundred twenty-two dollars. Scott was disappointed when he learned he'd need to set up the tank and get it stabilized before he could buy the fish. Donny helped him load the purchase into his car, and then told him to follow him home. It was a fifteen mile ride south, 'to the middle of no where', he told Scott.

As Donny pulled into his dirt and gravel drive, a tiny cloud of dust erupted into the air. The old car bounced over ruts in the drive and came to a stop beside the back door.

Donny got out of his car carrying a small, paper bag and waited for Scott to join him. "The pond's back here," he said, and started walking towards the back yard. The yard was scrubby, not landscaped at all except for around the pond. Bushes bordered the pond, there were a few Banana trees, a Hybiscus, a couple of palm trees, but it was bare by the short, ten-foot dock.

"Wow, this is cool. You have Piranhas in there?" Scott said as he walked closer to the edge of the pond. He stepped cautiously as if the water almost

had the power to draw him in. "I don't see anything."

"They're in there. I planted lots of weeds and other plants to give them plenty of hiding places. I worry they'd start eating each other if the pond was nice and clear like a swimming pool."

"I guess that makes sense." He stepped closer as Donny walked up behind him.

Donny opened the paper bag and pulled out a large can of brine shrimp. "They love this stuff," he said as he walked out onto the dock. Scott followed close behind.

"Shouldn't you have some railings or something? Don't you ever worry about falling in?"

"I'm careful," he said. He opened the container, walked to the very edge of the dock and then got down on his knees. "I like to watch," he said. He brought the container over the water and then turned it upside down. The contents fell into the water with a hundred tiny splashes. In seconds, the surface began churning, and it turned to boiling water as the hundreds of fish devoured the food. Within ten seconds, the food was gone and the water began to settle. Hundred of tiny, circular waves expanded to the shoreline.

"Wow! That was amazing! How many are in there?" Scott stepped back a little.

"I'm not sure. There must be hundreds, perhaps a few thousand. I have no idea really. They breed on their own. I'm thinking of digging a bigger pond, but they are getting expensive to feed."

"What else do you feed them?"

"Small fish, gold fish mostly. And sometimes, I toss a rat or mouse in. That's always interesting to watch." Donny replaced the lid on the container and put it back in the bag to throw away later. "Care for a beer?"

"Sure. This hot sun calls for one."

"Come on inside. It's air conditioned, but I'll need to turn it on. I leave it off when I'm at work to save money. Electricity in Florida isn't cheap."

"That's for sure."

They went inside where Donny got them each a beer. After he turned on the air and closed the windows, they went into the small living room and sat down. The house was sparsely furnished, but was relatively clean and uncluttered. Scott walked around the room looking at all the aquariums in the house. "This must be food," he said, stopping at a small tank that housed rats.

"I raise my own. I have a few more in a spare room. I don't like to keep them out here. In fact, I'm thinking of moving that tank into the other room."

Scott sat down and chugged on his beer. “Nice little place here.”

“I like it.” He took a long drink. They talked for a while, steering away from high school discussion, for now. Scott was a bank teller, a far cry from the success he enjoyed in high school and bragged he would be in life. He was twice divorced, had herpes, had been arrested once for domestic assault, which he claimed never happened. His wife was simply angry over an affair. The more Scott drank, the more Donny learned about his life. And like most jocks, Donny thought, he loved to talk about himself. It was almost a totally safe conversation. They finished several beers, and then Donny got out a half full bottle of whiskey and they did a few shots. Maybe it was the years of loneliness, the high school classmate that reminded him of old, simpler times when he didn’t have to fend for himself, or just someone to talk to beside the fish. Donny almost enjoyed the conversation. Until Scott got too drunk to hold his tongue.

“Didn’t people call you Dumb Donny?” Scott asked as he took another shot of whiskey. His words were beginning to slur now.

“Ah, yeah, some did,” Donny answered.

Scott laughed. “I remember now. You never went to a football game, did you? Too bad. You missed some great ball.”

“No, I didn’t. I was never too interested to sports, I guess. My dad never took me to a game. My mom was a drunk.”

“That’s common,” Scott slurred. “Didn’t guys always snap the towel at your dick in the locker room?” He chuckled again. “They always did that if you had a tiny dick,” he added.

Donny sat in the recliner holding the cold beer between his hands. “That wasn’t me. Perhaps someone else.” Being ugly was one thing, but no man ever admitted to having a tiny dick. He took a long sip of his beer, rested it between his legs, and then grabbed the beer and took another drink. Sitting still was getting to be difficult. “How about if we go outside and feed a rat to the fish? It’s dark now. They eat better in the dark. They feel safer.”

“Hey, want to?” Scott stood up and almost fell over his own feet. “Gimme another beer. I don’t want to see this sober.” Donny didn’t think there was any chance of that happening. He grabbed another beer for Scott and they went outside. On the way out, he turned on the rear porch light that was purposely aimed at the pond.

As they stepped off the tiny, rear porch, a dim cone of light cut through the growing darkness. Crickets and bugs made their evening songs, and the sky was filled with stars. It was still in the mid seventies and a light breeze

stirred the air. Donny walked onto the wooden dock, followed closely by a staggering Scott. The water looked black as ink.

“How can you see anything? It’s pitch black.”

“It needs to be dark for the best results. But you’ll see the water churn up, and the blood. Let me run in and get a rat.”

“Hurry. I probably better be headin’ home soon.”

Donny stepped around Scott on the narrow dock and ran into the house. A minute later he returned with a paper bag and a flashlight. “I brought this for you,” he said, handing the flashlight to Scott.

“Oh, thanks man. That will make it more fun.” He smiled as he looked at the flashlight.

Donny carefully stepped around Scott and walked to the end of the dock. “Now don’t shine the light until I say so. Let them hear the splash first, and then when they start eating, go ahead and shine the light on them.”

“Gotcha,” Scott said as he swayed on the dock.

Donny opened the bag and reached inside. He grabbed hold of the small rat, pulled it out and bent down closer to the water. “Get ready,” he said. He extended his arm over the black, inky water. The rat squirmed trying to break free, when Donny suddenly released it.

There was a splash. The flashlight beam went on and Scott pointed it on the water. The little rat began swimming furiously when all of a sudden, the water began to churn. The biting fish pulled on its legs, sending it partially under water. It had stopped swimming as all of its paws were becoming chewed to the bone. It squealed loudly, a piercing scream of sorts. Donny looked away briefly.

“This is so cool,” Scott said.

Donny didn’t think so, not really. It was nothing more than part of nature. How things worked. It was no worse than slaughtering cattle for a hamburger.

The water churned, and the rat was slowly pulled under. The water boiled rapidly, almost violently as if some giant whisk was stirring it from below. Then suddenly, it fell quiet, and the churning slowed to nothing more than bubbles and waves, and then nothing.

“That’s it,” Donny said.

Scott continued shining the light. The beam moved across the water as he swayed in his drunken stupor. “Member that cheerleader I dated, Pat?”

“I guess so,” Donny replied, barely recalling anything from high school at that moment.

“Her name was Pat,” Scott said.

“You said that.”

“Someone didn’t like her and called her Pat the Rat. They wrote it on her locker.”

“If you say so. That was a long time ago.”

“I just ‘membered that someone said it was you. Is that true?”

“Ah, that was a long time ago. I don’t even remember anyone named Pat.”

“I think you do!” Scott pointed the light beam into Donny’s eyes. “You’re a fuckin’ liar!” He tossed the light aside and it fell into the pond with a splash. He took a step closer to Donny who was already standing a foot away from the end of the dock. “It was you, wasn’t it? You hated jocks, didn’t you? And cheerleaders too, you hated everyone, didn’t you? Now I remember!” He pushed Donny, but it was a half hearted push. Suddenly, he had forgotten where he was standing. In the darkness, there were no boundaries, no end to the dock, no black, cold, inky water on either side.

“You’re drunk,” Donny said.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” He shoved Donny again until Donny found himself on the very end of the dock.

“Stop that!” Donny yelled. This was his house, goddamn it! He went to shove Scott, but Scott expected it and had raised his arms in preparation. They grabbed each other and struggled. Donny pulled Scott towards him, and then tried to push him away. Scott lost his balance and tried to regain it, but in his drunken state he quickly over compensated. Scott teetered one way and Donny the other. Both of them waved their arms wildly, trying to regain their balance. In the darkness, it was impossible to see the dock beneath their feet.

“Ahhhhhh!” Scott yelled, his arms flailing. “Ah, shit!” he screamed as he tumbled off the dock and into the cool, black water.

“Dammit!” Donny yelled. He looked down at the solid black surface of the water as he felt his feet leave the dock’s surface. A second splash followed. Donny struggled to find the edge of the dock. The distant porch light only cast dark shadows across the pond, and the dock was nothing but a different shade of black. His feet could not touch bottom that was about eight feet below the surface. And then he felt it.

There was a stinging like hot needles stabbing into his legs as the fish found flesh and began ripping through his clothes.

“Ow! Goddamn it! Ouch, ah shit, that hurts! Damn it!” The frenzy started.

Scott began swimming toward the dock, but in his drunken state and in

the darkness, he actually swam away from it toward the pond's center. He felt the tangle of weeds wrap around his legs, and then suddenly tiny razor blades dug into his skin.

"Goddamn it you sonofabitch! Ouch, motherfuck!" Suddenly, like the answer to a dinner bell, every fish sensed food and hurried to the splashing. Using razor sharp teeth, they grabbed onto pieces of clothing, chewing rapidly through to skin. A Piranha will devour large pieces of flesh whole until it is bulging with a meal. The fish swarmed around each of them, and in seconds, their bodies were covered with an overcoat of hungry Piranhas. Some fish were themselves devoured in the frenzy.

Scott tried grabbing the fish and slapping them away with his hands. When he brought a hand above water he saw the dark shadows of several Piranhas hanging on to fingers, to the fleshy portion of his palm, chewing and biting off bits of flesh and then dropping into the water to swallow them whole. The water was churning violently, looking like water at a full boil.

As the fish chewed large holes in their clothing, they entered and begin to feast on the flesh. It was like falling into a pool of hot acid. Within seconds, some were gnawing on leg bone. Both men were screaming now, unable to curse or find any words to match their fear. Scott let out an ear-piercing scream when a swarm of fish found first one testicle and then the other. In a few quick bites, his penis and scrotum were devoured. He felt the blood flow from his brain, and if it had not been for the darkness, he would've seen stars.

Donny waved his arms, trying to keep something above water, when one of them struck the dock. He grabbed hold and was suddenly aware that his hand was now missing three fingers and fish were biting and holding on to what flesh remained. He tried to grip the wooden plank, but there was no strength left in his hand. Burning needles of pain shot up his legs. He was feeling faint. The pain had found every single nerve ending and lit them all on fire. The hundreds of fish biting all at the same time were more than his brain could sort through and register. It simply felt as if every area of his body was enduring the maximum amount of pain it could possibly comprehend. Within seconds, he fell unconscious and slipped under the water.

Scott continued screaming, but there were no neighbors to help, and help couldn't be close enough to save his life. His shirt had been ripped to tiny threads. The fish had eaten away at his abdomen and begun entering the bloody cavity. He felt a pulling inside his gut as the fish tugged on his intestines. He tried to kick his legs in the water, but nothing moved in response. He couldn't

imagine that his legs had already been devoured, but they were gone, as the fish continued to chew away at the fleshy thighs that still remained. The water continued to boil and splash, and Scott kept trying to fight away the fish, but there were too many of them. As he slipped lower in the water, the fish attacked his face like a thousand tiny, red hot ice picks. They began chewing on his nose and cheeks, finding his tongue and eyes and stabbing them with tiny needles. Scott tried to scream, but nothing came out except silence. He felt consciousness slip away quickly, and his vision went black. He thought about high school, and his dying brain conjured up images of a much younger Donny, with tears in his eyes as the other jocks teased him, the times they pushed him around, snapped towels at him in the locker room, pushed his books out of his arms and laughed as papers went flying across the crowded hallway.



It wasn't funny now. It shouldn't have been funny ever. As Scott fell unconscious, his last thought was, how was he going to explain all this in heaven when he met Pat? She had died two years ago in a drowning accident. She had been his first love, in many ways, his only love, the one every high schooler never stops thinking about no matter how old they become. Pat was the one who made him want to be a better person, but she rejected him.

Dying for a Cigarette

Craig Morris knew he should give up cigarettes. He'd been told for five years by his physician, and four years, three hundred sixty-four days by his wife Ellen. She'd been visiting her mother the day he went to the physician. It was the only day of peace he'd known. First, she took bacon away from his breakfast. It had been a regular item on the table every Sunday morning since they married twenty-five years ago. Then the butter disappeared and margarine took its place. Two-percent milk found its way into the refrigerator, and even though he didn't eat eggs, she brought home artificial ones called Egg Beaters and began fixing those for breakfast every Sunday. A bagel with cream cheese was nothing but a memory.

It was almost enough to make a man want to get up early and sneak out of the house to attend church on Sunday morning.

When Ellen did buy beer, it was the light, reduced calorie kind. And if he wanted to grab a handful of nuts or chips, he'd have to stop at the bar on the way home from work when they had free snacks during Happy Hour. It would drive any man to drink.

Craig had cut down on his smoking, going from a three pack a day habit down to one pack, and sometimes less than that if Ellen was gone visiting her mother. For some reason when he was alone, he didn't have much of an urge to light up. The doctor had warned him that if he didn't quit, a heart attack was about as certain as crooked politicians in Washington. His cholesterol had been too high but there was medication to help that. Still, nothing could unclog the arteries that years of hard living had plugged up, and that's what worried Ellen.

Despite her nagging and constant fussing about his health, Craig loved his wife dearly. He often told folks that thirty years ago when they met, he had caught an angel flying low.



“I’m going shopping later today. Is there anything you’d like?” Ellen opened the dishwasher and began putting away the clean dishes.

“Yes, a pound of butter, some chips, pretzels and a six pack.” He was about to add cigars to the list but decided against pressing his luck.

“Can’t you think of something that’s good for you?”

He could, but it wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “Get whatever,” he growled.

Craig left the kitchen and went outside to the garage. It was every man’s last refuge, a place where the wife didn’t dust or vacuum, or arrange tools according to size and function. It was a place where a man could get dirty and tinker without being told what to do.

For a while, he tinkered around the garage, changing the lawn mower oil and replacing the spark plug. When he was through with that, he walked out behind the garage and lit one up. That first drag felt good and the years of nagging and special diets disappeared for a moment.

“Craig! Craig! Are you out there?”

So much for peace and quiet.

“Yes, dear.”

“What are you doing?”

He took a long drag off the cigarette then tossed it into the air. It hit the ground in a tiny shower of sparks. “Seeing if the grass needs cutting,” he yelled back.

“I’m sure it will sooner or later whether or not you’re watching it grow.”

Craig grumbled and started walking toward the house. Suddenly a sharp stabbing pain gripped his chest like a tightening vise. His lungs felt as if the air had been sucked out of them. He stopped and gripped his chest with his right hand. He wanted to yell out to his wife, but he felt frozen. In his mind, the words screamed, but he couldn’t find the air to mumble a syllable. Then just as suddenly, the pain began to subside. It no longer flowed down his left arm like hot acid in his veins. The vise loosened its death grip and Craig could breathe again. He stood still for a long moment until the pain had



completely disappeared.

Craig wiped the sweat from his brow and realized that his shirt was nearly soaked. He couldn't go inside looking like this. Ellen would ask questions and quickly come to a conclusion, and in a few minutes he'd be sitting in the emergency room waiting for the youngster physician of the day to examine him.

As a light breeze stirred the air, Craig lifted his shirt away from his body so that the breeze could dry it. The pain was totally gone as if it had never been there. Perhaps it was only a touch of heartburn. Beer had been bothering him lately. His two nightly beers, (three if Ellen wasn't watching closely), was always followed by a Pepto-Bismal chaser. Sometimes he took a double shot of that. After a couple of minutes, Craig went into the house.

"Any chores you want me to do?"

"I don't think so, unless you want to tackle that leaky faucet in the basement sink."

He thought about it for a moment. "Anything else?"

"Not unless you want to go grocery shopping with me."

"I think I'll stay home and work on the faucet." He hated shopping, except on Tuesdays; that was the day the grocery store was least occupied with other human beings. He loved his family, but when it came right down to it, he hated crowds, and that included family reunions. And any gathering with the in-laws. They were family that never really belonged to us, except maybe in times of inheritance, he figured.

Ellen reached into her purse that was sitting on the kitchen counter and retrieved her lipstick. She removed the cap, twisted the tube until a half-inch of red lipstick appeared, then proceeded to apply it.

"Why do women need to wear lipstick to go shopping? Having a thing going with the bagger?" Craig chuckled.

"Unlike men, women like to look nice when they go out. Your idea of dressing up is putting on clean socks."

"Glad to see you've still got a sense of humor." Craig smiled and watched his wife put away the lipstick. She reached into the purse trying to find the little pouch that she kept it in. She tilted the purse on its side for a better look and quickly tucked the lipstick safely away. "I guess I'm off."

He already knew that. "Okay, drive carefully." He bent over to kiss her goodbye.

"Not on the lips. Here," she said pointing to her cheek.

He lightly kissed her cheek and smelled the sweet perfume that she was wearing. Despite all the complaining about her, she was a wonderful woman.

No one else would've tolerated him all these years.

"Have a good shopping trip." Craig smiled, a smile that touched his eyes.

"Are you okay?"

"Never been better."

Ellen gave him a puzzled look that wrinkled her nose, then turned, grabbed her purse and went out the door.

Craig watched his wife leave and a feeling swept over him like a cold chill. It felt as though he was watching her leave for the last time. He shook his head as if that would throw off the thought, then grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and went into the living room. He popped open the can of beer and sat down in his favorite chair. It was a fifteen year old Lazy-Boy, well worn in just the right places to accommodate his large body. After setting the beer down on the end table, he fished under the cushion for the remote. Before he could turn on the TV, the phone rang.

"Dag nabbit! Can't have one moment of peace around here." Craig got up and walked across the room to the phone. "Hello."

"Daddy? It's Beth."



“Well hello, how’s my little girl?” She wasn’t little any more, but a woman of twenty-two would always be his daddy’s little girl.

“Doing well. How are you doing?”

Her voice sounded different somehow.

“Fine. Is something wrong?”

“No. Just thought I should call you.”

There was a brief pause, a moment of silence that spoke its own language.

“Now don’t tell me that. I know better. You don’t just call unless you’ve met a new boyfriend or need money!” He chuckled and Beth joined him.

“No, nothing like that. Can’t I call you for no reason?”

“Sure you can. You’ve never done it before. Maybe you should try a few calls like this, let me get used to them.” He chuckled again. “Your mother’s not here. She just left for the store.”

“That’s all right. I really called to talk with you. You feeling okay? Any problems?”

“No, why do you ask?” Did she sense something that he didn’t? That chest pain would’ve toppled a lesser man. He was surprised he hadn’t keeled over.

“I don’t know. Just felt I needed to call.” She paused, wondering if she should say more. A few minutes ago, her chest hurt and she immediately thought of her father. The two sensations seemed connected, and her intuition told her to not ignore it.

“I’m glad you did. When are you coming home to visit?”

“Next weekend. I won’t have any exams to study for, so I’ll be able to spend more time with you and mom. How about if you make some of your chicken on the grill?”

He said he would, and they talked for several minutes more. When Craig hung up the phone, he couldn’t help but wonder about the timing of the call. Several times, she asked if he was feeling all right, and each time he reassured her that he was doing fine. The words felt like a lie and there was little conviction in his voice. He didn’t even believe it himself.

After he settled down and watched a couple of TV shows and drank his beer, the chest pain started. It was a mild pain at first, easy to ignore, and then sharp, shooting pains followed. The stabs of pain took away his breath like a punch to the abdomen. The beer fell from his hand and Craig leaned forward in the chair clutching his chest. He tried taking deep breaths, but every time he inhaled, the pain worsened.

“I’m home dear!” came a sing songy voice from the kitchen. Thank God, Ellen was home.

“Ellen,” he gasped, the words coming out weakly as if someone had tightened a belt around his chest. “Help!”

Ellen walked into the living room, and after one look, ran to Craig’s side.

“Oh my God! What’s wrong? What’s wrong?”

“Chest pain,” The words came out in a lethargic gasp as if there was no air behind them. “Call 911.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God!” Ellen ran to the phone and dialed 911. “Hurry up dammit! Answer!” She looked at Craig, her face scratched with lines of worry. “Yes, my husband’s having a heart attack. I don’t know, just now I guess. I just got home. He looks like he’s having trouble breathing.” Ellen watched her husband as he gasped for air. She gave the address, then in the middle of a sentence, hung up the phone and rushed to her husband’s side.

“Oh God, it hurts.” The pain was pushing down his left arm. His shoulder felt like a gorilla was squeezing it. The pain worsened, pulled the breath from him and he toppled over onto the floor.

“Oh! Oh God! Help!” Ellen knelt beside Craig. “Talk to me, say something. Oh God, don’t take him. Please don’t take him.”

“I hope they..... ah.... hurry.” The words were weak, nearly lifeless.

Ellen sat on the floor beside him, grabbed his sweaty hand and rubbed it. “Oh please hurry. Oh please God. Oh please hurry.” She kept listening for sirens, but only traffic sounds filtered through the opened window. “They’ll be here any second. Just hang on, just a little longer.” She could feel her own heart racing. It felt like a squirrel was running loose in her chest. Ellen rubbed his head, feeling the thinning strands of hair flow between her fingers.

Four minutes later, the ambulance arrived. They worked quickly assessing Craig, starting an IV and putting him on oxygen. He was semi-conscious, drifting in and out of some ethereal door between earth



and the next world. By the time he was loaded on the stretcher, his lips were blue and his skin a pasty white.

“Do you have anyone to take you to the hospital?” one of the EMTs asked.

“No, not right now. My neighbors are all at work and my daughter lives out of town.” She held her hand up over her mouth, and looked at her husband through the blur of tears.

“Why don’t you ride along with us. I don’t think you need to be driving right now.” The EMT noticed his partner looking at him, but it was a brief stare, one that said that was not standard procedure.

The hospital was five miles away. Ellen didn’t even notice the wail of the sirens or the lumber truck quality ride of the ambulance. Her attention was focused on the nearly lifeless person who was her husband. The monitor showed an erratic and fast heart rate. She didn’t know exactly what it meant, but it didn’t look good. Consistency in anything in life was good, and his heart rate had no consistency.

As the ambulance pulled up to the emergency room entrance, Craig opened his eyes and immediately turned his head toward his wife as if he knew exactly where she was.

“Craig!” Ellen cried and large teardrops rolled down her cheeks.

“I love you, Ellen.”

“I love you, too.”

“Beth called just before this started.” Their eyes locked with all the intensity of two souls parting after a lifetime. “It’s ok, Ellen. It’s ok.”

Ellen didn’t notice that they had stopped and the two EMTs were waiting to bring him into the emergency room. She leaned over and kissed Craig on the lips, which were cool and bluish tinged.

By the time Craig was brought into the emergency room and hooked up to the monitor, his heart had gone into ventricular fibrillation. The two large ventricles, or chambers of his heart had ceased to beat in an organized manner, instead they moved as an uncoordinated quivering muscle. With ventricular fibrillation, there was no real blood flow throughout the body. The brain cells were energy hogs, and twenty-five percent of the heart’s blood flow went to the brain. Without oxygen, it wouldn’t take long for brain cells to begin dying by the millions.

“Epinephrine!” a doctor shouted.

A nurse gave the doctor a syringe with a large, three-inch needle as another nurse quickly pulled the curtain closed around the gurney.

With the skill that comes from experience of having watched too many

patients die, the physician touched Craig's chest, found the desired location, and plunged the needle through the chest into his heart.

The heart monitor showed no change.

"Let's shock him."

The defibrillator was readied and the nurse handed the physician the two paddles. A small amount of gel was applied to each paddle to assist in conducting the electricity and the two paddles were rubbed together to spread the gel.

"Clear!"

KA THUNK

Craig's entire body flinched as the electricity surged through his nearly lifeless body.

The physician watched the monitor for a response. There was an immediate spike, then a tiny squiggle indicating continued fibrillation.

His whole being seemed filled with an immense, overwhelming peace and serenity. There was no feeling of warmth or cold. He no longer had an awareness of his surroundings, only a sense of people working frantically to prevent his movement into someplace he now preferred. It was if he was moving into a new world that his whole life had meant to prepare him for.

He no longer felt like a spiritual being having an earthly existence, but an earthly being now trying to have a spiritual experience. For the briefest of moments there was an awkwardness, like he didn't really belong to either world, but was caught in the undertow that was now pulling him away from what was familiar.

The sensation of having a body began to fade, and was quickly replaced by a simple sensation of being. He felt no boundaries, no limitations, no pain, no negative feelings at all. It was like being a breath of air exhaled into the endless vacuum of the universe. The sense of peace was almost overwhelming. It was like nothing he had ever experienced nor dreamed of.

He had no cares, no worries, nothing pressing on his thoughts. There was no sense of sadness or remorse. His loved ones who were now left behind would see him again. The time he needed to wait would pass in an instant and seem like no real time at all. He knew that without so much as a thought. It was instinctive knowledge of the soul that was no longer weighted down by an earthly existence and all the doubts and questions that come with it. Only those still living would feel that weight of time and the dark unknown of death so often shrouded in fear. A lifetime, even one that spanned a full century or more was not even a blink in eternity. Time was simply a measure

of something, a measure of the earth's rotation around the sun, or its rotation around its axis. Days and years meant nothing in the other world, a world that watched a universe expand, and bore witness to the formation of galaxies and planets and watched life evolve. Time had no relevance; it didn't dictate rest and activity, meals or anything else that could be scheduled.

There were distant whispers, and though he could not determine what was being said, the voices were familiar and comforting.

Although there was no darkness, nor noticeable shades of white or gray, there was a brightness that was more intense than staring at the sun on a clear summer day. Craig knew that he was moving toward the brightness and that it was good. The brightness widened and seemed to envelop his seemingly endless being. There was no sensation of time. Events unfolded without the meaning or measurement of time.

As the brilliance of light enveloped him, Craig suddenly saw his entire life. It didn't parade past him like a movie, or a flash of a million postcard images. There was simply an awareness of its meaning, an awareness of all his shortcomings, his strengths, his triumphs and failures. He suddenly saw his life for what it was, saw the hidden motivations for his behaviors, the truth behind each lie, and the lies behind what he held as truth. He knew every psychological motivation for his behaviors, the meaning of anger that was merely a façade to cover a deeper hurt or fear. He suddenly understood the behaviors of others, what caused their reactions, their sharp words or easy tears.

In that instant, he knew exactly why no human being held even a fraction of the knowledge needed to judge anyone.

In the intense brightness, there was no sensation of warmth or cold.

Though no one was near him, he heard the growing whisper of voices and felt the presence of power, love and knowledge. There was no longer any fear of rejection, but an overwhelming sense of unconditional love and acceptance.

The murmur of voices grew louder and he recognized them as very familiar. Then suddenly there was a hushed silence as he felt the warmth of a gentle hand touch his. He knew he was in the presence of greatness, yet did not feel small or insignificant. All his notions of religion, of God and of Jesus fell away as truth filled his being.

The Son of God embraced him.

Craig looked beyond the brightness, beyond the warm embrace. God was not what he had ever imagined, not what religions preached and zealots warned about. It was closer to what the hippies of the 60s chanted.

God is love.

The Scent of an Angel

“Flight two forty-five for Houston now boarding.” The voice boomed through the waiting area like a command to action.

The people crowding the waiting area suddenly stood and began wrestling with their luggage, gathering up their newspapers and reaching inside their pockets for their tickets, and moving toward the rapidly growing line. A few type As, always in a hurry to stand and wait, were already in a line of sorts, and they rapidly fell into formation like a row of soldiers readying for inspection.

Brad Williams watched the line growing longer as he held a cell phone to his ear. He studied the lengthening line, wondering if there would still be overhead space when he reached his assigned seat.

“We’re boarding now, honey. Tell the kids I’ll see them in about,” he paused and looked at his watch, “four hours. Don’t hold dinner for me.” It could easily be seven by the time he got home if he didn’t have to wait too long to get his luggage, if the line out of long term parking wasn’t held up by everyone using credit cards, and if traffic on the expressway wasn’t snarled by an accident. It seemed a lot to hope for, but Brad was an optimistic person.

There was a long pause and he wondered if the connection had been broken. He stared at the growing line and looked down at his small pull behind suitcase. It didn’t take up much space, but everyone in line had luggage larger than his. Those overhead compartments filled quickly.

“You there?” he asked, still watching the line.

“Yes. I just had a funny feeling, that’s all.”

“What kind of funny feeling?” He bent over and pulled up the handle on his pull behind, checked to make sure his two hundred dollar briefcase was securely attached, and walked slowly to the growing line.

“I don’t know.” Another pause. “Are you feeling okay?”

“I feel fine. Just a little tired, that’s all. It’s been a long trip. What kind of feeling?” Cheryl too often felt this way before something bad happened. Two years ago before his father died suddenly from a stroke, she sensed something. Three years before that, she knew something was going to happen to her brother Eric. A week later, he was dead, victim of a drunk driver. But sometimes when she was on her period she had similar feelings that resulted in nothing but a little worry and lost sleep. He didn’t know if it was the hor-

more changes or the chocolate she ate that made her intuition go haywire. The last question he was going to ask if it was that time of month. That was a question no man should ever raise unless he was offering to stop at the store for tampons and sanitary napkins.

“That feeling. You know.”

He did know, and as he watched people board the plane he wondered whom it would be this time, if indeed it wasn't that time of the month. There weren't many relatives left. “Look hon, I've got to go. I'll call you as soon as I get to my car.”

“Okay. I love you. I'll save some dinner for you.”

They said goodbye and Brad turned off his phone and stuffed it into his suit pocket. One thing was odd. She didn't say, ‘have a good flight.’ It was as routine as telling their teenage daughter to drive carefully when she left the house, car keys in hand. Like a superstitious spell believed to ward off evil.

Brad stepped into the still growing line, ticket in hand and after a few minutes he settled into his aisle seat.

In the past when flying on business trips was a novelty, he always requested a window seat. He enjoyed looking out at the world with all the wonder of a child, seeing everything in miniature, watching tiny semis crawl along thin ribbons of highway that stretched to the horizon. But, after a hundred thousand miles of flying, countless delayed flights and late arrivals, he changed to requesting an aisle seat toward the front. It meant a slightly quicker exit upon landing. Maybe it only saved him five minutes, but that meant five more precious minutes with his family. Brad stuffed his suitcase into the overhead compartment, and settled into his seat. There was something relaxing about getting that whole boarding process over with. It was almost as comforting as having a good bowel movement. Such simple pleasures seemed so underrated in life. Being middle age, he found himself having more thoughts like that. It should probably disturb him, but pleasure was pleasure wherever you found it. He settled back into his seat and closed his eyes.

“Excuse me, I have the window seat.”

Brad looked up and saw a pretty, thirty-something brunette holding a large purse that could almost double as a suitcase, trying to avoid being trampled by a family of four shoving their way down the aisle, luggage and stuffed animals in hand.

“Here, let me get up.” Brad stood and stepped into the crowded aisle among all the passengers trying to stuff their suitcases into the overhead compartments, and slamming them shut one after another as if in rehearsed uni-

son. It was a welcomed sound. It meant they were closer to take off.

The brunette smiled, held her purse close to her chest and squeezed past Brad into the window seat.

Brad got a whiff of her perfume and instantly recognized the scent. It reminded him of his wife Cheryl.

“Is that Angel you’re wearing?”

She looked at him, her face drawn with tightened lines probably placed there by countless and annoying pickup lines. “Yes, it is.” Her smile seemed tense and forced.

Brad noticed the look and worried that his comment was misinterpreted. “It’s my wife’s favorite. In fact, I picked up a new bottle today. She’s almost out.”

Her smile widened as Brad sat down. “It’s my favorite too. Do you travel a lot?”

“Too much. Every week. And you?”

“Rarely, especially after, you know.” She didn’t want to say 9/11. No one flying ever wanted to say those words. It was more forbidden than talking about slimy worms and fish guts at the dinner table. There was something about flying that made the most reasonable, educated and science oriented people become very superstitious. “My name’s Christine,” she added after a short pause.

“Brad Williams.” They shook hands and he noticed her long, red nails and the softness of her touch. Just like his wife. Brad looked up as one of the flight attendants walked down the aisle, head turning right then left, checking for fastened seat belts, secured luggage, upright tray tables and probably for anything even remotely suspicious. When she came to an open overhead compartment, she lowered the door and pushed it shut.

“I hate flying.” With effort, Christine pushed her large purse under the seat in front of her, and then fastened her seat belt. “But, it’s the fastest way to get home and see my family.”

“Are you from Houston?”

“Not originally. My dad moved there when I was seven. I was born in Boston.”

“That’s quite a move.”

“My mom died of cancer and I think my dad was looking to escape memories. He never did re-marry. Too bad. I think he’d be a great catch for some older woman. Normally, I drive to Houston because I hate flying so much. But my dad sent me a ticket for my birthday.” She smiled then looked up as the

flight attendant began going through the pre-flight safety instructions.

“I could recite those in my sleep. You can always tell the business travelers. They don’t pay any attention.” He chuckled briefly.

“I suppose I should listen, since I’ve rarely flown, but really, what can you do in a plane crash anyway?”

She was probably right, but it wasn’t something he wanted to think about at the moment. He’d heard the odds of dying in a plane crash were one in three million. The odds of winning the lottery were greater, and he knew someone who won the lottery. He didn’t know of anyone who died in a plane crash. It was not a comforting thought. Brad shrugged his shoulders and looked around the cabin, trying to visualize what kind of flight he was going to have. A child was fussing five rows back, and across the aisle and two rows back, an infant was sleeping in its mother’s lap. That wouldn’t last long. Somewhere behind him, a baby started crying and Brad checked his watch, wondering how long it would be before he could ask the flight attendant for a drink.

After several minutes of taxiing on the runway, the captain announced they were number one for take off. A minute later the jet picked up speed and began rumbling down the runway, the tires making a clop clop sound as they rolled over seams in the tarmac. Brad loved the rush and the sensation of being pushed back into the seat. It was the best part of the flight.

Christine turned and looked out the window watching everything speed past them at over a hundred fifty miles an hour. As the jet accelerated nearby objects shot by in a blur. The jet had reached the point of no return. Even if the pilot wanted to abort the take-off, there wasn’t enough remaining runway for a safe stop.

Christine gripped the armrests tightly and stared forward. Suddenly the jet’s nose pointed upward and it was airborne. Within seconds, the landing gear folded with a loud whine and disappeared into the belly of the jet with two loud ka-thumps.

“What was that?” Christine’s eyes widened.

“Just the landing gear. Nothing to worry about.”

“Does it always make that much noise?”

Brad smiled and thought back to his first flight. He jumped at every noise and constantly bothered the flight attendants with questions. “Yes, everything’s fine. Don’t worry.” But his wife’s statement rang in his mind like an ominous warning. What was she sensing? He’d feel better when he was home, even though driving in city traffic carried a bigger safety risk. He’d

been on a business trip when Cheryl's brother Eric died. He didn't travel much then, maybe every month or so, not like now. At the time it seemed he couldn't hurry home fast enough, and by the time he walked in the front door, the house was filled with relatives he hadn't seen in years, and Cheryl was alone in the bedroom crying.

"I'm sorry I'm being such a pest. When I get nervous, I talk a lot."

"That's okay. I haven't talked to anyone in days except about profit margins and market initiatives." He grinned, welcoming the distraction. "Relax. The most dangerous points in flying are take-off and landing."

"I guess that's good. One down, one to go. Thank God we don't have a layover."

Brad nodded and pushed his shoulders back into the seat and tried to relax. The drone of the engines was such a lulling sound. He wondered why they didn't make sound machines with that noise. On board a plane, it always made him sleepy. Except today.

"How does your family adjust to your travel?"

"They tolerate it. Both my kids are teenagers so they're never home anyway, but I don't think they like it either. It's hard to borrow money from dad when he's a thousand miles away!" Brad chuckled and Christine giggled. It was a light and cheerful sound, one that helped to erase worry and tension. He needed more of those sounds in his life.

"How about your wife? Oh, I'm sorry. I'm getting too personal."

"No, no it's fine, really."

"I'm a little nervous."

"Well don't be. I fly over a quarter million miles a year, with not so much as a close call." Suddenly, he felt like a compulsive gambler stuffing quarters into a slot machine. Stand there long enough and three lemons are bound to show up. "Actually, all this travel has been on my mind lately. My wife hates having me gone so much. And with the kids getting older, we'd like to spend more time together. So tonight, I'm going to surprise her."

"And how's that?"

"I've accepted a different job with my company. It's a lateral move, no pay raise but I won't be traveling near as much as I do now."

"Good for you! I'll bet she'll be thrilled with the news."

The flight attendant came by with the beverage cart and they each ordered a drink to go along with their tiny complimentary package of salted peanuts.

"I remember when you got a meal on this flight. Now you're lucky to get two packages of nuts, and you have to practically beg for a second one."

Brad took a few long sips of his drink as he wrestled with the tiny package of peanuts. He tried to remember when his wife had her last period. It wasn't something she announced like a weather forecast, but there were always signs any slightly attentive husband couldn't miss.

Suddenly the jet shook violently and their drinks went flying as if bouncing on springs.

"What the hell was that?"

"Turbulence," Brad told her as he leaned forward and looked past her out the window. "It's pretty common over thirty thousand feet. Looks like some thunderheads out there. Here, take my napkin. My drink was almost empty."

She thanked him and began mopping up the spill with the tiny square napkins.

"I hope we don't have any more of that." She stuffed the soaked napkins into the empty cup.

Brad noticed the seat belt sign had blinked on and decided they were probably in for a bumpy ride. He saw that Christine's belt had remained fastened as had his.

"Hello ladies and gentleman, this is the captain. It looks as though they're having a few storms below us, so we're climbing up to thirty-three thousand feet to try and get over this bumpy air. Please remain seated with your seat belts fastened. It probably won't be too long before we find some smooth air again." The mic clicked off and Brad noticed that Christine was gripping each armrest so tightly that her knuckles had turned white.

"Don't worry. This happens all the time," he tried to reassure her. He swallowed hard and noticed there was a lump in his throat like he had swallowed a small rock.

The cabin shook and bounced as the jet hit more turbulence. There was a loud thud from the rear of the jet, but the cabin noise muffled it as the jet bounced and pitched.

"What was that?"

"What?"

"I heard a noise."

"Just turbulence. Want me to get a magazine for you?"

"What I'd like is another drink." Fear had scratched its mark on her face. Her eyes had widened and some of the color had drained from her face.

Brad smiled, pushed himself back into his seat, closed his eyes and tried to relax. The flight attendants busied themselves stowing the beverage carts,

picking up empty cups and handing out napkins for the passengers to clean up their spills.

“I thought the captain said he was going to a higher altitude.”

“He did. Why?” Brad saw the worried look on her face. The soft features of her face were etched with deep lines and her eyes were wide circles. Suddenly she appeared older, almost his age.

Christine looked out the window then turned toward Brad. “Unless those clouds are rising, I think we’re losing altitude.”

Brad leaned forward and looked past Christine. The clouds did look as though they were going higher. That was impossible, so the jet must be losing altitude.

“Something’s not right.” He scooted to the edge of his seat and turned around to look for a flight attendant. There was none in sight. They were probably all buckled in waiting for smoother air.

Suddenly there was a loud bang from the tail section. It was a noise easily heard over the drone of the engines. The jet bounced as if its wheels had suddenly run over a fallen tree on a runway.

Except for a small number of passengers who appeared to be sleeping, everyone began looking around the cabin, their eyes studying everyone for some clue or answer as to what was happening. The growing hum of conversation became louder.

“What was that?” Christine looked at Brad, her eyes pleading for some rational answer and reassurance.

“I don’t know.” He looked up at the ceiling and pushed the call light. It lit with the faint sound of a bell. “I’m going to find out.”

Turbulence buffeted the jet and somewhere several rows back, a baby started crying, the noise muted by the loud drone of the engines and the conversations that were growing in number. But the hum of the engines was no longer a lulling sound that soothed like white background noise. Fear stoked minds cross-examined every change in sound, and passengers began exchanging opinions on what they thought was wrong.

The jet banked slowly to the left then went level again.

“Something’s wrong! Something has to be wrong! What’s wrong Brad?”

Brad turned around and looked behind him; he saw the worry in everyone’s eyes, and then noticed a flight attendant slowly working her way down the aisle, weaving like a drunk as the jet bounced over invisible bumps. “Just stay calm,” he urged, but he felt anxiety welling up in his gut feeling like a gallon of battery acid. He noticed the man across the aisle was still sleeping,

his head rolling as if his neck was made of soft rubber.

“Can I help you?” the flight attendant asked.

“Yes, what’s going on? We’re losing altitude and if that banging noise happens again, I’m going back by the beverage carts and help myself to the liquor drawer.” He felt panic dancing on his nerves and decided that he needed to calm down, at least for Christine’s sake.

“We’re just hitting a little turbulence,” she answered, but there was no confidence in her voice. In fact, she looked pale and drained. Not long before, she had stood up and reviewed safety procedures with the confidence of a real flight veteran.

“Turbulence doesn’t make funny banging noises,” Brad told her.

“Just stay seated. We should be through the worst of it soon.” She smiled, but Brad could tell that it was forced, working upstream against the frown muscles.

“Have you talked to the captain?”

“Everything’s fine. Please don’t worry. As soon as we can resume beverage services, we’ll pass out drinks compliments of the airline.”

Brad nodded and tried to settle back into his seat. They’re going to get us all drunk and then plunge us to our deaths, he wanted to say.

Three rows back there was a retching noise, and a minute later the acrid smell of bile and partially digested food wafted toward the front of the plane. Suddenly the cabin felt tiny and stuffy, filled with a variety of odors as varied as the number of passengers.

They sat in silence as the jet bounced, banking first one way then another. More people were vomiting and Brad wished he had another drink. The odor reminded him of his college days, of a bar he frequented where the bathroom was never cleaned and the pervasive odor of urine, vomit and stale beer was simply part of the ambiance of the establishment. He leaned a little closer to get a whiff of Christine’s perfume, but even that aroma was rapidly losing its battle against the growing stench.

After several minutes it became apparent the pilot was having trouble controlling the aircraft. It seemed the jet wanted to pitch to the right and nosedive. Every few minutes the pilot pulled the aircraft back into line, but it felt like a difficult, and losing battle. Suddenly he remembered the flight that crash-landed in Sioux City. There was a problem with the tail section and the pilots had to steer the plane by adjusting the engines on each wing. Though it did crash land on the runway, there were survivors. It wasn’t a comforting thought and he kept it to himself.

As the jet pitched one way and then another, its movements became more violent and erratic. There were moans, brief screams and the murmur of conversation in the cabin. Some discussions had grown louder, and Brad could pick out specific voices and sentences of a few passengers with growing worries and opinions. One man yelled, wondering what the hell was going on here? A woman screamed, her piercing voice cutting through the noise with all the sharpness of a razor blade. Everyone kept looking around, studying other faces for some expression of hope and confidence. But every face was drawn with fear and tension. Two babies began crying and their mothers cried along with them.

Suddenly the jet bounced so violently that for a brief moment the wings appeared to flap like a bird's. There was a sudden drop in altitude and Brad felt the seat belt dig into his lap as he experienced fleeting weightlessness.

"Oh my God, we're going to die!" Christine shouted. Others in the cabin echoed her words and the sounds of the engines became a distant hum.

"It's only turbulence. Try not to look out the window. Pick some spot and stare at it." His words came out in almost a stutter and he thought of Jimmy Stewart. But Jimmy Stewart could talk like that and still sound bold and confident.

He needed to use the bathroom, but wondered if he dared get up. The jet bounced violently again and its nose pitched down, hitting pockets of air as if they were huge rocks in the sky. A person waiting for a vacant lavatory fell to the floor with a grunt. The jet rolled to the right and Brad kept waiting for a correction. He gripped the armrests and waited, but the jet slowly continued its roll. He felt Christine's weight crushing him as the jet rolled over. The seat belt dug into his lap, squeezing him with a vice-like grip and pushing against a nearly full bladder. People screamed as purses and brief cases rolled along the floor. Change spilled out of purses and scattered across the aircraft. As the plane continued its roll, Christine fell over onto Brad. She reached up and grabbed his shoulders, pushing him further into the aisle. He felt the right armrest dig into his ribs like a dull knife being shoved into him by a terrified mugger. The armrest bent outward against his weight and both Brad and Christine moved further into the aisle.

"My baby!" a mother screamed, and Brad knew what had happened.

The jet continued rolling over. Bodies fell from their seats and flopped against the side of the cabin with dull thuds, the sounds nearly swallowed whole in the noisy chaos. In mere seconds that lasted a lifetime and seemed instant at the same time, the jet was upside down. Brad winced and wanted

to scream, and wondered briefly if he was screaming. The cabin was filled with an amalgam of noise, a thick soupy mixture of voices and aircraft noises that confused hearing. Detecting his own voice was done more on vibration than sound, and even that was difficult as the jet shook and shuddered. The cabin had become filled with shouts and moans, screams and crying. The seat belt dug deeper, slamming into his gut like a prizefighter's punch and he wondered if it would hold. The nose of the jet pointed lower and lower, shoving an intertwined Brad and Christine forward into the back of the next seat. Brad winced and tried to push himself back into his seat, but found the task impossible. He turned his head toward Christine, his face now smashed against the seat back.

Her face was only inches away. He could still smell the sweet perfume she was wearing. Its aroma was so out of place and foreign, yet there was something comforting about it at the same time. He saw the horror on Christine's face; her skin was pale and drained of blood. Blue veins were visible beneath her skin looking like thin wires. Her eyes were wide, and her facial muscles tensed to the point they looked ready to rip loose. Christine's mouth was open, and she gasped for air in quick breaths. As the jet accelerated, there was a loud whining noise. Objects flew past him and he heard them land with loud crashes, sometimes accompanied by groans or screams of pain. As the jet accelerated in its nosedive, the seatbelt loosened its knife-like grip. The brief weightlessness caused many passengers to immediately suffer nausea and vomiting. Brad and Christine were lifted into their seats.

Brad couldn't wait any longer, and let his bladder go. A sudden flash of warmth flooded his lap as the warm urine soaked his pants. He wondered briefly if Christine had noticed, and quickly, almost immediately decided it didn't matter at all.

"Brad! Brad! We're going to die!" She was shouting, but the sound was cut to a whisper in the noisy cabin.

There were more screams. He caught a glimpse of someone falling forward, their body gliding almost effortlessly along the ceiling that was now the floor. It was such a strange view. Seeing a sight that is so alien plays tricks on the mind, and Brad wondered if they were truly upside down. More objects began falling. He gripped the armrests and watched in horror as purses, books, eyeglasses and countless other objects flew past him with all the force of professionally thrown baseballs. Several magazines flew by, their pages flapping as they sailed past looking ironically like clumsy planes with broken wings.

The whine became louder, like a thousand high-pitched screams as the

jet accelerated in its descent. He knew now that there was no hope. No one controlled the jet. It was hostage to the forces of gravity and the fierceness of air currents. He had the answer to the question that everyone considers from time to time, even if only briefly before burying it again beneath layers of denial; He knew how he was going to die and exactly when. It was a fact now, and there was no time for denial or anger or bargaining. The fact of his death had slammed into his thoughts and it wasn't going to negotiate feelings. In the terrified panic that was strangling his gut, Brad had quickly accepted the fact he was about to die. It only took seconds, and he felt a strange sense of gratitude for that. Maybe it was because there was no choice, but from listening to the screams and panic of many other passengers, he decided that a person always had a choice on how they reacted to any situation. Brad thought of his wife Cheryl, he pictured her face, her smile, the 'look' of disapproval that every married man knew, the last time they made love and how it left the sweet smell of the sea in their bed, the smile and kiss she greeted him with, the soft touch of her hands, her beautiful, long feminine nails, the smell of her hair after a shower, his two children Wendy and Jim, their giggles, the goodnight hugs he always cherished, their angelic faces when they slept, how pitiful and yet cute they appeared when they were ill, Christmas mornings and the excitement that filled the whole house, playing Uno and building with Lego and the trip to Disney World. Memories paraded through his mind in an endless string of images. He'd never see any of them again, at least not in this life. He believed in God and Jesus and heaven, but it was so easy to have faith when it wasn't tested, when there was absolutely no time for denial or bargaining with God. There was simply no time for anything except remembering. It made no sense to spend his last few moments yelling. He winced in pain and wanted to scream, but oddly, as intense as the pain was, seemed tolerable. There was simply no real comfort in screaming or fighting a battle he would lose; there was only comfort in remembering. Suddenly the jet shuddered and a loud ripping sound overstepped all the other noise. Metal creaked and groaned followed immediately by a long screaming EEEEEEEK as the left wing ripped apart and fell away into the sky. The sound pierced his ears like a thousand hot needles. Brad and Christine both looked out the window at where the wing had been. Fuel sprayed out and coated the window dimming the cabin for the briefest of moments, followed immediately by a huge orange fireball. The brief flash of light was blinding and painted the cabin white, but after it subsided, the bright glow of orange flames still flooded the cabin. For the briefest of

moments it reminded Brad of the warm bask of a sunset. Flames flickered and waved, and within a few seconds the heat invaded the cabin with its hot breath. The jet began to spin; clouds and patches of blue sky rolled past the window, and suddenly green sections of earth flickered in view. The jet was now flying toward the earth in a corkscrew formation. Flames and smoke trailed along the broken section of wing.

A few passengers screamed louder, but the number had diminished greatly. Dishes and pillows, blankets and purses, cans of soda and beer went sailing through the air like errant missiles, bouncing off the sides of the cabin in strange trajectories caused by the spinning jet. He heard snapping sounds followed by bodies being hurled through the cabin. People slammed into seats, rolled briefly along the sides or the ceiling, hitting with muffled thumps. Sometimes there were groans, but often, the limp bodies simply bounced around like lifeless manikins. The spinning shoved him back into his seat, then pulled him against one armrest, and then the other, then tossed him violently into the seat in front of him and then repeated. He felt Christine's body hitting him then falling away, and heard the clumps and thuds as her body slammed into one thing after another.

One woman bounced off the ceiling right above them, her foot sliding across his hair, and then just as suddenly the limp body disappeared from view. A briefcase smacked Brad on the side of the head and for a moment, his vision dimmed and tiny points of light floated before his eyes.

"Oh my God, oh my God!" someone yelled.

A woman behind him began reciting the Lord's Prayer. A man joined her, but there was a crashing noise and his voice was silenced. There were fewer voices now, mostly just groans and whimpers, and the whining sound of a jet streaming toward earth.

The jet continued to spin and objects rolled around on the ceiling for a few moments like clothes in a dryer before spinning off in one direction or another.

"Where's my baby?" a woman screamed, then just as suddenly, she fell quiet.

By now there were no infants crying, and most voices had been silenced. Brad glanced across the aisle and was surprised to see the three seats still filled, the passengers still alive, all conscious with eyes widened and staring forward like so many deer looking into headlights.

"Oh God help us!" someone yelled.

Another body flew past so quickly, Brad couldn't tell if it was a man or woman.

“Christine, do... you... believe... in... God?”

She was crying and occasionally a tear spun off and landed on his face.

“Yes... I... do,” she answered sobbing.

He reached over and grabbed her hand. In the spinning jet, such a small movement was difficult and complicated, like moving in a torrent of water. “At.. least.... I.... won’t... have.. to... feel.. alone... when ...I ...die.” The spinning motion of the jet and the seatbelt pushing on his chest made his words come out in puffs. “Thank... you..... for... wearing.. Angel..... today.It.... reminded.....me..... of..... my..... wife.”

“She’s.... lucky... to.... have..... you.”

“She.... was.... lucky... to.. have... me,” he corrected.

“You’ll... always... .be... together... Heaven’s... like... that.”

Suddenly there was the loud screech of ripping metal as the other wing sheared off. Another huge orange fireball erupted, filling the cabin with a blinding brightness. The jet seemed to spin faster. The whine of its descent was so intense it created a sharp pain in his ears. He could feel a tingle inside each ear as if his eardrums were vibrating beyond capacity.

“I... hope.... so,” he answered.

“What?” Christine yelled. The noise had made conversation difficult.

“I... said, ...I ..hope... so!” Brad yelled.

The prayer had ended and the cabin was almost void of conversation. Thuds and bangs rattled off like slow gunfire, as objects spun around the cabin sounding like tennis shoes in a dryer. There was an occasional scream or moan, some muffled conversation that sounded like people yelling from inside a styrofoam box. Brad was feeling dizzy from all the spinning, and spots still floated across his vision. He looked out the window at the growing landscape that rapidly spun past. He could see a farm and large green and golden fields that were growing bigger every time they spun past the window. They almost seemed close enough to touch. As the plane spun around the window was filled with green, then gold, then green then gold until it became a blur. He saw treetops not far away before they disappeared.

As the nose of the jet plowed into the field at nearly a ninety-degree angle, the pilot and co-pilot instinctively gripped the armrests and clenched their teeth. The two men crashed into the instrument panel, their faces instantly crushed and erased into a blotch of crimson. The force fractured their skulls into pieces no larger than a nickel, and the mass of bone and flesh merged with the crushing metal and glass. The jet began folding upon itself like a giant accordion. The seats were forcefully ripped from the floor as one

row immediately cascaded down upon the next, crushing each passenger with such force that they were as thin as a suit on a hanger. Blood, bone fragments and gray matter that has the consistency of warm jello, sprayed the cabin. Within a fraction of a second, moans and voices were immediately silenced as if some internal voice switch had been flipped. The noise was deafening as the metal crumbled like foil. Brad looked forward, and in that fraction of a second, he saw the forward section of the jet rush toward him with such speed it was mostly a blur and then it was over. In nearly an instant, the entire fuselage crumbled and the metal was shredded into tiny pieces that sprayed across the field or were buried several feet beneath the surface. He heard no sound. He felt a slight sting on his forehead and then all pain and sound was erased. An image of his wife's face appeared in his mind. It was a frozen image, unmoving like a photograph. In the silence, the image faded like the brightness of a camera flashbulb. But as the brightness faded, and his wife's image dissolved, it was replaced by blackness as dark as ink. The world had become dark and silent. His skin registered no sensation, no pain or heat. He never felt his arms being pulled from their sockets, or his legs being crushed. The force of the impact was so immense, that a body's flesh simply disintegrated, appearing much like the spray of a water balloon on a concrete driveway. In the darkness and the silence, Brad saw a very distant, but slowly growing white light. He began to feel something. His skin felt slightly chilled like it did on a cool autumn evening when he went out for a walk without a jacket.

Immediately upon impact, a huge fireball engulfed the entire jet. Instantly the seats melted. Any clothing made of synthetic material dissolved and clung to the skin, causing instant fourth degree burns. In the violent impact muscles were torn from bones. Arms, fingers, heads and torsos were flung forward throughout the cabin in a shower of flesh and debris.

And then there was an eerie silence, except for the soft crackle of the flames that sent black clouds of smoke billowing into the air; smoke that looked so thick that it appeared as if huge wads of black cotton were being flung skyward.

The fire crackled, engulfing everything in an inferno of hell, charring it to a midnight black.

Then there was near silence, broken only by the whisper of the fire. The quiet seemed misplaced, mocking the tragedy that lay within the charred ruins of the jet.

Allan Stiles, an air traffic controller noticed that a blip on his screen sud-

denly disappeared. The pilot had radioed they were having mechanical problems and that he was descending to a lower altitude. But there had been no panic in his voice, and he requested no emergency flight plan. Allan was very comforted by that for personal reasons. The pilot's voice had remained calm, in fact, very calm. He kept his radio responses brief, saying only they were busy.

But, Allan knew in his heart the thick lump in his throat was telling him the truth. He knew what flight it was and who was on it. And the fact the jet had disappeared from radar and was not responding to radio calls, confirmed his fears. It was going to be a horrible day, the kind that makes international headlines, and the world would have no real idea what emotional pain the survivors would be suffering. The only thing the world and press would care about

would be getting the most graphic pictures they could obtain, and an interview with tears would lead the story.

Allan swallowed hard because he knew the truth before the world did, but the world wouldn't really care nor understand about his personal loss.

Allan thought about the Angel perfume he had purchased yesterday as a gift for his fiancée Christine, one that would never be given.

Next week he would be going to a funeral, not a wedding.



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