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The Reapers Are The Angels

Written by Alden Bell

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Alden Bell

The Reapers Are The Angels

TOR



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I pity the man who can travel from *Dan* to *Beersheba*, and cry, 'Tis all barren – and so it is; and so is all the world to him who will not cultivate the fruits it offers. I declare, said I, clapping my hands chearily together, that was I in a desert, I would find out wherewith in it to call forth my affections – If I could not do better, I would fasten them upon some sweet myrtle, or seek some melancholy cypress to connect myself to – I would court their shade, and greet them kindly for their protection – I would cut my name upon them, and swear they were the loveliest trees throughout the desert: if their leaves withered, I would teach myself to mourn, and when they rejoiced, I would rejoice along with them.

Laurence Sterne,
A Sentimental Journey

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Part One

One

GOD IS a slick god. Temple knows. She knows because of all the crackerjack miracles still to be seen on this ruined globe.

Like those fish all disco-lit in the shallows. That was something, a marvel with no compare that she's been witness to. It was deep night when she saw it, but the moon was so bright it cast hard shadows everywhere on the island. So bright it was almost brighter than daytime because she could see things clearer, as if the sun were criminal to the truth, as if her eyes were eyes of night. She left the lighthouse and went down to the beach to look at the moon pure and straight, and she stood in the shallows and let her feet sink into the sand as the patter-waves tickled her ankles. And that's when she saw it, a school of tiny fish, all darting around like marbles in a chalk circle, and they were lit up electric, mostly silver but some gold and pink too. They came and danced around her ankles, and she could feel their little electric fish bodies, and it was like she was standing *under* the moon and *in* the moon at the same time. And that was something she hadn't seen before. A decade and a half,

thereabouts, roaming the planet earth, and she's never seen that before.

And you could say the world has gone to black damnation, and you could say the children of Cain are holding sway over the good and the righteous – but here's what Temple knows: she knows that whatever hell the world went to, and whatever evil she's perpetrated her own self, and whatever series of cursed misfortunes brought her down here to this island to be harboured away from the order of mankind, well, all those things are what put her there that night to stand amid the Daylight Moon and the Miracle of the Fish, which she wouldn't of got to see otherwise.

See, God is a slick god. He makes it so you don't miss out on nothing you're supposed to witness firsthand.

*

She sleeps in an abandoned lighthouse at the top of a bluff. At the base there's a circular room with a fireplace where she cooks fish in a blackened iron pot. The first night she discovered the hatch in the floor that opens into a dank storage room. There she found candles, fishhooks, a first-aid kit and a flare gun with a box of oxidized rounds. She tried one, but it was dead.

In the mornings she digs for pignuts in the underbrush and checks her nets for fish. She leaves her sneakers in the lighthouse; she likes the feel of the hot sand on the soles of her feet, the Florida beach grass

between her toes. The palm trees are like bushes in the air, their brittle, dead fronds like a skirt of bones around the tall trunks, rattling in the breeze.

At noon every day, she climbs the spiral stairs to the top of the signal tower, pausing at the middle landing to catch her breath and feel the sun on her face from the grimy window. At the top, she walks the catwalk once around, gazing out over the illimitable sea, and then, towards the mainland coast, the rocky cusp of the blight continent. Sometimes she stops to look at the inverted hemisphere of the light itself, that blind glass optic, like a cauldron turned on its side and covered with a thousand square mirrors.

She can see her reflection there, clear and multifarious. An army of her.

Afternoons, she looks through the unrotted magazines she found lining some boxes of kerosene. The words mean nothing to her, but the pictures she likes. They evoke places she has never been – crowds of the sharply dressed hailing the arrival of someone in a long black car, people in white suits reclining on couches in homes where there's no blood crusted on the walls, women in undergarments on backdrops of seamless white. Abstract heaven, that white – where could such a white exist? If she had all the white paint left in the world, what would go untouched by her brush? She closes her eyes and thinks about it.

It can be cold at night. She keeps the fire going and pulls her army jacket tighter around her torso and

listens to the ocean wind whistling loud through the hollow flute of her tall home.

*

Miracle, or augury maybe – because the morning after the glowing fish, she finds the body on the beach. She sees it during her morning walk around the island to check the nets; she finds it on the north point of the teardrop land mass, near the shoal.

At first it is a black shape against the white sand, and she studies it from a distance, measures it with her fingers up to her eye.

Too small to be a person, unless it's folded double or half buried. Which it could be.

She looks around. The wind blowing through the grass above the shore makes a peaceful sound.

She sits and studies the thing and waits for movement.

The shoal is bigger today. It keeps getting bigger. When she first came the island seemed like a long way off from the mainland. She swam to it, using an empty red and white cooler to help keep her afloat in the currents. That was months ago. Since then the island has got bigger, the season pulling the water out further and further every night, drawing the island closer to the mainland. There is a spit of reefy rock extending out from the shore of the mainland and pointing towards the island, and there are large fragments of jutting coral reaching in the other direction from the island. Like the fingers of God and Adam, and each day they come closer

to touching as the water retreats and gets shallower along the shoal.

But it still seems safe. The breakers on the reef are violent and thunderous. You wouldn't be able to get across the shoal without busting yourself to pieces on the rock. Not yet at least.

The shape doesn't move, so she stands and approaches it carefully.

It's a man, buried face down in the sand, the tail of his flannel shirt whipping back and forth in the wind. There's something about the way his legs are arranged, one knee up by the small of his back, that tells her his back is broken. There's sand in his hair, and his fingernails are torn and blue.

She looks around again. Then she raises her foot and pokes the man's back with her toe. Nothing happens so she pokes him again, harder.

That's when he starts squirming.

There are muffled sounds coming from his throat, strained grunts and growls – frustration and pathos rather than suffering or pain. His arms begin to sweep the sand as if to make an angel. And there's a writhing, rippling movement that goes through the muscles of his body, as of a broken toy twitching with mechanical repetition, unable to right itself.

Meatskin, she says aloud.

One of the hands catches at her ankle, but she kicks it off.

She sits down beside him, leans back on her hands and braces her feet up against the torso and pushes so

that the body flips over face up, leaving a crooked, wet indentation in the sand.

One arm is still flailing, but the other is caught under his back so she stays on that side of him and kneels over his exposed face.

The jaw is missing altogether, along with one of the eyes. The face is blistered black and torn. A flap of skin on the cheekbone is pulled back and pasted with wet sand, revealing the yellow-white of bone and cartilage underneath. The place where the eye was is now a mushy soup of thick, clear fluid mixed with blood, like ketchup eggs. There's a string of kelp sticking out of the nose that makes him look almost comical – as though someone has played a practical joke on him.

But the rightness of his face is distorted by the missing mandible. Even revolting things can be made to look whole if there is a symmetry to them but with the jaw gone, the face looks squat and the neck looks absurdly equine.

She moves her fingers back and forth before his one good eye, and the eye rolls around in its socket trying to follow the movement but stuttering in its focus. Then she puts her fingers down where the mouth would be. He has a set of upper teeth, cracked and brittle, but nothing beneath to bite down against. When she puts her fingers there, she can see the tendons tucked in behind his teeth clicking away in a radial pattern. There are milky white bones jutting out where the mandible would be attached and yellow ligaments like

rubber bands stretching and relaxing, stretching and relaxing, with the ghost motion of chewing.

What you gonna do? she says. Bite me? I think your biting days are gone away, mister.

She takes her hand away from his face and sits back, looking at him.

He gets his head shifted in her direction and keeps squirming.

Stop fightin against yourself, she says. Your back's broke. You ain't going nowhere. This is just about the end of your days.

She sighs and casts a gaze over the rocky shoal in the distance, the wide flat mainland beyond.

What'd you come here for anyway, meatskin? she says. Did you smell some girlblood carried on the wind? Did you just have to have some? I know you didn't swim here. Too slow and stupid for that.

There is a gurgle in his throat and a blue crab bursts out from the sandy exposed end of the windpipe and scurries away.

You know what I think? she says. I think you tried to climb across those rocks. And I think you got picked up by those waves and got bust apart pretty good. That's what I think. What do you say about that?

He has worked the arm free from underneath him and reaches towards her. But the fingers fall short by inches and dig furrows in the sand.

Well, she says, you shoulda been here last night. There was a moon so big you could just about reach up

and pluck it out of the sky. And these fish, all electric like, buzzing in circles round my ankles. It was something else, mister. I'm telling you, a miracle if ever there was one.

She looks at the rolling eye and the shuddering torso.

Maybe you ain't so interested in miracles. But still and all, you can cherish a miracle without *deserving* one. We're all of us beholden to the beauty of the world, even the bad ones of us. Maybe the bad ones most of all.

She sighs, deep and long.

Anyway, she says, I guess you heard enough of my palaver. Listen to me, I'm doin enough jawing for the both of us. Enough *jawing* for the both of us – get it?

She laughs at her joke, and her laughter trails off as she stands and brushes the sand off her palms and looks out over the water to the mainland. Then she walks up to a stand of palm trees above the beach and looks in the grassy undergrowth, stomping around with her feet until she finds what she's looking for. It's a big rock, bigger than a football. It takes her half an hour to dig around it with a stick and extract it from the earth. Nature doesn't like to be tinkered with.

Then she carries the rock back down to the beach where the man is lying mostly still.

When he sees her, he comes to life again and begins squirming and shuddering and guggling his throat.

Anyway, she says to him, you're the first one that got here. That counts, I guess. It makes you like Christopher Columbus or something. But this tide and all – you wanna bet there's more of you coming? You wanna bet

there's all your slug friends on their way? That's a pretty safe bet, I'd say.

She nods and looks out over the shoal again.

Okay then, she says, lifting the rock up over her head and bringing it down on his face with a thick wet crunch.

The arms are still moving, but she knows that happens for a while afterwards sometimes. She lifts the rock again and brings it down on the head twice more just to make sure.

Then she leaves the rock where it is, like a headstone, and goes down to her fishing net and finds a medium-sized fish in it and takes the fish back up to the lighthouse where she cooks it over a fire and eats it with salt and pepper.

Then she climbs the steps to the top of the tower and goes out on the catwalk and looks far off towards the mainland.

She kneels down and puts her chin against the cold metal railing and says:

I reckon it's time to move along again.

Two

THAT NIGHT, by firelight, she removes from the hatch in the floor the things she stowed there when she first arrived. The cooler, the canteen, the pistol with two good rounds left in it. Later, she takes the gurkha knife and the pocket stone down to the beach and sits on the sand whetting the edge of it in long smooth strokes. She takes her time with this, sitting there under the moon for the better part of an hour, until she can taste the sharpness of the blade with her tongue. It's a good blade, a foot long with an inward curve to it. It whistles when she swings it through the air.

She sleeps soundly that night but wakes herself up just before dawn and gathers her things.

She puts the knife and the pistol and the canteen and her panama hat into the cooler and drags it down to the beach. Then she walks back up to the lighthouse to say goodbye.

It's a sorry thing to leave your home, and this one's been good to her. She feels like a pea at the base of that tallboy tower. She climbs the steps one last time to the catwalk and looks at herself in the thousand

little mirrors of the dead light. Her hair is long and stringy, and she takes a band and ties it up at the back.

Then she reaches in and uses her fingers to prise loose one of the little mirrors and puts it in her pocket as a souvenir of her time here.

Truth be told, the inward gaze is something she's not too fond of. But there are secrets that lurk in the mind, and she doesn't want any of them sneaking up on her. Sometimes it pays to take a deep look inside even if you get queasy gazing into those dark corners.

Back at the bottom, she goes out and shuts the door, pulling it closed tight behind her so the wind won't blow it open and stir things around in there. It's a warming thought to picture it staying the same after she's gone away from it.

She stands at the base and cranes her neck to look up at it.

Goodbye, you good old tower, she says. Keep standin true. Take care of whoever settles down in you next, dead or alive, sinner or saint.

She nods. It's a nice thing to say, she thinks, like a blessing or a toast or a birthday wish or a funeral sermon – and she knows that words have the power to make things true if they're said right.

*

Down at the beach, she strips naked and puts all her clothes and her shoes in the cooler with everything else and shuts the lid as tight as she can, stomping up and down on it a few times. She pulls it into the waves until

it begins to lift in the current of its own accord, then she swings it in front of her and pushes it over the breakers until she's beyond them and beyond the swells.

She swims towards the mainland, keeping far away from the shoal so the current won't pull her onto the rocks. She keeps her arms around the cooler and kicks her feet, and when she's tired she stops and floats and keeps an eye on the mainland to see which way the current is taking her. There's a breeze that sweeps over the surface of the water, and it makes goosebumps on her wet skin, but it's still better than trying to make the swim at midday when the sun is directly overhead and parching you up like a lizard.

She has no way to tell time, she's no fast swimmer and it feels like an hour before she reaches the mainland and pulls the cooler up onto the beach. She sits on a rock wringing the saltwater out of her hair and drying her skin in the morning breeze.

The beach is deserted. She opens the cooler and takes out a miniature spyglass and climbs a set of broken concrete steps to a gravel turnout overlooking the shore to get the lay of the land. There are two cars parked down the road and some shacks in the distance. Against the horizon she can see a few slugs. They haven't caught her scent, and they're limping around in their random jerky way. She keeps her head low and focuses the spyglass again on the two cars. One of them is a jeep, and the other is a squat red car with two doors. All the wheels seem intact from what she can tell.

Back down on the beach, she combs out her hair

with her fingers and from under the screen of her hair she can see a figure on the shore in the distance. She doesn't need the spyglass – she can tell by the way it lumbers. Slug. She finishes tugging the knots out and ties it up into a ponytail.

Then she takes her clothes from the cooler and dresses.

The slug has spotted her and is headed in her direction, but its feet keep getting tripped up in the sand.

She pulls out the spyglass and looks through it.

The dead woman is dressed in a nurse's uniform. Her top is medical green, but her bottoms are brightly coloured, like pyjama pants. Temple can't tell what the pattern is, but it looks like it could be lollipops.

She closes the spyglass and stows it in her pocket. Then she goes back to the cooler, takes out the pistol, checking the rounds to make sure they haven't got wet, and puts on the sheathed gurkha knife, which hangs from her belt and straps it to her thigh with two leather ties.

By the time she's finished, the nurse is twenty yards away, her hands reaching out before her. Instinctual desire. Hunger, thirst, lust, all the vestigial drives knotted up in one churning, ambling stomach.

Temple looks one last time at the nurse, then turns and climbs the concrete steps up towards the road.

The other slugs are still in the distance, but she knows they will catch sight of her soon enough, and that a few have a tendency to turn quickly into a pack and then a swarm. So she walks directly to where the cars

are parked and opens the door of the red compact. The keys have been left in it, but the engine's dead.

She searches the jeep for keys and can't find any, but there is a screwdriver under the front seat, so she uses it to rip away the cowling from around the ignition and prise out the cap on the ignition barrel. Then she feels for the notch at the end of the barrel and puts the head of the screwdriver into it and turns.

The engine coughs a few times and starts, the gauges on the dash rolling to life.

Okay then, Temple says. That's a boon for the girl. Half a tank of gas, too. Watch out great wide open, prepare to be motored on.

*

The world is pretty much what she remembers, all burned up and pallid – like someone came along with a sponge and soaked up all the colour and the moisture too and left everything bone dry.

But she's also glad to be back. She's missed the structures of man, which are pretty wondrous when you put your mind to them. Those tall brick buildings with all their little rooms and closets and doors, like ant colonies or wasps' nests when you bust open their paper shells. She was in New York City once, when she was little. They had it pretty well slug-free because it's an island, and she remembers standing at the bottom of this terrific tall building, thinking that civilization's got some crackerjack people working for its furtherance, and kicking at the base of the building with her foot to see if the

whole thing would topple over but realizing that it didn't and never ever would.

In the first town she comes to, she spots a convenience store on the corner and pulls up onto the sidewalk in front of it. Deep slug territory – there are meatskins milling around everywhere she looks, but they're spread out so there must not be anything for them to hunt around here. And they're slow, some of them even crawling. Nothing to eat for a long time, she figures. This place is written off – she'll have to go further north.

But first she goes into the convenience store. She discovers a whole box of those peanut butter crackers she likes – the ones made like sandwiches with the bright-orange cheese crackers. She rips open one of the packages and eats it right there in the store, standing in the window and watching the slugs inch their way in her direction.

She thinks about her diet on the island.

Ain't a fish swimming in the ocean, she says, could beat these crackers.

She takes the rest of the box and a twenty-four pack of Coke, some bottles of water, three tubes of Pringles, a few cans of chilli and soup, and some boxes of macaroni and cheese. She grabs some other things too: a flashlight and batteries, a bar of soap in case she gets a chance to wash, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a hairbrush, and a whole spindle of scratch-off lottery tickets because she likes to see how much of a millionaire she would have been in the old times.

She checks behind the counter for a gun or ammunition, but there's nothing.

Then she notices the slugs are getting closer, so she loads up the passenger seat of the car with her haul and gets back on the road.

When she's out of town, on a long stretch of two-lane road, she opens a Coke and another packet of peanut butter crackers, which taste like cloudy orange heaven.

While she's eating, she thinks about how smart it was for God to make meatskins not interested in real food so there would be plenty left for regular folk. She remembers an old joke that makes her smile – the one about the meatskin who gets invited to a wedding party. At the end of it they have twice the leftovers and half the guests.

She chuckles, and the road is long.

*

She takes the coast road for a while, shaggy palm trees everywhere and overgrown beach grass coming up through the cracks in the road, and then she turns inland for a change. Gators, she's never seen so many gators before. They are sunning themselves on the black tarmac of the highway, and when she approaches they skulk out of the way in no particular hurry. There are other towns, but still no signs of regular life. She begins to imagine herself as the last person left on the planet with all these meatskins. The first thing she would do is find a map and drive the country to see the sights. She

would start in New York and then adventure herself all the way to San Francisco where they have the steep-driving hills. She could find a stray dog or tame a wolf, have it sit next to her and put its head out the window, and they could find a car with comfortable seats and sing songs while they drive.

She nods. That would be a right thing.

The sun goes down, and she turns on the headlights and one of them still works so she can see the road ahead of her but in a lopsided way. There are some lights in the distance, a glow on the horizon that must be a city, and she drives in the direction of the glow.

But on the road at night, you start thinking ugly, alone thoughts. She remembers, it must have been five years ago, driving through Alabama with Malcolm in the seat beside her. She was very young then, she must have been, because she remembers having to push the seat all the way forward, and even then she had to sit on the edge in order to reach the pedals. And Malcolm was younger still.

Malcolm was quiet for a long time. He liked to chew that gum that was too sweet for her, and he liked to put two pieces in his mouth at once. For a while she could hear him chewing next to her, then it was silent, and he was just looking out the window at the big black nothing.

What happened to Uncle Jackson? Malcolm said.

He's gone, she said. We ain't going to see him no more.

He said he was gonna teach me how to shoot.

I'll teach you. He wasn't your real uncle anyway.

To get the memory out of her head, she rolls down the window and lets the wind play in her hair. When that doesn't work, she decides to sing a ditty she once knew by heart and it takes her a while to remember all the parts of it.

Oh, mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzy divey,
Yes, mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzy divey,
A kiddley divey doo, wouldn't you?
A kiddley divey doo, wouldn't you?

It's on a long stretch of country road that the car dies, and she pulls over and pops the hood to look. It's probably the fuel pump, but she can't be sure without getting under the car and poking around, and the engine's too hot to do anything for a while. She doesn't have any tools to poke around with but she can see a house set back away from the road down a little dirt drive, and there might be tools there.

She looks into the dark horizon towards the city lights. Distance is difficult to determine at night; it's possible she could walk it by morning.

Still, that house. It might contain something worthwhile.

She's been out of the game for a long time now and she's feeling bold – and anyway, she wants something to distract her from her night memories. So she straps the gurkha knife to her thigh, jams the pistol in the waistband of her pants – two rounds, emergency use only – and takes the flashlight and walks up the

packed-dirt driveway to the house. She's ready to kick the door in except she doesn't have to – because it's standing open.

There's a stink in the house, and she recognizes it. Flesh mould. Could be corpse or could be slug. Either way, she tells herself to breathe through her mouth and make it quick.

She finds her way to the kitchen where there's an overturned and rusting Formica table and peeling wallpaper with a strawberry vine pattern. Because of the humidity, patches of furry grey-green mould are growing everywhere. She opens the drawers one by one looking for a tool drawer but there's nothing. She looks out the back window. No garage.

There's a door in the kitchen, and she opens it and finds wooden steps leading down beneath the ground.

She waits at the top of the steps for a moment, listening for any sounds in the house, and then descends slowly.

In the basement there's a different smell, like ammonia, and she sweeps the flashlight around to a table in the middle of the room cluttered with bottles, burners, rubber tubing and one of those old-fashioned scales with a long arm on one side. Some of the bottles are half filled with a yellow liquid. She's seen this kind of set-up before. Meth lab. They were big a few years before when some people were taking advantage of the slug distraction.

She finds a workbench against the wall and roots around for a screwdriver and a wrench, but what she's really looking for is a pair of pliers.