A Quiet Belief in Angels

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Extract

I am an exile.

I take a moment to look back across the span of my life, and I try to see it for what it was. Amidst the madness that I encountered, amidst the rush and smash and brutality of the collisions of humanity I have witnessed, there have been moments. Love. Passion. Promise. The hope of something better. All these things. But I am faced with a vision, and wherever I turn now I see this vision. I was Salinger's 'Catcher', standing there on the edge of a shoulder-high field of rye, aware of the sound of unseen children playing among the waves and sways of color, hearing their catch-as-catch-can laughter, their games – their childhood if you will – and watching intently for when they might come too close to the edge of the field. For the field floated free and untethered, as if in space, and were they to reach the edge there would never be time to stop them before they fell. Hence I watched and waited and listened and tried so hard to be there before they went tumbling away into the precipice beyond. For once they fell there would be no recovering them. They were gone. Gone, but not forgotten.

This has been my life.

A life spooled out like thread, strength uncertain, length unknown; whether it will cease abruptly or run out endlessly, binding more lives together as it goes; in one instance no more than cotton, barely sufficient to gather a shirt together at its seams, in another a rope – triple-woven, turk's-head closures, each strand and fiber tarred and twisted to repel water, blood, sweat, tears; a rope to raise a barn, to fashion Portuguese bowlines and bring a near-drowned child from a flooded run-off, to hold a roan mare and break her will, to bind a man to a tree and beat him for his crimes, to hoist a sail, to hang a sinner.

A life to hold, or to see slip through uncaring and inattentive hands, but always a life.

And given one, we wish for two, or three, or more, so easily forgetting the one we had was spent unwisely.

Time travels straight as a hopeful fishing line, weeks gathering to months gathering to years; yet, with all this time, a heartbeat of doubt and the prize is gone.

Special moments – sporadic, like knots tied, irregularly spaced as if crows on a telegraph wire – these we remember, and dare not forget, for often they are all that is left to show.

I remember all of them, and more besides, and sometimes wonder if imagination hasn't played a part in designing my life.

For that's what it was, and always will be: a life.

Now it has reached its closing chapter I feel it is time to tell of all that has happened. For that's who I was, who I will always be . . . nothing more than the storyteller, the teller of tales, and if judgement is to be made on who I am or what I have done, then so be it.

At least this will stand as truth – a testament if you will, even a confession.

I sit quietly. I feel the warmth of my own blood on my hands, and I wonder how long I will continue to breathe. I look at the body of a dead man before me, and I know that in some small way justice has been seen to be done.

We go back now, all the way back to the beginning. Walk with me, if you will, for this is all I can ask, and though I have committed so many wrongs I believe that I have done enough right to warrant this much time.

Take a breath. Hold it. Release it. Everything must be silent, for when they come, when they finally come for me, we must be quiet enough to hear them.

ONE

Rumor, hearsay, folklore. Whichever way it laid down to rest or came up for air, rumor had it that a white feather indicated the visitation of an angel.

Morning of Wednesday, July twelfth, 1939, I saw one; long and slender it was, unlike any kind of feather I'd seen before. It skirted the edge of the door as I opened it, almost as if it had waited patiently to enter, and the draft from the hallway carried it into my room. I picked it up, held it carefully, and then showed it to my mother. She said it was from a pillow. I thought about that for quite some time. Made sense that pillows were stuffed with angels' feathers. That's where dreams came from – the memories of angels seeping into your head while you slept. Got me to thinking about such things. Things like God. Things like Jesus dying on the cross for our sins that she told me about so often. Never took to the idea, never was a religious-minded boy. Later, years behind me, I would understand hypocrisy. Seemed that my childhood was littered with folks that said one thing and did another. Even our minister, the circuit rider, Reverend Benedict Rousseau, was a hypocrite, a charlatan, a fraud: one hand indicating the Way of the Scripture, the other lost amidst the boundless pleats of his sister's skirt. Way back then, my time as a child, I never really saw such things. Children, perceptive as they may be, are nevertheless selectively blind. They see everything, no question about it, but they choose to interpret what they see in a manner that suits their sensibilities. And so it was with the feather, nothing much of anything at all, but in some small way an omen, a portent. My angel had come to visit. I believed it, believed it with all my heart, and so the events of that day seemed all the more disparate and incongruous. For this was a day when everything changed.

Death came that day. Workmanlike, methodical, indifferent to

fashion and favor; disrespectful of Passover, Christmas, all observance or any tradition. Death came – cold and unfeeling, the collector of life's taxation, the due paid for breathing. And when Death came I was standing in the yard amidst the scrubbed earth and dry topsoil, surrounded by carpetweed and chickweed phlox and wintergreen. He came along the High Road I think, came all the way along the border between my father's land and that of the Krugers'. I believe He walked, because later, when I looked, there were no horse tracks, nor those of a bicycle, and unless Death could move without touching the ground I assumed He came on foot.

Death came to take my father.

My father's name was Earl Theodore Vaughan. Born September twenty-seventh, 1901, in Augusta Falls, Georgia, when Roosevelt was President, hence his middle name. He did the same to me, gave me Coolidge's name in 1927, and there I was – Joseph Calvin Vaughan, son of my father – standing amidst the carpetweed when Death came to visit in the summer of '39. Later, after the tears, after the funeral and the Southern wake, we tied his cotton shirt to a branch of sassafras and set it afire. We watched it burn down to nothing, the smoke representing his soul passing from this mortal earth to a higher, fairer, more equitable plain. Then my mother took me aside, and through her shadowed and swollen eyes she told me that my father had died of a rheumatic heart.

'The fever took him,' she said, her voice cracking with emotion. 'Fever came down here, winter of '29. You were naught but a babe Joseph, and your father was racked with phlegm and spittle sufficient to irrigate an acre of good soil. Once the fever grips your heart, it weakens, it never can recover, and there was a time, maybe a month or more, when we were just biding the hours until he died. But he didn't go then, Joseph. Lord saw fit to leave him be for a handful of years more; maybe the Lord was figuring he should wait until you began your adult years.' She reached into the pocket of her apron and took out a gray rag. She wiped her eyes, the kohl smearing further across her upper cheeks; she possessed the hangdog demeanor of a ruined bareknuckle fighter, spirit-broken and defeated on a Saturday night. 'The fever was in his heart, you see,' she whispered, 'and we were lucky to keep him for the years we did.'

But I knew that the rheum hadn't taken him. Death took him,

coming down from the High Road, heading back the same way, leaving nothing but His footprints in the dirt by the fence.

Later my thoughts of my father would be fractured and distended with grief; later, thinking of him as Juan Gallardo perhaps, as brave as that character in *Blood and Sand*, though never inconstant, and never as handsome as Valentino.

He was buried in a broad coffin, plain deal and warped, and the farmers from adjoining tracts, Kruger the German amongst them, drove his body along the country blacktop on a flatbed truck. Later they congregated, dour and suited, in our kitchen, amid the smell of onions fried in chicken fat, the aroma of bundt cake, the scent of lavender water in a pottery jug by the sink. And they spoke of my father, airing their reminiscences, their anecdotes, telling tall tales within wider narratives, each of them embellished and embroidered with facts that were fiction.

My mother sat wordless and watchful, her expression one of artless simplicity, her kohl-limned eyes deeper than wells, dilated pupils as black as pitch.

'One time I watched him all night with the mare,' Kruger said. 'Lay there 'til sunrise feeding the old girl handfuls of crow corn to stop the colic.'

'Tell you a story about Earl Vaughan and Kempner Tzanck,' Reilly Hawkins said. He leaned forward, his red and callused hands like bunches of some dried foreign fruit, eyes going this way and that as if forever searching out something that held a purpose to evade him. Reilly Hawkins farmed a tract south of ours, had been there long before we arrived. He welcomed us like long-lost even on our first day, raised a barn with my father, and took nothing more than a jug of cold milk for his trouble. Life had sculpted him a patina, features crazed with fine wrinkles, eye-whites close to mother-of-pearl, kind of eyes washed clear and clean by tears for fallen friends. Family too, all of them long-gone and near forgotten; some from war, or fire or flood, others from accident and foolish misadventure. Ironic now, how impulsive moments – in and of themselves nothing more than efforts to affirm and grace existence with a rush of vibrant life – resulted in a death. Like Reilly's younger brother, Levin, all of nineteen years old at the Georgia State Fair. There was a half-drunk and garrulous stunt pilot, owned a Stearman or a Curtiss Jenny, crop-dusted in season;

out to scare the tops of trees and graze the roofs of barns with his senseless and arrogant tricks, and Reilly had goaded and cajoled Levin into taking a flight with the man. Words went back and forth between the brothers like some *pas-de-deux*, a precision two-step, a tango of dares and provocations, each phrase a step, an arched foot, a bowed back, an aggressive shoulder. Levin didn't want to go, said his head and heart were built for ground-level observation, but Reilly kept at it, worked his fraternal angle despite knowing better, despite the haunt of sourmash around the pilot, despite the closing evening light. Levin conceded, went up on a wing and a prayer for a quarter dollar, and the pilot, a good deal braver than he was adroit, attempted a bunt followed by a hammerhead stall. Engine died its death at the apex. Long breathless silence, a rush of wind, and then a sound like a tractor hitting a wall. Killed the pair of them. The pilot and Levin Hawkins like two helpings of scorched roadkill. Plume of smoke three hundred feet high and still a ghost of it come morning. Pilot's rungofetch assistant, kid no more than sixteen or seventeen, walked around for some hours with no expression on his face, and then he too disappeared.

Reilly Hawkins' folks died soon after. He tried to keep the small farm together after they passed on, both of them broken-hearted after Levin's death, but even the hogs seemed to look sideways at him like they understood his guilt. Never a word of blame in Reilly's direction, but old man Hawkins, chewing ceaselessly on his Heidsieck champagne tobacco, would watch the older brother, watch him like there was a debt to be repaid and he was waiting for Reilly to offer up. His eyes would twitch back and forth like a quit smoker in a cigar store. Never a word spoken, but the word always present.

Reilly Hawkins had never married, some said because he couldn't give children and had no shame to admit it. I believed that Reilly never married because his heart was broken once, and thought to have it broken a second time would kill him. Rumor said it was a girl from Berrien County, pretty as a Chinese baby. Figured not to risk such a venture as he had other reasons to live. Choice between some wide-mouthed girl from an over-stretched family, girl who wore cotton print dresses, rolled her own cigarettes and drank straight from the bottle – that, or loneliness. Seemed to have chosen the latter, but of this he never spoke

directly, and I never directly asked. That was Reilly Hawkins, the little I knew of him at the time, and there was no guessing his purpose or direction, for more often than not he seemed a man of will over sense.

'Earl was a fighter,' Reilly said that day in our kitchen, the day of the funeral. He glanced at my mother. She didn't move much, but her eyes and the way she glanced back was permission for him to continue.

'Earl and Kempner went up beyond Race Pond, over to Hickox in Brantley County. Went up there to see a man called Einhorn if I remember right, a man called Einhorn who had a roan for sale. Stopped in a place on the way just to take a drink, and while they were resting a brute of a character came in and started up hollering like a banshee in a warbonnet. Upsetting folk he was, upsetting them and getting people riled and ornery, and Earl suggested the man take his business outside and into the trees where no-one could hear him.'

Reilly looked once more at my mother, and then at me. I didn't move, wanted to hear what my father had done to calm this brute of a character near Hickox in Brantley County. My mother didn't raise her hand, nor her voice, and Reilly smiled.

'Cut a long story down to size, this brute tried to level Earl with a roundhouse. Earl sidestepped and sent the man flying out through the doorway into the dirt. Went after him, tried to talk some sense into the devil, but the man had a fighting heart and a fighting head and there was no reasoning with him. Kempner went out there just as the man came up again and went for Earl with a plank of wood. Earl was like one of these Barnum & Bailey Chinese acrobats, dancing back and around, fists like pistons, and one of those pistons just connected with the big man's nose, and you could hear the bone break in a dozen places. Blood was like a waterfall, man's shirt was soaked, kneeling there in the dirt and howling like a stuck pig.'

Reilly Hawkins leaned back and smiled. 'Heard that the old boy's nose never did stop bleeding . . . just kept on running 'til he was all emptied out—'

'Reilly Hawkins,' my mother said. 'That was never a true story and you know it.'

Hawkins looked sheepish. 'No disrespect, ma'am,' he said, and

bowed his head deferentially. 'I wouldn't want to be upsetting you on such a day.'

'Only thing that ever upsets me is untruths and half-truths and outright lies, Reilly Hawkins. You're here to see my husband away to the Lord, and I'd be obliged if you'd mind your language, your manners, and keep a truthful tongue in your head, especially in front of the boy.' She looked over at me. I sat there wide-eyed and wondering, wanting to know all the more gory details regarding my father: a man who could right-hook a brute's nose and deliver death by exsanguination.

Later I would remember my father's burial. Remember that day in Augusta Falls, Charlton County – some antebellum outgrowth bordering the Okefenokee River – remember an acreage that was more swamp than earth; the way the land just sucked everything into itself, ever-hungry, never satiated. That swollen land inhaled my father, and I watched him go; I all of eleven years old, he no more than thirty-seven, me and my mother standing with a group of uneducated and sympathetic farmers from the four corners of the world, jacket sleeves to their knuckles, rough flannel trousers that evidenced inches of worn-out sock. Rubes perhaps, more often uncouth than mannered, but robust of heart, hale and generous. My mother held my hand tighter than was comfortable, but I said nothing and I did not withdraw. I was her first and only child, because – if stories were true, and I had no reason to doubt them – I had been a difficult child, resistant to ejection, and the strain of my birth had ruined the internal contraptions that would have enabled a larger family.

'Just you and me, Joseph,' she later whispered. The people had gone – Kruger and Reilly Hawkins, others with familiar faces and uncertain names – and we stood side by side looking out from the front door of our house, a house raised by hand from sweat and good timber. 'Just you and me from now on,' she said once more, and then we turned inside and closed the door for the night.

Later, lying in my bed, sleep evading me, I thought of the feather. Perhaps, I thought, there were angels who delivered and angels who took away.

Gunther Kruger, a man who would become more evident in my life as the days went on – he told me that Man came from the earth, that if he didn't return there would be some universal imbalance. Reilly Hawkins said that Gunther was a German, and

Germans were incapable of seeing the bigger picture. He said that people were spirits.

'Spirits?' I asked him. 'You mean like ghosts?'

Reilly smiled, shook his head. 'No, Joseph,' he whispered. 'Not like ghosts . . . more like angels.'

'So my father has become an angel?'

For a moment he said nothing, leaning his head to one side with a strange squint in his eye. 'Your father, an angel?' he said, and he smiled awkwardly, like a muscle had tensed in the side of his face and would not so easily release. 'Maybe one day . . . figure he has some work to do, but yes, maybe one day he'll be an angel.'