

Michael Garcia Bertrand

How Like an Angel

Allie could whiff it in the air, the old familiar liniment whose name she'd always confused with a popular medical drama from the sixties, and reminded herself she didn't believe in the Resurrection. Even so, she mashed the remote control's mute button as if TV noise could possibly hinder her sense of smell and sniffled the air like a greedy bloodhound. It was just like him, she thought, the selfish lout, to disrupt her morning coffee and general peace of mind. She clucked in irritation, breathed deeply, and tried to discern reality from imagination.

There it was, sure as sugar, the pungent odor of menthol and marriage, enveloping her anew like hoary dust. Her husband used to lather himself up in the white, creamy, detestable thing to try to ward off the bruising, nagging aches of life's ups and downs. Even at the end, when he'd forgotten everything else, he'd asked for it.

She sleuthed about the house and decided the odor was strongest in the kitchen, in the faint breezes coming through the screens of the opened windows, so she set her mug on the counter to glimpse into the backyard, but the spouting jets and drizzles from the whirring sprinklers blurred her view. She flicked them off using the switch by the fridge and looked again, craning her neck one way and then the other, her nose up against the glass door. Clucking her tongue again, she pulled the glass and screen doors aside and stepped onto the wet grass in her careworn slippers. She walked toward the center of the yard, trees, bushes, and wire fence forming the boundaries between her property and her neighbors'.

Ah, yes, the scent was as redolent as jasmine in the spring. There was no doubt. How she'd come to loathe it, especially after it'd become part of her marital landscape as certain as his sharp toenail crescents caught in the carpet's nap or his gleeful penchant for body noises; his awful bathroom habits; his obnoxious, boorish cutting up when they were out with friends; his drinking; his whoring; his gambling; his verbal, sometimes, abuse. He'd not been an easy man to live with; it'd not stayed an easy marriage.

The yard was dappled with light and shadow and her vision, though still relatively good, was blurred when she wasn't wearing her glasses, so it was easy to miss at first the naked man near the gardenias balled up in the shade of the massive black olive, his face buried in his bony arms, his bony knees opened too far for modesty.

She gasped and did a quick 180 and then another, clucking

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nervously, wondering if the fog which lingered in the just-awakened brain hadn't lifted yet. The old man's scrawny head came up at the commotion, a long, gray beard unfurling beneath his chin as he planted his rheumy eyes into her shocked face. She stared back at him with squinting eyes—she'd gotten in the habit of forgetting her glasses—before grimacing, before scowling when she recognized him at last. It was her husband, indeed.

“Charles!” she squawked, convinced she'd lost her mind.

The old man nodded in assent, guilty as a small child, and proceeded to lift himself carefully to his spindly feet, using a frail hand and the black olive's trunk for support. She could hear the creaking of his aged bones as he labored himself upright, which meant standing no taller than a malformed question mark, reminding her of her ceramic statue of St. Lazarus, minus the crutch and bandages.

She stuffed her wrinkled hands inside the large pockets of her frumpy housecoat, her go-to stance whenever she was angry or troubled and clucked again, a jumpy habit she'd adopted in her fifth decade of life. Sixty-eight years old and never had she heard of a spouse's unwillingness to stay properly dead. She considered phoning her sons, or the police for that matter, but she told herself she was an independent woman now, self-reliant, certainly able to deal with the trifling nonsense of a husband resurrected; in any case, was any of this really happening?

Still, she became scandalized for three reasons: 1. the man was stark naked (and in full view of the nosy neighbors, especially that Mrs. Updike behind them); 2. he'd been most certainly dead when she buried him almost two years ago; and 3. and most perplexing of all, the old fool was sporting wings! Tall, billowing things with large, white feathers—some of which had carpeted the ground around him—like those heraldic misfits, Gabriel and Michael, rising a foot or two above his egglike head and spanning way beyond his cadaverous width.

She blinked again.

Wings. It was the last thing she would've expected because a. angels didn't exist and b. he hadn't done enough to earn himself a pair, certainly not by her. The audacity! She couldn't decide what mortified her more: his nakedness or his nerve!

He was a sight, for sure, balancing himself unsteadily, on hairless, varicosed, toothpick legs, and scratching his few gray hairs, curling like dying vermin, in his sunken chest with his icy-thin, blue-veined hand while the other rested on his slight hip as if he was casually contemplating some trivial thing. His shoulders were pinched as if he'd been squeezed through a small tunnel or canal while that thing between his legs sagged freakishly, a shriveled member grown as harmless as a rooster's wattle, she'd attest. His arthritic, twisted

toes and his liver-spotted, cancerous scalp covered in scaly wounds glistened wetly in the morning sun, probably the result of the liniment, which he had slathered on.

He was no Michelangelo's *David*, that was evident, and he didn't seem bothered by the difference. Of course, they'd stopped seeing each other in the buff decades ago, and she'd witnessed his privates only in the end when she had to wash, clean, and change him, so this . . . this was too much; so was his long, gray beard, which made him look like a Biblical charlatan—when did it happen, she wondered, the beard? Hair grew after, right? She didn't like it.

She'd no idea what the etiquette was for dealing with angels—what else to call him but that?—especially decrepit ones, and he was shivering badly because his wings were soaking wet from the sprinklers, which had come on during the pre-dawn hours. To make things even more uncomfortable between them, he farted, obnoxiously like a frat boy, blaringly, card-in-spokes worthy, and she clucked in response, which he must've taken as encouragement because he began to shuffle in her direction like a swifter version of the old man character on *Carol Burnett*. She thought better of halting his progress with an upturned hand, thinking of clown-faced Mrs. Updike, who even now was probably peeking through her blinds, and stood aside (when he reached her, finally!), so he could cram his obtrusive appendages through the narrow opening, feathers and greasy liniment rubbing against her appalled face. She spat to clear her mouth of both and controlled a sudden urge to vomit. Why would any self-respecting angel resort to using the vile thing in the first place? She figured old habits die hard—just like old husbands evidently.

Just inside, he stood like a wet chicken, his thing hanging limply like a desiccated worm, so she went to retrieve the gaudy orange shorts he used to wear around the house, sporting the cartoon mascot of his alma mater on its right leg, the preposterously baggy ones, which he would cinch up three times or they'd fall to his ankles. She'd kept them, one of those odd, quirky items people salvaged after a loved one's demise. Of course, she'd loved him!

He took the shorts from her and stepped clumsily into them. Even as a young man, her husband could never ever get his angular body out of its own way fast enough, yet somehow managed, gracefully, to shrink up his wings to sitting-down size like an accordion and settled himself in his favorite chair, the tattered, faded wingback he'd bought when they were first married, forty-six years ago, and which she hadn't had the heart to throw out even though she'd redone the house and put new furniture in just about every room. His crooked fingers rested over his knobby knees and his hairless toes, splayed painfully, curved under and about like tiny creatures looking for

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shelter. His wan skin made the smoker's yellow of his teeth, snaggle-toothed and absurd, seem like unfaithful beacons.

He adopted a sheepish air as if he hadn't been in the house before. Maybe his present condition unsettled him. She imagined herself in his place and shuddered—except she hoped she'd have enough sense to put on a robe at least, before gallivanting off into the world. Sitting across from him as they did when they read or watched TV in their respective chairs, she speculated about his intentions, so she asked, "What are your intentions?"

"I don't think I have any," he said.

She wavered, noting the apparently unjust system governing the afterlife, which made one spend eternity as an old, beat-up thing if you lived too long. She'd always assumed—when she was in the believing vein anyway—that heaven restored one's youth, vigor, and beauty. Regardless, there had to be some rational explanation for her husband's return if, indeed, it *was* her husband. The scammers fleecing the elderly of their life's earnings had gotten more sophisticated these days, and who knew what the latest technology allowed them to do; however, this, this would be on a wholly unimaginable level, the drivel of science fiction, really, to create a holographic image, or whatever it was, of her late, very dead, husband.

"Why are you here?" She tried to keep the accusatory inflection from tainting her voice.

"This is my house," he said, a little too sharply, "and you're my wife. Where else would I go?" He studied the room as if the answer might be in one of its nooks and crannies, behind the bric-a-brac and tchotchkes they'd amassed over the years, the figurines and statues, the shot glasses, the many coffee mugs and plates and bottles from their travels together.

"I don't know," she said. As a child, her dead grandmother visited her often to talk about Clark Gable. Nana loved Clark Gable, quoting from *Gone with the Wind* at will because Rhett was *simply* to die for! But, whenever her granddaughter pressed her on questions about the afterlife, Nana repeated Rhett's famous line, laughing mischievously like a little girl. Of course, even then, she knew it was only her grieving imagination bringing Nana back from the ether. Now, she wasn't sure what to think. "*Heaven?*"

He shook his head, his near-transparent skin greased in the sheen of the hateful cream. She had a mental image of an angels' pharmacy up in the sky . . . or a devil's apothecary's den below.

"The *other* place?" Dante's version of *Inferno* had made a deep impression on her in college.

"No, none of that is real. At least, as far as I can tell."

She wasn't surprised. She'd majored in philosophy. Reading

Aquinas—or St. Augustine?—used to make her laugh out loud, especially when she was high.

“So . . . what happens . . . ? Tell me, Charlie. I want to know.”

He shook his head as if to say he *wasn't sure* or *didn't want to talk about it* or *wasn't it obvious*?

“How'd you get your wings?” she asked then, trying a new tack.

He smoothed the large feathers on either side of him with his ancient hands, uneasily, and plucked one with a grimace. He studied it in the slanting morning light. “I don't know. They were there when I woke up.”

“Woke up?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged his skinny shoulders.

“Where?” She was glad he was able to carry on a conversation, not like at the end when he was addled by dementia and who knows what else. Heaven, then, (or hell) wasn't totally callous and cruel.

“Huh?” He let the feather drop to the floor.

“Where were you when you woke up?”

Again, he seemed at a loss. “That's just it,” he said, quietly. “I don't know.”

“Peter at the Pearly Gates handing them out?” she asked, her sarcasm evident.

He snorted. “No. And there's nothing heavenly about them. You try getting around in these things.”

Suddenly, her breath caught, and she leaned forward urgently. “*Liza*?” she cried. “Oh, Charlie, have you seen or spoken with *Liza*?” Her tears were quick. The death of their little girl had destroyed them.

His chin fell to his chest with a snort, and he stopped moving. Anxiously, she plodded hesitantly to his side, worried he'd died in his wingback (like the first time, reading Garcia Marquez, or was it Cortazar?), until she remembered he was dead already. He *was*, wasn't he?

She pushed on one bony shoulder with two fingers, careful not to touch the slippery cream more than she needed to, and he made a growling, snoring sound, his hand shooting out as if he were being attacked, shouting, “Stay your hand, Flibbertigibbet . . . ! Man is not alone. Our Father . . .” And, then, he glanced up at her with tearful eyes, wrapped his arms around her waist, spoke with desperation: “Remember Key West? We sat by the shore, drinking rum runners, and you were in that two-piece, the green one, the one that made me want to put my hands all over you, and I did the very second we got back to our room, and then we made love for the rest of the afternoon, and later we walked along the shore and made out under the stars, and when we got back to our room we made love all over again? Didn't we fall

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asleep in each other's arms? Remember how we used to fit together?"

She was nodding as in *how could she ever forget*, and the warm wetness of love welled up in her. How she'd missed it. "I do, Charlie."

"My God, the erections I used to have," he said, chortling, letting her go. "The size of Montana!" And he chortled again.

"Like a centaur!" she said, laughing, too, and she fell back into her chair, remembering when they used to wallow in each other's body because things between them hadn't gotten heavy or burdensome yet. When had they begun to pull away from each other? When had it become an *unpleasant* marriage?

His sharp shoulders trembled like unloved children. "Let me get you a blanket," she said.

"No," he said. "I'm fine. I need to get used to this new . . . *life*, anyway. Besides, try finding something to wear when you've got these things growing out of your back." He tried to laugh, but a coughing fit got in the way. She brought him water. "Remember when Liza was born?" he asked after a few sips. "I was so proud of you, of us, and so happy, and you said it was the best day of your life, and I swore I'd always love you."

"I remember." She smiled. It'd been good much of the time. Hadn't it? There'd always been love between them. Even if a lot of damage along the way.

"After your mitral valve repair, you didn't wake up," he said, thickly, "and I stayed next to you all day and all night, for as many weeks as it took, hoping you'd come back to me and I'd get another chance. I swore I'd be a better man for you. And I meant it, I did. My God, I would've done anything to get you back. Do you remember? No, of course you can't."

"I remember the boys telling me," she said. She reached for his hand, startled to find it warm, and he squeezed hers in return. And she was feeling like she did once, a long time ago, before she'd grown to hate him while loving him, too, she could never stop loving him How she'd mourned for him. She never wanted to be engulfed in that darkness again.

"You came back to me," he said tenderly, looking at her. "And I was good for a while, wasn't I?"

Their sons—two after Liza—used to berate her for standing for the nonsense, *just leave him already!* they'd say with exasperation. but what did they know? They couldn't understand what marriage was, what it meant. Those of her generation believed in its inviolability, and you stayed married through thick and thin no matter what—loving, hating, struggling, enduring. You took it all or you'd had none of it. It was the whole shebang, do or die. Nothing in between. And you

didn't leave just because you'd grown *unhappy*. That was marriage, after all

"It wasn't all bad, was it, Allie?" he asked, suddenly, the sharp odor of the liniment in the air. It made her feel, strange to say, *safe*.

"No, Charlie," she said. "It wasn't all bad."

"Well . . .," he said, standing abruptly, the burden of his wings breathing in heavy relief. "I have to go."

"Why?" she said, suddenly alarmed.

"I'm not here to stay, Allie," he said, apologetically. "You know that."

"You'll come back to visit, won't you?" she cried. "Every once in a while?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think I can."

"But . . . but you can't just leave. Not again," she said. She loved the man, damn it, damn it, *damn it*, she'd always loved the man. Only they understood what love was, what it meant, no matter the many tragedies, big or small.

He touched her face with his skinny fingers. It was wet. "I'm sorry, Allie. I don't make the rules." He was crying, too. Incredibly, she'd only seen him cry twice before . . . for Liza and one other time.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said, swallowing hard, "for all the terrible things I put you through. You don't know how many times I'd wish I'd been another kind of man for you, but I could never change, and that's the horrible truth. Dying has a funny way of making you face up to things, and I guess there's no shaking it in the end—what one was . . . *is*. I guess, what I want to tell you, Allie, is . . . is . . . that every rotten thing I ever did to you, I'd do again. That's it, really. Can you believe it? I couldn't ever have been a better man for you, even if I'd been given a million chances. I was fooling myself the whole time—and you. My God. To have to live with this Maybe, this *is* hell."

She heard his words and they fell heavily like pummeling earth, and she couldn't breathe because it was in her nose and mouth or gasp or cry out and she knew, *knew*, that she'd been emptied of everything once hers because, *because*, goddammit, theirs could have been, *should* have been, a *good* marriage. Fuck! It *should* have been! *Every day*. They'd wasted so much time, *she'd* wasted so much time, waiting for him to . . . what . . . *change*? But that was ridiculous. She knew better than that. So, then, what was it? What was it had kept her there? Only one thing. Love . . . ? Of course. What else, indeed?

She flew at him as if she herself had wings, and, to his credit, he didn't even flinch when she hit him with the palms of her hands over and over as hard as she could, across his face, his chest, his shoulders, whatever she could reach, and he let her, my goodness, he

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didn't even try to defend himself, and she . . . she . . .

She pulled away abruptly, her chest tightening, breathing hard. She thought she might be having a heart attack. Wouldn't that be the final insult? She rubbed her palms together, trying to calm herself, but they were clammy with the sickening cream, which never seemed to dry or evaporate enough. When she was able to breathe again, she noticed the red handprints on his skin—*angels can be marked, is that right?*—and his lips were upturned as if in a kind-of smile, and he said, "Forgive me, Allie." He nodded as if he'd come only for this, turned, and shuffled his mortal coil through the opening toward the backyard, his baggy shorts slipping below the tip of his crack as he edged along; she might've laughed but for the circumstances and the fact that she wanted to say something to keep him here longer, but she couldn't command her voice to speak.

He'd lived for two days after his final stroke, and she was by his side the whole time, watching in fascination and despair as his organs shut down one by one. She was there during his last moments, her small body alongside his in the narrow hospital bed, singing in his ear their honeymoon song though she could hardly say the words, and that's when she saw, just before he left her, the solitary tear slip his eye, slide down his cheek toward his pillow. He'd heard everything, in the end.

"Charlie!" He was waiting for her in the middle of the yard, arms opened wide. She fell into them like she used to long ago.

"There's nothing to forgive, Charlie," she said, breathlessly. "I love you. There's no need to doubt."

"I never have," he said, sticking his tongue out at her, playfully. "I love you, too, sweetheart. Always." He wheezed a little. Old age was a bitch. Even after death.

"Will we see each other again?" she asked. "Will we, Charlie, ever?"

"I don't know," he said, thoughtfully. "Goodbye, my love." He hugged her close, kissed her lips, touched her hands before releasing her.

Her husband spread his wings, then, to their fullest span instantly, and she clucked a small "o" when she saw their breadth and beauty—an angel indeed—and, yes, majesty, and thought how worthy he was of them, and he grinned his snaggle-toothed grin and sang for her a line or two from their song, horribly out of tune.

"Bye, Charlie," she mouthed, smiling, tasting her tears.

It took him three tries to get airborne, but he finally did, propelling himself upward like a spastic diver in reverse, his bony legs working furiously, his arms pinwheeling, his wings fluttering like a new bird's. The shorts fell away from him like discarded skin.

When he cleared the roof of what used to be their life together, she'd already made up her mind to try to keep up with him for as long as she could, and if Mrs. Updike was watching, then let her . . . let her see the old, myopic woman scampering along the side of the house beneath the pale, funny-looking bird with a long, gray beard, glancing up, sideways, down, up, sideways, down, up, trying to sneak quick peeks to avoid the garbage bin, the hose coiled like a snake, the uneven paving stones, losing a slipper in the interim, through the gate and toward the front and into the street, crazy to follow him, shading her eyes from the morning sun to keep him in her field of vision for as long as possible while he flew higher and farther, farther, farther, until he was nothing more than a smudge in the sky, a speck, a tiny, soundless dot in the horizon.

Was it forever she stood there in her old robe, one foot bare, staring into the empty vista? Was it forever?

She couldn't remember getting back but, when she spotted his orange shorts high in the branches of the black olive in the backyard, she clucked with relief. What a disgrace if he'd shown up to wherever he was going in those ridiculous things?

She thought about how to retrieve them because, after all, they couldn't stay up there forever, you know. Too bad she didn't have one of those tall ladders, but what was she thinking? She was too old to climb, but imagine if she could, why, she would climb into the sky and, maybe, one day, find him to reach out a hand to him. She was being silly, and she had many things to do. But it was funny how, with the glare in her tired eyes, how the bright shorts—way up in the tree as they were, flapping like that—funny how they resembled a great orange bird spreading its wings for flying.

She sniffed the air. The odor of liniment was fading.

Yes, she thought. There'd been love between them.

