

8,000 Words

THROUGH DEATH'S HANDS WEEP

A novelette by

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“Gideon, now aware that it had been the angel of the Lord, said, ‘Alas, Lord God, that I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!’

The Lord answered him, ‘Be calm, do not fear. You shall not die.’”

(Judges 6:22, 23)

12:48 A.M. SATURDAY - 01/12/1974

“Through death’s hands weep, these eyes must see.” Karl Jaeger whispered, looking into the rear-view mirror at the reflection of his tired blue eyes as he drove up to the summit of the mountain. He wasn’t exactly sure where the phrase came from, but it had been rattling its way through his head for most of the evening.

A thin sliver of a waning crescent moon illuminated the sky, winking in and out of sight through slippery passing clouds. He was racing against the snow moving in overhead. Even though his maroon, 1967 Mustang GT Fastback had a powerful 390 cubic inch engine under its enormously elongated hood, and he was pushing the motor to the point of meltdown, he was losing the race.

He reached the peak, and began his descent down the other side of Penobscot Mountain over winding two-lane blacktop. He down-shifted the automatic into second gear with a moan of protest from the engine, and even though he’d switched from gas to brakes to navigate the treacherous turns of

the down slope, the trees still whizzed past the side windows so quickly it seemed as though they didn't have time to leave shadows behind.

Karl's mind was a blister of concentration, locked into the road, but his eyes would occasionally focus back and forth from the blacktop to the glass of the windshield, searching for the first flakes of January snow.

As he drove, his mind fluttered back to where he was before the journey home began. He was back at the doorstep of Joey's camper near Lake Wallenpaupack in Hawley. It wasn't difficult for him to regress his thoughts back there. He could still smell her perfume in his old flannel work shirt.

"C'mon! Yer lettin' all the warm air outa the house!" Joey protested. She was scantily dressed in a purple nighty. She shivered in Karl's arms, and pressed herself closer to him to keep warm from the chill of the cold Pennsylvania night. He was one-step below her, and they stood at even height with one another.

"Josephine, honey, I wanna stay here with you tonight." Karl pleaded in a mockingly childish voice.

She disliked it when people called her "Josephine". Karl was the only person whom she would allow to call her by her given name, and she would only allow it privately, intimately. When he would attempt it with other people around, it would usually earn him a playful slap on the arm, or at least a contemptuous look from her dark brown eyes. Even her parents referred to her as either "Jo" or "Joey".

“You know we can’t do that tonight! You know how my parents are! They hate the fact that I’m living here alone to begin with –”

“We can change that, y’know.” Karl said with a sly grin.

“Stop it! You know they’d hate **that** even worse! Jesus, they pro’ly still think I’m a virgin or something. If they found out we were **living** together, they’d have a conniption and disown me!”

“Everybody does it anymore.”

“I’m not everybody, Karl.”

“I know that.”

“You’d better, if you know what’s good fer ya!”

“Okay. Hey! What if I made an honest woman outa you? Think they’d go for it?”

“Karl? Are you serious, baby? I mean –”

“Yeah, I’m serious.”

“Jesus, I dunno. I mean, could we make it on what you’re gettin’ at the mill? You know how my dad is. I love you Karl, I really do love you. I just, I dunno – it’s kinda sudden.”

“Okay, baby. Tell ya what, don’t gimme an answer yet. Sleep on it. Think about it fer a couple o’ days. I know how your dad is, I don’t think that anybody’ll ever be good enough for you as far as he’s concerned. Maybe someday I’ll be able to convince ‘im that a factory mechanic makes a pretty decent buck fer around here.”

“I want to. You know that, right?” She asked.

“I know. Go ta sleep, Joey. Like you said, your parents are comin’ over tomorrow. You’ve got a long day ahead of ya.”

“I’m sorry, Karl. I really did want to spend the weekend up at your place.”

“It’s cool.”

“Maybe Sunday?” She asked.

“Cool with me. Call me, okay?”

She pressed herself close to him and let her long kiss goodnight answer his question.

The embrace fizzled out, and he smiled at her as he drew his keys from the front pocket of his Levi’s. He turned and walked down the last three steps with confidence and pride to his cherished car.

“Jesus Karl!” She called out. Backlit, she was a silhouette to him now.

“Aren’t you **ever** gonna get a new car? That thing must be ten years old by now! The new Mavericks are pretty neat, maybe –”

“Baby, they don’ build ’em like **this** anymore! I’ll be in the cold ground before I give this puppy up!” He called back, as he turned the key in the ignition. The engine turned over and he gunned the accelerator, revving the motor to emphasize the point.

“Careful goin’ home, Karl! It’s supposed to snow tonight!” She yelled over the motor.

Karl pulled out the knob for the headlights and looked down at the clock in the dashboard. It read twenty to midnight.

“It’s cool, I should get back before it hits.” He looked back up to her shadowed outline in the camper door. “I love you, Josephine.”

“I love you, too.” She replied, and even though he couldn’t see it, he knew she was smiling. She shut the door behind her as Karl pulled away.

1:17 A.M.

“Through death’s hands weep, these eyes must **sleep.**” Karl whispered to himself, rubbing his eyes with one hand, as he drove with the other.

His mind was still back at Josephine’s camper when the reflectors from the guardrail caught his attention. The road made a sharp elbow, and his reflexes took control of the steering wheel and the pedals.

He slammed down hard on the brake pedal, locking the wheels, and cut the steering wheel into the curve. The Mustang briefly left the ground by a few inches, and Karl could feel the car’s suspension relax. The world slowed down and became a surreal reflection of itself as his adrenal glands went to work. He shifted his weight downward slightly, and the driver’s side front wheel chirped as it made contact with the blacktop.

The other tires followed, and made a deadly skidding sound as they ground down into the asphalt. Karl cut the wheel a little more, quickly letting his foot off the brake, and instinctively switched to the accelerator. He kept it under control and negotiated the curve.

The road went straight again, but maintained its downward pitch. As he rounded the next curve, more cautiously this time, he saw a pair of large eyes catching the reflection of his headlights.

DEER! His mind screamed out, and he slammed down hard with both feet this time on the brake pedal.

There was a large six-pointed buck standing casually in the lane Karl was driving in. The adrenaline level in his blood shot back up. The car bucked from side to side as he tried desperately to stop. The tires screeched and burned against the pavement. The Mustang stopped, with its bumper just inches away from the buck's legs.

Karl's temples pounded furiously, he took air into lungs with huge gulps, and his white-knuckled hands trembled in their death-clench on the steering wheel. The buck casually turned his head in the direction of the windshield and looked calmly down at Karl. The deer blinked its eyes, and walked with a relaxed motion into the woods beyond the shoulder of the road, seeming not to care about having missed death by a margin measurable by a man's fist.

Karl waited for the deer to leave the road before letting his feet off the brake pedal. His breathing had returned to a near-normal pace, and he could smell the burning rubber from the tires and brake pads.

He drove on for home, slower, more cautiously now, thinking how from now on he would only travel main roads back from the Poconos at night.

He neared the junction for Route 309, and the first flakes of snow began to hit off the windshield.

"It's okay," he whispered, trying to comfort himself, "I'm almost home."

"You're going the wrong way." A low voice from the back seat replied. It was like nothing he had ever heard before. It was a voice, but it didn't sound like anything that would come out of a person. It was low, slow, and had a menacing potentiality to it. The hairs on the back of Karl's neck arose, froze, and became needles prickling the nerves beneath them.

The stop sign at the junction was in sight. It was just about fifty yards away, and the pit of his groin froze in fear for the entire drive up to it. He brought the car to a slow stop. He paused for a moment and drew in a deep breath before turning around to see who, or **what**, was in the back seat of the car.

He turned around to see it.

No mystery guest, no passenger, there was nothing – nobody.

The thought occurred to him it would actually be preferable if there were **something** there. Even if it were a something whose appearance matched the low menace of the voice he heard. Something would be better than nothing at all. There was junk mail, a box of discarded parts from a carburetor re-build, a Chilton manual, nothing that could account for the voice. He even checked the floor with his hands in a blind and vain attempt to find the source of what he heard.

The intersection was silent, devoid of other cars. He checked both ways for oncoming traffic, and drove left, further up the mountain.

"You're going the wrong way." The phrase echoed in Karl's mind in the inimitable voice that originally gave life to it. Each time it echoed, its fresh and

lustrous ring faded softly, giving it less emphasis. It dwindled downwards, back into the deep recesses of subconscious thought where it could give birth and life to dark dreams, choking away any chance of rational or pleasant thought.

The smell of a freshly killed skunk lying on the side of the road broadcasted its way through the Mustang's ventilation system. He wrinkled his nose at the smell and drove faster up the mountain towards home.

1:31 A.M.

Karl fumbled around with the door key, trying to fit it into the lock in the knob. His hands were still slightly shaky from all of the excitement on the highway earlier. He found it and turned it, opening the door.

"You're going the wrong way." The voice said from behind him. It sounded even lower and more menacing than before. Karl knew it wasn't something he was hearing in his head. It was external, and it frightened him as nothing else ever had in his life.

He spun around to look for the source of the voice, but there was only a silent parking lot behind him.

"In here, Karl." It said from inside his apartment. Karl rushed through the door and finally got to see the source of the terrible voice that haunted him for the past half hour.

It sat calmly on his living room couch. It was tall and lean, and gave an outward appearance that was vaguely human. It was dressed in a long, black

hooded robe that covered it from shoulder to ankle, making its pale, milky, gray/white skin amplified in magnitude against it. Its features were human, and were somewhat oddly familiar to him. Except for its eyes, which were pure black and glassy. It was as though its pupils dominated over the whole of its irises. The whites of its eyes nearly blended with the rest of it. It had a shock of wavy, brownish blond hair covering its shoulders. It bore the face of some one both familiar and alien to Karl.

Its appearance was an attempt at a gesture of sympathy, to give Karl a sense of being in familial presence. It was a close approximation of a son not yet born, at an age in life close to Karl's own.

In its lap rested a large black book.

"Who in the hell are you?" Karl yelled to it in a voice that demanded an immediate answer.

"What an impolite manner in which to address an angel! It would be impolite to address **anyone** in such a way, but addressing a messenger of **God**? How rude. This is not how I wanted **any** of this to start, Karl. My name is Azrael." The angel replied in a manner both affable and cozy.

"Az? Az –" Karl tried to say the angel's name through a haze of shock, amazement, and fear.

"Azrael. Azz-ree-el." He pronounced, slowly, carefully sounding out each syllable. "Have you ever heard my name before?"

"No." Karl replied, shaking his head.

"Then you don't know why I'm here?"

“No.”

“Good. No preconceived notions. A much better way to get acquainted.”

Azrael said, and relaxed himself further into the cushions of the couch.

“You’re... an angel?” Karl said in wonder, and sat down on the couch next to him.

“Did I stutter?” He asked with a polite grin. “Yes, Karl. I am an angel.”

“What kind of angel?”

“I could be sassy here and say, ‘The usual kind.’, but I won’t. I’ll be plain, even, and direct. I’ll say it now, so there can be no possibility of miscommunication later:” Azrael leaned forward slightly, “I’m the angel of death, Karl.”

“...” Karl tried, but whatever words were there became lost in a big ball of spit that went down his throat the wrong way.

“There. Now I’ve gone and done it. I’ve scared you, haven’t I? I didn’t mean to, Karl.” Azrael said in a tone offering sympathetic apology.

“Why are you here?” Karl managed to ask.

“There’s a somewhat complicated answer to that question, Karl. I’ll be brief and blunt – You interest me.”

“I interest you?”

“Hmmm. Perhaps I was a little too blunt and more brief than I should have been. The deer, Karl. You do remember the deer on the highway, correct?”

“Yeah...”

“You have keen reflexes, Karl. Very sharp, very... **in tune.**” Azrael said, tapping his long, bony fingers rhythmically with the syllables of his words against the book in his lap for emphasis. “You’re a highly coordinated individual, one might say.”

“What’s this all about, Azrael?” Karl asked, hesitantly.

“You were supposed to hit that deer and die, Karl.”

“Huh?” Karl asked, stunned out of words.

Azrael ignored Karl’s initial shock at his statement and continued.

“We’re in a timeline that shouldn’t exist. I shouldn’t be here, **you** shouldn’t be here. Time has lost its synchronicity, and it’s my job to set it right. We are meeting at this juncture through no fault of anyone. It isn’t your fault that your reflexes saved you from your natural end. Nor is it mine. We’re sitting in the middle of a paradox, Karl – one we’ve both created.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“Of course you don’t. Nor should you. I know your life, Karl. I know you have much to live for. Let’s clear this up right here and right now. I’m not here to make you beg for clemency, it would be beneath both of us to explore that as an option. I’m not here to play games. Contrary to what you may have heard, I don’t even know how to play chess. I’m here because you interest me, as I’ve said before. You interest me, and I respect you, Karl.”

“Thank you?” He responded in a questioning tone, not really knowing where this was all leading to yet.

“You’re welcome. What should we do here, Karl?”

"How do you mean?"

"Of course, how could I be so short-sighted? I'm asking your opinion and you don't have all the facts in front of you. Men are so linear in their thinking."

"I don't understand."

"I just said that." Azrael snapped back, and quickly opened his book to a page marked with a black plume.

"What are you reading?"

"The future, Karl. Future ramifications of an existence that may or may not be." Azrael paused and thought carefully about what he was going to say next.

"Karl, what if I told you that you and Josephine had conceived a child no more than two hours ago?"

"Jesus! You mean –"

"Yes, you're a father. You're son was supposed to grow up **never knowing** his father. How would it change him as a person if you were in his life? How would it change future generations of your progeny if his life became something it was never supposed to be? How would your being here change the world around him? These are the questions I'm dealing with presently, Karl. There are no easy answers."

"Joey's gonna have a son? We're gonna –"

"Yes, Karl. Yes and no. If this timeline is to continue properly, she can't know you after today, and Jacob can't **ever** know you."

"Jacob?"

“Yes, Jacob James Jaeger. He is to be born nine months from now in the month of September.”

“I have a son.”

“Again, you do, and you don’t.”

“What are we talking about, **exactly**? Are you saying that you’ll let me live if I disappear, go away, and never see or speak to either one of them?”

“Perhaps. I still haven’t decided what you could or what you **would** change if you were to go on living.”

“If I said yes, what would I have to do?”

“Leave this place. Leave and never return. I know you were saving your money for a future with Josephine. You have the means to do it. If you are to have any future at all, you would have to take what you have and start everything over somewhere else.”

“Life without her, and life without ever knowing my son?”

“Yes. Your son is to have an important life in this branch of time. I cannot risk altering it. It would damage everything to an extent I cannot predict.”

“Or death?”

“That is the opposite option, yes.” Azrael answered, calmly.

“How would that be? I mean, could I see him? Could I see her?”

“It would be different, but no less enjoyable. I can’t explain it in great detail. Some mysteries are supposed to be left to human faith and perseverance. Again, it would be different from actually being a husband and father, but no less pleasurable.”

“Where would I go? What would I do? I’d be Cain, wandering the Earth, looking for a home that doesn’t exist. No, my place is here.”

“Your place can’t be here. I’ve given you the only two options I can give.”

“When do you need an answer?”

“When were you planning on giving me an answer?”

“Tomorrow. Let me sleep on it. I mean, this **is** life or death, right? I can’t just jump in and say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. I need time to think.”

“All right. I can agree with your reasoning. It’s a decision not easily made for one in your position. I have terms that go along with the arrangement though.” The angel said, shutting his book with a low thud that echoed through the sparsely furnished apartment.

“Terms?”

“Of course.” Azrael leaned closer to him. His black eyes projected intent and fixed their way into Karl’s pupils, seeming to stare past them into his mind and soul. There was an unfathomable knowledge in those eyes. They had seen time from its beginning.

“You cannot leave this apartment.” Azrael began, he waited for Karl to protest, it didn’t come, so he continued. “You cannot see or speak to anyone – not through the door, not on the telephone, not by any means. I won’t be far away. If you violate these terms, I will consider it a forfeiture of my generous offer, and a betrayal of my good will. I will take you back to judgment before contact with another person is made. Agreed?”

“Okay, I agree.” Karl said, trying to disguise his fear. His hesitation gave it away.

“Good.” Azrael looked up at the clock on the wall. “Your clock says it’s three in the morning. When it reads three o’clock again, this afternoon, I will return to hear your decision. You have twelve hours to think it over. Somehow, I doubt you’ll sleep at all.”

“Somehow, I think you’re right. Hey, lemme get this straight – you’re just gonna hang around fer twelve hours, waitin’ fer me to make up my mind? I mean, you’re the angel of death, don’t other people have to die?”

“Men. You’re perception of time is so narrow. To explain it in a way you can grasp, let’s just say I can be in several places at one moment in time.”

“Okay...”

“Done.”

The angel was gone. There were no puffs of smoke, no microcosmic implosion. He simply wasn’t in the room anymore.

Karl wandered into his bedroom and sat down at the side of his bed. He picked up the brass alarm clock and set to ring at three o’clock. He wound it up, carefully placed it back on the nightstand, and turned out the light. He laid back, hands behind his head, fully clothed, contemplating his new reality. His black engineer boots hung off the edge of the bed.

Karl listened to the ticking of the clock.

4:47 A.M.

No, I won't let him do it! He's not gonna get me, not the way he thinks. I'm gonna turn this whole thing around. I'm gonna set this whole thing **right**.

In his mind, Karl saw the black, pistol-grip shotgun he kept for protection next to the sofa in the living room. The shells for it were in the drawer of the end table above its hiding place. The magazine held five shells, but Karl knew he would only need one to accomplish his purpose.

A **note**, I need to leave a note. I need to – hey! Why does it have to be some sappy, crappy love letter to Joey and the rest of the world? I'm sure if I mention the angel of death's name in there somewhere, Azrael will just come by and swipe it up before it's ever found. No, if I'm gonna do it, it's gonna be **defiant**. It's gonna be bigger than a piece of paper. Blood. I'll slit open one of my wrists, and write what I've gotta say in blood on the wall. Azrael couldn't take that away from me, and I could say what I want to say.

Karl went even further in his mind, imagining a paintbrush in a cabinet underneath the kitchen sink he bought ages ago to do some touch up work on water stains underneath the living room windows. Water had leaked through one of the windows, and left ugly brown streaks running down the length of the white drywall.

He would dip the brush into a lacerated wrist, gushing out its horrible red paint. The words would stand out obscenely against the eggshell color painted on the drywall.

But, what do I want to say?

He thought about it for a moment, and it came to him almost **too** clearly,
too effortlessly.

How about, I'm sleeping in hell tonight?

Karl smiled.

His smug grin slipped back in to solemnity as he thought about it a little longer. The mood in his heart changed quickly, and he felt a heavy weight there, pressing down on him, threatening to crush his chest.

Yeah, that'll do it. That'll send Joey into hysterics. That'll make a police detective shake his head. That'll... just be a really bad idea. No note.

No, no gun either. What's the point of it? If I'm dead, I'm dead. Why cross over into an already uncertain afterlife being the one who pulled the trigger on myself?

Because I can choose my own time and place – **that's why!**

And that would accomplish what?

I could...

Choose your own time and place, you said that one already. The truth is, you're **not** choosing your own time and place. Time? You'd have to do it before three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Place? You can't leave the apartment, he'll kill you if you tried. It would be quicker and easier to go upstairs, knock on your neighbor's door, and let a lightning bolt zap you dead before he answers.

It would at least be on my own terms though.

Your own **limited** terms. It's an interesting concept, but I think we're gonna have to pass on it, Karl. Your landlord's a nice guy, why make the poor man have to scrub your blood and brains off the walls?

It was that thought which quelled the sudden suicidal urges rising up within him.

Nobody deserves to have to clean up a mess like that, he reasoned, and besides, if there is a such thing as hell, why take the risk of getting sent there directly? I'm gettin' taken out early, under circumstances I did my best to avoid. Any way you look at it, none of it's fair to begin with.

In an effort to find sleep, Karl tried to time the beating of his heart with the ticking of the alarm clock's second hand. He kicked off his engineer boots, rolled over onto his side, and drifted into a light and uneasy sleep. As he slipped down into the wells of unconscious thought, he caught the smell of Joey's perfume in his shirt. It comforted him into a place where he could find some rest.

The alarm clock ticked out the minutes left to him with metronomic precision.

6:39 A.M.

"You're going the wrong way." Azrael's cold warning echoed in Karl's sleeping mind.

The phone on the kitchen wall began to ring, waking Karl out of his light and dreamless slumber. The loud, ebbing drone of the ringing bells made the

blood in Karl's arms and legs run cold with each buzzing tremor. His heart sunk deep into his chest – he knew he couldn't answer it.

That's a bad ring. He thought. Looking around the room, it was dark. Night still had a firm hold of the morning. He couldn't see the clock, but he heard it, ticking his life away from him. A call this early in the morning? That's bad news, bud. That's some one hurt or dead. That's get yer ass outa bed right now 'cause we need you right here, right now.

Each time it rang, it sent a cold jolt of current through his nervous system.

Maybe it's Joey, callin' ta see if I got home okay?

It wouldn't stop. It just sat on the wall, screaming for his attention.

No, not this early. If she were gonna call, she'd've called hours ago. That's a bad ring. There's something behind that ring. It ain't stoppin'. It ain't goin' away. Somebody wants to talk to you, Karl. Somebody needs you. Somebody's in trouble.

The pressure of it all became too much to endure any longer. He jumped out of bed and ran to the kitchen.

“STOP!” He screamed at the black, rotary wall phone, flapping his arms wildly at his sides.

“Please! **Just STOP!**” He yelled, and picked up a wooden kitchen chair. He began to smash into the linoleum floor continuously with each ring, screaming “STOP!” each time the wood hit the floor. The chair relented under his attack and broke apart. He turned over the kitchen table, scattering the contents that lie on top throughout the kitchen and living room.

A skinny case that held a black, two-piece pool stick flew open onto the living room rug. The emblem on the butt of the cue, a depiction of a flaming skull and crossbones, faced up to the ceiling. Karl had owned the pool cue forever. He loved it. It was a sixteenth birthday present from his father. Yet he ignored it under the torrent of mad frustration consuming his soul.

Karl moved to the entrance to the kitchen and pounded the heel of his fist into the archway that led into the kitchen from the living room, making a dull thump against the solid beam inside. The phone was two feet away, on the same wall. The receiver bobbed up and down with each thrust of Karl's fist into the archway, threatening to fall out of its cradle and hit the floor. His face was bright red, and tears were beginning to flow freely from his eyes.

He wanted to answer the phone more than anything else in the world. He wanted to hear Joey's voice on the other end, telling him everything would be fine, that it was all just a silly bad dream and she would see him on Sunday.

The phone rang relentlessly, without remorse or pity for the agony it caused.

Azrael stood quietly out of sight, choosing not to make himself visible, knowing it would only make matters worse. He carefully observed Karl's fervent display of anger. As Karl's frustration grew, Azrael's thoughts regressed back to humanity's beginnings.

Humanity as it exists on Earth, that is.

Human beings were never native to Terran soil. They first evolved on a world whose name was a forgotten memory for men, in a cluster of stars in the

section of the sky modern people living on Earth referred to as the constellation of Orion. As they evolved, the people chose to reach out into the dark oceans of space and colonize suitable worlds near to them.

Humanity's settlement on Earth began as a penal colony far away from those worlds. The star-faring societies of men dropped their criminals in habitable parts of the Earth's newly formed continents shortly before the planet's last ice age.

They were the worst of the worst incorrigibles in those societies. The men and women deposited here, as was the reasoning of those societies of the time, had no chance of returning as useful, rehabilitated members in the worlds who abandoned them. Their judges had them cast out here with only the clothes on their backs, and enough food to last them a week.

The Earth was an untamed wilderness in those times, teeming with predators, subject to hostile weather, climatic extremes, and its own indigenous population of sentient and peaceful people whose fossilized remains would later be referred to as "Neanderthals" by the new people who arrived, centuries after they had effectively exterminated them.

The indigenous peoples were nothing more to them than slow, stupid, freakish-looking competition in the beginning. Ironically, the Neanderthals took in those early outcasts and looked after them. They educated them in their ways, teaching them how to hunt and fish. They taught those starving refugees from the stars which plants were poisonous, and which ones were edible. The Neanderthal's kindness would eventually be repaid, first with slavery, and later

rewarded with a global genocide as their relationship came to its inevitable conclusion.

At the end of the ice age, the star-faring tribes of men returned once more to reevaluate Earth's potential for housing their most incorrigible criminals. What they found astounded them. From genetic adaptations and mutations to withstand the cold, inhospitable hell the planet had become, to the mingling of blood with the indigenous peoples, their own kind, their own **people** had become nearly unrecognizable to them.

The new species of men had subjugated the planet. Most of the predatory species of animals that threatened them in the early years were on the brink of extinction. They had established settlements, and as their populations would inevitably overlap into others hunting and feeding grounds, they would make war with one another.

Darwin's game of survival of the fittest had begun.

Here on Earth, their faulty chromosomes, which instilled their brutal and homicidal nature in them, allowed them to accomplish their goal of survival in manners and methods unspeakable to the races who abandoned them.

When Lucifer fell from the grace of Heaven, the Earth, with all of its penchants for murder and depravity, became a playground. He reveled in all of the fears and hatreds of these men.

They did retain something of their shared pasts. These criminals were also skilled builders and artisans. One of their first exercises was to construct an enormous scale model of the part of the galaxy from where they originated.

They constructed the pyramids in perfect symmetrical alignment to true north. They built those mountainous monuments as a reference tool for future generations of men, so they would know their past, glimpse their future, and know they were not alone in the oceans of space. They designed them to stand for all time, and other than the occasional cover of the shifting sands of the African desert, they have stood immovably thus far.

Viewed in their complete scope, across miles of desert waste, the pyramids are a perfect representation of the constellation of Orion, a stone monumental mirror of that sacred part of the Earth's night sky. It may stand as the most grandiose display of homesickness ever conceived in the universal sea of sentient life.

The pyramids also served another purpose. They built them so the people who abandoned them could see those monuments from the skies. They knew the distant colonies of men watched their movements. They saw the colonies' vessels in Earth's skies from the early days. They constructed the pyramids to show the people hovering above that the abandoned lines of humanity below would not forget their past, and they intended to return to the stars one day, perhaps to exact revenge upon those who cast them out.

This offshoot of human genetic material could be nothing other than what they were. They were murderers, thieves, and conquerors from an extracted genetic pool of the same.

It's not their fault. Azrael thought. His solemnity cast an invisible shadow the length and depth of time itself. They can't be anything other than what they

are. They aspire to be more, and for that, they should be commended, or at least admired. They're orphans, they can sense it about themselves, and they still carry those ancient resentments in their blood and bones. Their souls are stained and tainted with murder, and under murder, murder shall always perpetuate itself. They've forgotten who they are, yet the hatred is still with them, and after all this time, and after all they have accomplished, all they have to manifest their hatred towards is one another.

It wasn't often in Azrael's ambiguous existence when he would feel pity for living things, but in this moment, he pitied not only Karl, but also the whole of humanity with him.

Karl eventually wore himself out. His angry and frustrated display lasted long after the phone stopped ringing. Emotionally and physically exhausted, he fell back into bed. The butt of his hand throbbed with a dull ache, and a heavy bruise began to form. The tears subsided, and he soon found himself in the lighter realms of subconscious dreams under the watchful eyes of the angel.

Amidst all of the anger and confusion, the brass alarm clock wound down and spent its minutes and seconds with dutiful accuracy.

11:27 A.M.

"Man, I need a drink." Karl said to himself.

He woke up a little more than an hour ago, and he couldn't think of anything else to do other than sit on the couch and stare into the portable

television. The stress of it all made his head hurt in chorus with his bruised and swollen hand.

As his words echoed through his mind and he began a mental inventory of alcohol in the house. It was simple to do, there wasn't any.

"Azrael? Can you hear me, Azrael? You said you'd be close by. Are you there?"

"I'm here, Karl." Azrael replied, appearing next to Karl on the couch. "Are you ready? Have you made your choice?" Azrael asked, seeming somewhat anxious.

"No – I wasn't aware that I could do it early."

"Of course. I thought I was plain. Three o'clock is simply the cut-off. You could make your decision any time before then."

"I didn't know that."

"Have you decided?"

"No, no I haven't. I had a question for you."

"Okay, I'm listening." Azrael said, sinking back into the cushions of the couch, preparing for a conversation.

"Man, what am I doing here? This can't be happening. This **isn't** happening. There's no way."

"Is that your question? This **is** happening, Karl. For as much as you don't want it to be this way, it is. I came here to hear your decision, not to play games. You're wasting my time."

"I have a question." Karl said with finality.

“Ask.”

“Who was trying to call here before?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“It’s important to me.”

“Why?”

“It’ll affect my decision, Azrael.”

“I know it will, and that is **precisely** why I won’t tell you who it was.”

“Why would **you** care one way or the other about **what** I decide?”

“I have an interest in this because it involves important future events, events that will eventually ripple and have repercussions across this level of existence. I have a stake in protecting it. You might say I’m acting as a guardian of not only the future of your line, but the future of humanity itself.”

“So you’re a ‘guardian angel’, huh?” Karl said, mockingly. A tired grin warmed his face slightly, and for a moment, he forgot about his headache.

“There are no such beings, Karl. You’re a free and independent creature. You make your own decisions and live your own life. Angels have other things to do besides guarding every person on this planet individually – despite anything you’ve heard or read to the contrary.”

“Jeez, sorry Azrael. It was a joke.”

“A poorly conceived joke.”

Karl looked into the small portable television at his reflection. When he looked to see if Azrael’s reflection was in there, he saw it wasn’t.

What did you expect? Are really all that surprised?

“So, you can't tell me who was trying to call, or you won't tell me?” Karl asked.

“Both.” The angel replied with a smirk.

“What do you want me to decide? What's the best way for you?”

“Your death would be easier for **me**, of course. It was planned, and it was what was always supposed to be. If you choose to live, you will become a random thread in the tapestry of existence here. You will always have the potential of unraveling the whole thing if pulled. I can't allow too many random threads, Karl. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I guess I do. How many 'random threads' are out there now?”

“Just the one I'm talking to, you – but there have been others. I hope you're the last one, but you're probably not. Have you made your decision, Karl?”

“No, Azrael, I haven't. Could you leave me alone for a while? I need to think.” Karl said, placing his hands on either side of his head, pressing his fingers into his temples, trying to massage away his headache.

“All right. I **will** be back, Karl.”

“I'll be here, Azrael. I didn't have any plans today.” He said casually.

The alarm clock continued ticking in its relentless pursuit of time.

3:00 P.M.

The bells of the alarm clock rang furiously. Karl sat on the living room couch listening to it. He didn't attempt to get up and stop it. His eyes were

bloodshot with dark blue bags of wrinkled flesh underneath them. He stared vacantly at the clock through the hall doorway.

Karl quietly lit a cigarette and flicked the first ash into the tray on the pine coffee table in front of him.

As he exhaled the first drag of smoke, the blood rushed to his head, and he realized it was the first cigarette he'd lit up since Azrael made his presence known more than twelve hours ago. His hand throbbed with bruised pain. His head throbbed with nearly the same. He was tired. He was tired and ready to sleep.

The alarm clock bells slowed, quieted, and finally stopped as the ringer mechanism wound down. Karl seemed oblivious to it. He knew what needed to be done, and he was prepared to do it. He accepted it.

Change was inevitable and fate was immovable. He felt the awesome presence of the angel entering the room.

He heard the wind outside for the first time. He remembered the snowstorm now, becoming aware the wind's song had been with him all through the night.

I wonder how much we got? They were callin' fer eight inches to a foot. I guess it really doesn't matter much now, does it?

Karl pressed the filter to his lips and shut his eyes. He listened to the dull crackle of the embers from the lit end of the cigarette as he sucked the smoke into his mouth, and when there was enough, he inhaled. He lifted his head without opening his eyes. He exhaled another lung full of smoke, and felt all the life left in his body wash away with it.

Azrael was there. He sat patiently on the couch next to him. The angel had a question. The man had the answer. The world would change now.

“Hello, Karl. Are you ready? Have you made your decision?” Azrael asked.

Karl opened his eyes.

“I’m ready, Azrael. Let’s do this.”

9:18 P.M. Sunday – 01/13/1974

“Karl?” Joey inquired, loudly. She tried to peer into the living room windows of Karl’s apartment. There was no way for her to see what was going on inside through closed curtains and shut blinds. She went back to rapping on the door.

“Karl? **Karl**? Are you in there?”

The apartment felt empty to her. She knew he wasn’t in there. She knew it from the moment she pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex and saw that his car was gone.

Almost a foot of fluffy snow fell the night before. It was the kind of snow fallen from a cold night sky, there wasn’t much moisture in it. The winter wind carried it along in billowing drifts against the building. She looked for his footprints leading up to or away from the door, but there were none. Fresh snow covered his parking space. She began to think he never arrived home Saturday night.

If he didn’t go home, then where did he go? Please, Karl. Please be in there!

“Karl? C’mon Karl, I’m freezing! Let me in!” She cried, banging on the door.

Azrael sat on the living room couch reading his book of names and events. He listened to the ardent thumping coming from Josephine outside. He nodded his head in quiet agreement and shut his eyes.

Everything is as it is supposed to be. Everything has been set right, or – at least as right as I can make it. The timeline is secure, and that is all anyone could ever ask of me. Azrael thought, feeling uneasy with his decision.

Right, wrong, good, evil, none of it applies here. This was **necessary**.

Azrael saw the black shaft of wood lying on the floor amidst the debris scattered from Karl’s earlier tantrum in the kitchen. As he went over to it, and he saw the white death’s head visage emblazoned at the bottom and smiled. The natural maple section of the pool cue was still in the case. He gathered it all together and sat back down on the couch. He figured out how the butt fit into the case and put the ensemble together. He looked around as though he were shoplifting in a department store. He was actually trying to determine if anyone would miss the pool stick. He stood from the sofa and slipped the cased cue into his robe.

“For Jacob, from his father.” He said quietly to himself, gently patting the case inside his robe.

Azrael’s form began to darken into a shadow until there was nothing left of him to see. Azrael was gone.

In the bedroom, the alarm clock stopped ticking. Time stopped and became silent. All that was audible inside the small, drywall rooms of the apartment were the wind and the woman outside.

3:33 A.M. Sunday – 01/13/1974

U.S./Canadian Border, Niagara Falls, New York

“Do you have any form of picture I. D.?” The Mountie asked from inside what could pass as a tollbooth.

To Karl, through his American eyes, the Mountie in his bright red jacket and tan brimmed hat looked as though he were a refugee from a costume party. In a Canadian's eyes, the man was a cop, and Karl afforded him the respect he was due.

“P. A. state driver's license, is that good?” Karl asked, extending his hand out through the window of the Mustang, holding the license out to him.

“That's fine, sir.” The Mountie replied, taking the card. He glanced at it, checking its validity, while briefly scanning through his memory to try to ascertain if the name matched any wanted fugitives from the States. It didn't, so he handed the license back to Karl.

“Your business in Canada, sir?” The Mountie asked.

“Tourism, came ta see the Falls.”

“Uh-huh. Are you bringing anything into the country, Mr. Jaeger?” The Mountie was testing him to see how well he responded to the surname on the license. He pronounced the name with a hard “J” sound on the first consonant.

“That’s **Jaeger**.” Karl, stressed, pronouncing his surname correctly, with a “Y” sound, as was the proper German pronunciation.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Jaeger.” The Mountie said, pronouncing Karl’s name correctly this time.

“It’s cool, man. People do it all the time.”

“So, are you bringing anything into the country tonight?” The Mountie asked once again.

“Nothin’, man. Nothin’ but a week’s worth o’ food, and the clothes on my back.” He said, smiling a friendly smile.

The Mountie thought for a moment the smile seemed fake, as though the man in front of him were forcing it. His blue eyes seemed to hide a measure of sadness behind them.

“Okay then.” The Mountie said with a cheerful smile. “Welcome to Ontario. Enjoy your visit.”

“Thanks, man. I’m sure I will.”

END.