

Angel Of

The town of Haven wasn't exactly quiet even if no vehicle had used its streets in seven days. No television, radio, or phone had worked in that time. The street lamps were dead. And even the night sky had dull and lifeless stars.

Lining power and telephone lines were birds, not just the usual sort of crows, but robins, blue-jays, finches, pigeons, wrens, doves, cardinals, and any other fowl of the sky that were native and even some that were not.

They sat still, watching the town of Haven, watching houses and buildings grow dark and decay like discarded flesh in dank woods. Even the plants and trees changed, graying and flaring out like electrified hair.

But there was more to watch, much more.

On makeshift crosses lining the streets, hung the citizens of Haven. Some were fresh. Most were not.

A carrion crow landed on one near what used to be Abaddon Elementary School. A girl, no more than eight, was tied to a cross using fishing string which cut deep into her flesh all the way to bone. Most of Haven's kids had been crucified near the school.

The crow picked at the girl's ear. It was pale white and hard, but it gave to

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the penetrating beak of the bird.

As the black eyes switched back and forth looking at the bloating girl, the crow wanted to caw, cry out to the other birds. But she knew better than that.

The town of Haven wasn't completely dead. Just off Main Street, up Corner Road was the Calvary Salvation Church, a blocky building with cheap stained-glass windows of nativity, crucifixion, and resurrection scenes. All but the crucifixions were broken out.

The church sat atop Malek Hill overlooking Haven. It often served as a meeting place on special occasions, picnics, family get-togethers, and city sponsored cook offs. It also served as a burial place. Harbenger Cemetery was atop the hill. Work there was very busy.

With a few grunts and the sound of dirt crunching under dull shovels, the town of Haven was far from quiet.

More than a dozen souls toiled at digging. Their clothes were torn and dirty, and so was their skin as if they themselves had been dragged through the Earth and pulled from the ground. But they couldn't complain even if they wanted to. Their eyes and mouths had been sewn shut with thick stitches.

They worked blind, guided by another's hand in the shadow of a hidden sun.

One near the middle of the pack, who used to be the town constable John

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Milton, tumbled over next to the grave he had been working on. His fifty-six year old body had been working for forty-seven hours straight. It had finally had enough.

Another took John Milton's place. As work continued on the grave, the dirt being shoveled away slowly covered him.

Meanwhile inside the church, Adam Byrne was at work also.

The church buzzed with activity, almost sacrilegious in just its efficiency. Pews had been cleared out to make room so servants could build their machines. The machines now clanked and whirled with wheels and cogs, pistons thrusting in perverse synchronicity.

Adam thought of them as Machines of God for they were in church, God's House.

The inside no longer resembled a church however. Paintings were burned off the walls. Curtains pulled down and used as rags to polish the metal of the machines. The walls were etched with ancient Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and detailed diagrams of massive machines.

Adam couldn't read them, couldn't read anything but his name and his mother's, Mary Byrne. She was laid to rest in December of last year. "I'll die of heart break," she often told Adam. It was true in the end. While sleeping, her thirty-three-year-old heart squeezed blood for the last time, quivered for a second,

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and then was still.

Since then, Adam had been staying with Pastor Henry Jones. There were some pending court hearings and such, but for the time being, Pastor Jones had been his guardian and little was made of it. Didn't matter much now of course. Pastor Henry Jones was beheaded and then crucified on an inverted cross in Harbenger Cemetery just the day before.

Adam paused from his work. At the back of the church, where the altar used to be, were two servants. They too had their eyes and mouths stitched shut. Everybody Adam saw had. The two were digging away at the floor with pickaxes, but not looking for any body.

The Crucifix of Jesus had been torn down from the altar and placed carefully upon the floor. Their task was simple, use the pickaxes on it forever.

Two men carried a crate in and sat it next to Adam. It was time for another delivery.

He looked at it briefly. He wasn't thankful for much, but he was thankful the sorting and collection process was held out back of the church in a clearing. He knew that wouldn't be very clean. And his mama didn't like things that weren't clean. Out back where he couldn't see, the ground was stained dark red and littered with flesh, shattered bones, and stretches of skin.

Only a few flies were inside with Adam. He guessed in that clearing there

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were thousands of them. Sometimes, he thought he could almost hear them and animals feeding out there. His mama didn't like flies either and certainly didn't like feeding strays. Strangely, this made him realize how he wasn't hungry, hadn't been in days, not since all this began. And his mama told him to always eat no matter what so he would grow up to be a healthy, good boy.

One of the men who carried in the crate stood with face down at Adam.

Adam knew the man, who was in his late thirties with thinning dark hair, couldn't really see him. But it still made him feel uncomfortable. Adam didn't like it when people stared at him.

The man heaved forward a second, white fluid leaking from his mouth, from between stitches. After that, he turned and walked away.

Adam was glad and reached into the crate and picked up a slice of decomposed flesh. It was black, slimy, and felt gritty in his hands, which were already covered in gore.

He began his work now, not knowing how he knew what to do. He just did. He wasn't afraid or sickened or outraged. Adam's perception of life was that everything was part of life. "God's will," was a favorite saying of his mother. Things would come to him, even if he didn't want to know. Now, things came to him, and his hands would do them, even if he didn't want to.

To Adam, it was like that time he knew where Mrs. Ketches' cat was. He

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had overheard his mother talking to Mrs. Ketches on the phone. Adam told his mom it was behind an engine block in Mr. Steven's backyard. When asked how he knew that, Adam said he didn't know. And he didn't. When the cat was found cut up in Mr. Steven's backyard, everybody thought that Adam did it, everybody but his mom. She told everybody Adam had seen it while out snooping around. He said he hadn't and was punished for lying.

With swift hands and a mind roaming through memories, Adam placed flesh on metal rods tied to real bones. He used wires and stitchings to fix the flesh to the skeleton before him.

Layer after layer, he rebuilt muscle tissue on arms and legs. He filled the chest cavity with lungs. He laid veins and arteries like some oil company laying pipe from a refinery. He cradled a stomach for a second and then placed it with intestines, kidneys, spleen, and liver. He connected each organ as a surgeon would and then placed muscle tissue over them to protect and support them.

Adam was finished for now, an almost whole body before him lacking skin. Outside he knew others were gathering skin for him and the body.

Through a nearby window, Adam could see the night's sky. It wasn't black but a dark blue. The moon was full and caused the clouds to cast shadows. He couldn't see them, but Adam imagined those shadows on the ground.

Before his mother nailed down his bedroom window, he used to climb out

onto the roof and watch the night move.

However tonight, the stars were stuck in the sky. Adam could hear the machines in the church straining. They were holding onto the night, keeping it in a tug of war with the sun and the day.

It wasn't long before more crates were brought to Adam. They were full of skin.

Adam picked up a strip and began piecing together a covering for whom he had built.

He wandered again in thoughts, hands not guided by him. Adam thought of his mother and his schooling. She called it "Mama's School of the Righteous."

There was no reading, writing, or arithmetic. It was just Mary Byrne and her morals against the wickedness of this world. Her teachings always included Jesus and His angels fighting the wickedness. He had risen and was going from town to town setting up His ministry. Mary was preparing for when He came to Haven. She was right and her boy would be right for Jesus and His work, even if her boy was what they called "slow." She called it his saving grace. "He'd never know sin because of it."

Hours passed, and Adam had most of the body covered in skin. The body looked like a jigsaw puzzle made of flesh.

Now Adam sculpted genitals for the body, an elongated penis and soft

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scrotum. He handled them with care, making sure the skin fit loosely where it needed to.

Adam didn't realize it, but he had fashioned an uncircumcised penis. He had only seen his own penis, which was circumcised at his birth.

Mary Byrne forbade matters of sexuality. "All the Devil's work." When Adam was very young, he was supervised during bath time so he knew not to touch himself. When he was older, he was taught to pray against the sins and temptations of the flesh.

During a trip with his mother to a local market to buy fresh tomatoes, Adam saw a beautiful girl about his age.

She was a bit taller than him and had black hair that fell straight like rain. His eyes dipped from her dark ones to her budding breasts that hid behind an oversized blouse. And occasionally they'd fall to somewhat skinny legs sprouting out of a pleated skirt. Below a knee, there was even a tiny scrape that was surrounded by a fading, faint yellow-purple bruise. This seemed to burn itself in Adam's mind to always stay.

There weren't any impure thoughts in Adam's mind then. He actually wasn't thinking of much. He felt funny somehow and knew he really liked what he saw, just didn't know why.

And when his mother saw that he did, she dragged him to her beat-up old

Chevy truck, almost throwing him into the cab.

At home, he was forced to bathe in cold water to cleanse his body. And he had to pray to Jesus to take away the demons in him.

The memories went away, and Adam realized he was finished with the face. It looked horribly swollen with fluids oozing from seams. Black hair had been sewn to the top of the head, and it flowed around the face. The eye lids were partially open, but no eyes were in the sockets, just pits of endless black.

The only thing left was to tie the ribs together and close the chest. But he hesitated and waited for something.

That something was brought in. It was a small casket with a golden haired girl inside.

She was removed and laid before him. Her clothes were then torn free.

Adam stared at her pale, doll-like body. It wasn't as deteriorated as the others. He guessed that she didn't really come from the cemetery, the casket not really hers. He thought of his mother's saying on children who die. "The Devil likes them young."

Adam's right hand now held a knife, about six inches of sharpened steel. He watched it tip over and press at the chest of the girl. He closed his eyes as he felt it slide hard on her. His hand went back and forth over and over, cutting flesh, cutting bone, pressing so hard the bones just gave away in a crisp crack.

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He opened his eyes to see both his hands reach into the dark, wet insides of the girl and pull free her heart.

As those who brought her in were dragging the girl out of the church, Adam placed her heart into the body.

When he was finished connecting the heart, he tied the ribs together and closed the chest.

The body was built, constructed out of the dead and decomposed, a macabre tribute to the human form.

If Adam could comprehend such things, he might have been proud of his work. But he didn't really see it as work.

He stood but not to go anywhere. Through the window he could see the power and telephone lines. He could see birds lining them, lots of them. "Messengers of evil," his mother had called them and often chased them from her yard with a broom.

One by one, the birds were flying to people. Adam could see that, but what the people were doing with them, he didn't know.

It wasn't long before more crates were brought to Adam. They contained bones, flesh, and feathers.

He began his new work by easing the body over. Then it was his hands' turn again, and they were quick.

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Outside, the birds that were left let their shadows grow larger in the static lunar light.

Inside the church, a tremendous machine was switched on. It had enormous wheels that jerked before spinning wildly. Copper, silver, and gold coated the machine and the wheels, which gleamed like fire. The whole thing vibrated as internal mechanisms whirled away unseen.

Adam was finished. This time, all his work was. He wiped his brow and stood, moving away from the body.

The machine roared, shaking the church. Pistons lunged upward, pushing at panels of metal plating that had been attached to rafters. The ceiling opened up to the sky like a flower seeing the morning rise.

Adam heard thunder as the machine died down. The thunder was soft at first but grew as if something was coming, like hooves of colossal animals running on the backs of gigantic steam locomotives. And they were all headed for the church.

Clouds above began to circle, swirling around the church.

Adam turned to the window and saw that where birds had been, now perched angels in shadows.

A bolt of lightning cast down from the sky. It struck the body, and white light exploded, knocking Adam onto his back.

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Adam thought he was dead, gone to be with his mother, walk with the Lord Jesus. But the thumping in his chest and ears, the tingling in his skin, told him he wasn't dead. So he sat up.

He saw huge, powerful, black wings spread before him, first pointing to the sky and then coming down in a swoop as the angel stood, the angel that Adam had made.

The angel's body wasn't a patchwork of flesh anymore. It was muscular and smooth. His skin was clean and glistened with a faint shimmer. He raised his strong arms high and glared with black eyes at the Heavens. He let out a cry, and Adam covered his ears.

Above, amidst the clouds, angels flew. Adam at first saw just dark lines that bent almost in half. As they neared, he could see they were angels. And soon, they filled the sky. It was as if all of Heaven had fallen to Earth.

The angel let out another cry, and Adam backpedaled into a corner, clinging to himself.

As the angel flapped his wings, taking flight, other angels from the sky circled down to the church.

They flew in rings. Adam was able to see more than he could have imagined about them. His mother's lessons of grace often included them. They were protectors of children and good people and were messengers of God doing

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his good work. But Mary Byrne's lessons were slightly off in description.

In Mary Byrne's version of angels they all had halos, white robes, and all were white males.

The angels before Adam had no halos, wore no robes and were nude, and were both male and female of all colors.

Six of them, three males and three females, came down to the angel Adam had built. The six flew together, wingtip to wingtip while keeping their distance from Adam's angel. He eventually landed back in the church, and so did they.

The six walked around him, wings spreading and closing as if to take flight suddenly. The angel looked at them with his empty eyes, a look of sadness on his face. He gave another upward cry, and they stopped walking, the females behind him.

A male with long, full brown hair stepped toward Adam's angel. Adam thought of him as the lead angel. He drew a mighty sword that caught all the light from the night's sky. He raised it above his head, and the stars followed it.

Adam's angel fell to his knees before the lead angel and began to weep tears of crimson that stained his face.

The sword edged forward and pulled back. It continued to tease that it might fall upon Adam's angel and undo all of Adam's work.

The lead angel, face solid and unmoving with eyes laced with contempt,

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tilted his head and looked down on the angel.

The female angels were different. They looked at Adam's angel as if he was a sick child who was never going to live. Adam had seen that face on his mother when their cat Faith had kittens that were sickly.

The female angels brought their elegant hands to their faces and waited, switching glances between the angel and the lead one, watching to see what his decision might be.

And then the sword was brought down. But it did not cut flesh. The lead angel brought it to his side.

Two female angels rushed to Adam's angel and helped him to his feet. They wiped away his tears as they held to him.

For a moment, Adam thought he could see a smile on his angel's face. But on the female's, he saw something else. They were crying, their bloody tears running down their faces, dripping to their breasts.

The look on their faces was a look of profound sadness. Adam could see that. But it seemed like sadness that was too much for one to handle and contain, like it might cause a person to hang their head and fade away into nothing.

And when the third female angel, who had been standing just behind Adam's angel, hung her head, Adam thought for sure she was going to collapse under the weight of her sadness.

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But she didn't. She placed a hand on the angel's shoulder. Adam's angel tilted his head to rub his cheek on it. The female angel closed her tear filled eyes for a second. When she opened them, she sank a knife deep into the angel's back.

He screamed, and the female angels held him still. The angels above cried out as well. In defiance or in agreement was lost in their sheer volume. Lighting spread through them as if Heaven was on fire.

The female angels held Adam's angel by his arms. They pulled on them, forcing them straight.

Adam's mind tried to remind him of the crucifix that was above the altar. But he was lost in watching what was before him.

The lead angel and the other male angels walked behind Adam's angel. Without hesitation, they took hold and tore from him his wings. They turned to dust upon hitting the ground.

The knife was pulled from his back, and Adam's angel was let go to fall on the ground, sobbing in the dust of his wings. But a wind came and blew the dust away.

The other angels flapped their wings and were airborne again, rising as feathers and tears fell.

As they flew upward, the clouds grew darker until they were red and the

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moon was dripping with blood as if stillborn.

And then a great cry came from all the angels above, and the sky flashed with white fire.

Adam covered his face, but his hands couldn't block all the light as his eyes burned.

Slowly, the light faded away, and there was only silence.

Adam opened his eyes, wincing at the birth of a day. The machines were all shut off, and the morning sun was sliding over the horizon, chasing the stars away.

The church was empty but for Adam. There were no angels in the sky or Adam's angel in the church. All were gone.

Adam stood there for a while. He didn't have anything to do. If something hadn't popped into his head, he might have stood there forever, watching the day.

What popped in his head wasn't like before when things came to him, and he did them, not really knowing why they came or what they meant. This was partially his own thought, partially a memory of his mother.

She'd talked of a city just a few miles from Haven called New Davenport. A distant cousin lived there by the name of Maggie Da Lyn. Adam was told he'd met her before, but he didn't remember. And Mary Byrne had called Maggie right with God sometimes and a lost sheep other times. Adam would just have to find out

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which she really was.

So, he left the church, walking down Corner Road and then skipping down Main Street towards New Davenport.

A bird cried out, causing Adam to stop. He turned and looked down Main Street. At the end, was his angel, his now wingless angel.

He was still nude and slowly staggering down the street. The other end of Main Street met with Highway 138 and that led to Interstate 36. And Adam knew that would take him to the “big city.” And the “big city” was off limits for Adam.

Adam watched the angel’s walk become more stable. And then it was like he was walking with some force. He held his head up and squared his shoulders. Even from the distance, Adam could see the wounds where wings had been and where the knife had penetrated. They weren’t bleeding anymore.

Adam let out a sigh and then the wind came. It wasn’t strong against him, but it was against the town of Haven.

Houses, buildings, and crosses became dust and were blown away in a blur like the wings of Adam’s angel. Even the church was gone in a blink of Adam’s eye.

And the town of Haven was no more. There was just Main Street, but it had no sign anymore. And at one end was an angel and Adam at the other.

For a moment, Adam thought about following the angel, his angel. But

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instead, he was hungry and wanted to hurry to New Davenport. So, he turned away and began walking.

While on his way, he reached into his pocket and found a feather. And even though his memories of Haven and what had happened there faded as he walked away, he always kept that feather close to him.

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