Ater Angelus

By

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Smashwords Edition

I couldn’t see a damn thing.

Driving down route one that night I was listening to old rock on the radio. Listening to the music and just trying to see out of the windshield, more than a little inebriated. As I rounded a curve the headlights suddenly revealed a deer standing smack in the middle of the road, hypnotized by my lights.

I cut the wheel hard to the left and the car started spinning counter-clockwise; thumping and throwing the deer on the third of five complete revolutions that the car and I made. I finally got the car stopped, ending up perpendicular to the highway, my hands clamped on the wheel like steel talons. Taking deep breaths to get my heart rate down, I marveled at my good fortune at getting through the ordeal with no damage to life or limb.

Well, except maybe the deer.

Just then I noticed movement out of the windshield. The deer was slowly working its way up on all fours, finally shaking it off and limping away.

I guess lady luck was smiling on us all!

My fuzzy mind didn’t realize the change at first, but it gradually dawned on me that the night was getting lighter. As I looked to my left I was blinded through the rain-soaked window by the brightest most invasive light I could ever remember. Leaning my forehead on the cool glass of the window as I watched the light rapidly approach, I was mesmerized. I just sat there watching the light grow bigger and brighter until it seemed to fill my soul with a blinding whiteness. In those final moments I was overcome with an agonizing dread, noticing how quiet everything had become as the bile started working its way up my throat.

Then the semi struck the door…

I don’t know if waking up accurately described my next conscious thought, but suddenly I was standing in a room with a warm fireplace burning on the far wall. I felt cold and wet and moved toward the welcome source of heat, noticing the neat and tidy furnishings carefully placed around the room.

“Hello George” a voice from the corner of the room clearly spoke, although it seemed more in my mind than felt in my ears. I looked in the direction of the voice but saw nothing, save for a small white wisp that was barely visible. “May I call you George?” the voice floated out again, this time from around the fire.

I said, “George is fine,” as I scoured the room for the source of the disembodied voice. I had noticed an accent to the words that I could not place, so I added “you’re not from around here are you?”

Laughter filled the room and seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. “I’ve always enjoyed your outlook on things, it is indeed a real treat to finally meet you” stated the stranger.
“I would probably be glad to meet you too if I knew where you were,” I stated as I
continued to scan the room for the source of the voice. It should be a pretty creepy
situation considering the circumstances, but I felt very at ease and my gut said this place
was all right.

“I’m sorry” said the voice, this time from behind me. “I always forget that I need to
change so humans’ can see me.”

Turning slowly, I was confronted by a man of average build and short dark hair with
the bluest eyes I have ever witnessed. He was dressed in jeans, a white long sleeved shirt
buttoned all the way up and a dark vest. His smile was infectious and exhibited pure joy
as he rose from the chair he was sitting on and stood with his arms clasped behind his
back.

He looked down and distractedly fingered a button on his vest. “I do love a waist
cloth but normally never get the chance to wear one.” He seemed caught up in the moment
as he continued to admire the silky cloth.

He suddenly glanced to his left before again facing me, almost embarrassed.

“Forgive my wandering mind George; I’ve just set up the board, would you care to
engage in a game of checkers? I love that little game of yours!”

He waved his hand in the direction of the chair as he continued. “We have much to
discuss when you get comfortable.”

“I feel like I’ve been run through the wringer, do you have any beer?” I questioned
him, uncertain at how long it had been since I’d had any, but feeling the need in a strong
way.

“Certainly,” he said, “it’s already sitting next to the chair, along with some pretzels
and chips, I have to admit I’ve grown quite fond of your potato chips.”

I looked over and the bottle of beer was there all right, steamy looking cold wisps
curling out of it just like in the old magazine ads. I realized that moments before when I
had walked by that very chair, there hadn’t been any beer or checker board set up, and the
surprising thing was that it didn’t seem to surprise me. I kinda expected the unexpected in
this room already.

I sat down and grabbed the bottle and gulped a swallow. It was ice cold! As I
continued to drink in the best tasting brew I had ever tasted, I became aware of the fact
that the bottle seemed always full.

“They got this at the local liquor store?” I questioned, “I might like to pick up some
of this brand.”

Again the all-encompassing laughter filled the room, his smile beaming brighter than
ever.

“So,” I tentatively began, “you seem to know a lot about me, but all I know about
you so far is that you play checkers, serve the best beer I ever tasted, and seem to be
somewhat of a magician.”

“You seem familiar to me too, but I don’t remember seeing you before. You belong
to the Legion? Who the heck are you?”

His eyes twinkled as he looked on me from the other chair, hesitating but a moment
to finish a bite of his potato chip before he spoke.

“Let’s just say I’m your guardian angel.” There was a glint of something that quickly
passed over his blue eyes, but they returned to normal quickly enough that I couldn’t
grasp what it was.
I sat there with my perfect beer in this perfect room, talking to a man who I suddenly realized also seemed a little too perfect. Where do we go from here I wondered.

“You were in imminent danger tonight, so I pulled you out of your car and brought you here,” he stated, seeming to read my thoughts.

“Where is here” I asked, “It reminds me of someplace.”

“It’s just a representation of someone’s living room from your mind. Pretty nice isn’t it?” Looking over to a door in the wall, he smiled the most perfect smile I have ever seen—at least on a man.

Pointing at the door, “And through that door…well, lets just say, one of your futures awaits you.”

“You have a choice to make tonight George. These things are *always* your choice by the way.”

“You are not actually here in this room of course, this is just one of your memories that we are sort of…visiting. Everyone’s mind is a little different, based on your life experiences and likes. No one else has a room in their head exactly like this one.”

“What journey would that be…say…what is your name anyway?”

“You know my name, for I have been with you for a long time. But for the purposes of this discussion, why don’t you just call me Michael.”

Michael it is then,” I smiled at my host. “So, what’s this journey you keep talking about?”

Michael looked over at me from seat and settled in to his own beer. “This is one of the best thing you have going, beer is truly a miracle. I don’t get it near often enough.”

I smiled at the thought and nodded in agreement, Beer was the best!

“About that journey you mentioned earlier, and a choice, what was that about?” I asked.

Turning serious, Michael got to the point. “You have been brought here as I stated before, because you were in imminent danger. My job tonight is in part to give you a choice in outcomes to that wreck.”

Sliding forward and leaning elbows on knees he continued.

“You see, it is not your scheduled time to leave this world, but because humans have free will, we do not always have control over when the actual event may happen.”

“We could not foresee that Jake, the driver of the truck that hit you, would drive an extra shift tonight. He has been under a lot of stress lately; behind on his bills and such, and he thought he could help his family with the extra money. Jake was however very tired and fell asleep at the wheel”

“Of course we expected you to have been drinking tonight…it’s what you do every night!”

He smiled knowingly as he continued. “Unfortunately, we have no control over the animals of the world either, and hadn’t foreseen the deer stopping in front of you on the road.”

Standing up, Michael started pacing in front of our chairs, obviously mulling over how to continue the story. I however had no trouble thinking of things to say as I was reeling from all of the information he had laid on my lap in the last few minutes.
“Hold on a minute,” I said, halting Michael’s pacing. “You pulled me out of the car and brought me here?”

Michael’s lips curled into a smile and he again took his seat, looking me in the eye as he addressed my question.

“Not exactly George, we’re not really here…remember?”

Now I was confused, how could I be here, but not here?

“But, since this isn’t supposed to be you time, you have been given the great honor of a choice. It really is a great honor George, you should take it as such,” Michael stated.

“Ok...ok, say I’m honored, what is the choice I have to make then,” I asked guardedly.

“Seems to me it’s either my time or it’s not, either way I appear to have kicked the bucket.”

“I know your patience is wearing thin,” he said, “humor me a minute more if you will while I try to explain myself.”

“While I can’t protect you from everything as I said, I do have the power to alter certain situations.”

“For instance, I can move you to the other side of the car, allowing you to live, but I would not be able to completely shield you from harm. In this situation you would end up badly crippled and in much pain.”

“You would spend the rest of your life as a mute quadriplegic, depending on others for your every need. You would be unable to even scream to express the amount of pain that you would be constantly suffering. You would most likely spend the rest of your life in a nursing home, who in turn would take every bit of your mother’s future earnings for your care. She would end up in abject poverty, all because of you.”

I felt sick. The room around me, once bright and warm looked dimmer suddenly. A chill crept up my spine as the sudden coldness of the room permeated my soul. The fire was gone now and I ran over to the now cold ashes and threw up in them, the bile staying in my throat and burning like acid.

“What the hell!” I screamed at Michael as a cold sweat covered my body. “What kind of choice is that?”

“It’s a hell of a choice George, did you never suspect that you may need to pay a price for the lifestyle you have lived these last ten years?”

A sneer formed across Michael’s face as he uttered these words, nonchalantly flicking a piece of lint off of his pants as he spoke.

“You do have a choice though; your other option is through that door.”

He again pointed to the closed door on the wall of the room.

“Through that door is Hell George, in all of its agonizing glory. You have the choice of skipping all of those earthbound atrocities I mentioned earlier. You can chose to alleviate your mom’s impending hell, and your years and years of constant pain that are in store for you if you stay. You can suck it up, think of someone besides yourself for once. Your mother will quickly get over her sadness at your passing. You have been a very big burden on her soul you know.”

Tears were streaming down my face as I easily made the decision between the eternity in hell and the one on earth that I would force my mother to also endure. The sadness of knowing that I hadn’t thought enough of her well being in this life caused my heart to break.
Standing but still facing the cold fireplace, I tried to speak, the noise coming out of my mouth little resembling my normal voice.

“Ok,” I croaked, “Take me to hell.”

“Excellent choice my boy, that is indeed an excellent choice!”

Still standing and facing the now frigid fireplace, I heard Michael rise from his chair and walk up behind me. Noticing his shadow on the wall, I was filled with fear as the shadow grew in height and distortion. I didn’t recognize the figure now projected on the wall, but I closed my eyes before I had to look at the hideous form behind me now.

Suddenly, my forehead was again against the cold glass of the car as the headlights of the semi seemed to be coming at me with lightning speed.

“WE HAD A DEAL!” I screamed as the truck made contact with the door and the screeching steel started to wrap itself around my body.

Suddenly everything stopped! Everything was frozen in time as I suddenly felt the putrid hot breath of Michael on my ear as he whispered in a raspy voice.

“Why do you think they call it hell?”

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