

☑ angel

Shreveport, Louisiana
1987

My father is a liar. He claimed to name me Angel the day my mother died. He said it was because God sent me to save him, but as the years passed he shriveled up anyway into a wad of sadness and self-pity. The lies he told about her death became my foundation—they were the kind that anchor little girls when they don't have a mother.

He gave me a story.

Before I began the real search for my mother, I was lonely. All I had was the liar, who, based on my meager experience, seemed to be doing the best he could. After all, he taught me to love the wide-open distance surrounding us, and sometimes that space made me feel as if I could actually fly. The cotton fields made it seem possible more than anything. Sometimes when he gazed up into the blue-sea sky, my father cried. The more he cried, the less I cried, but no matter what degree of strength I gained, the cotton fields stirred something in me. Each time I felt that rousing beat of my heart, I thought I understood his tall tale. See, my mother, Betty Lou, had loved fields, and my father, filled with

a grief so rich it turned generous, showed me all her favorites. He took me onto private property, and even to the top of a high-rise building erected on the very spot where she had stretched out across the grass, searching for shapes in the clouds. She photographed them—it was her passion—or so the story went.

Only later I found out I had to create my own story. Ironically, it began in a giant bug-infested cotton field, surrounded by cows, at the LSU Agricultural Center. For several years, I'd worked a few hours a week at the hospital near our home, which was convenient and a good way to make a few bucks, keep as active as possible, and seem normal. It was perfect, filled with a variety of healthcare professionals, lots of capable hands to catch me if I fell. The situation changed, though, in the spring of my junior year, when my neurologist decided to increase my medication, hoping to propel me through my last year of college.

He winked, saying, "It might actually make you hyper," which sounded interesting. I didn't think I'd ever been hyper.

Imagine a hyper turtle. I was a turtle. So on his advice, and my father's strong support, I took a full-time summer job at the Ag Center. They hoped the nature of the work and the sunshine, along with the new regimen, would somehow give my body a jump-start. As they discussed the possibilities, I imagined I'd be like the turtle I found in our yard as a kid. I'd painted its back white in hope of finding it again. I worried that they'd need to tag me so I could be found at the end of the summer. As the doctor scribbled down my new prescription, my father just smiled like he had for the last twenty years, kind of sad but hopeful. I smiled back, guessing that the turtle with the white back was dead now.

So I ended up in a field of my own, and it was there I met Tim and Kimmy.

Thrown together on the first day of work, we seemed an unlikely threesome. College appeared to be our only connection. Tim was a small-boned guy who, despite his lack of muscle, was tough enough to make us think he was strong, and Kimmy, older than Tim and me by several years, was tall, soft, and rounded with very few edges. Tim

struck me as a know-it-all, and she seemed to know very little considering her age. She had puppy-dog eyes. Later I realized just how perfect we were for each other; in fact, our dynamic set my story in motion, and if it wasn't for that, I might still be asleep.

From the beginning, they could see I was both tired and wired, a combination that would make anyone curious. I tried to hide it, but dull eyes, drooping lids, and slurred words followed by drug-induced hyperactive behavior (a hyper turtle) are hard to hide, even for the most skilled of my kind. I'd been trying to mask my narcolepsy for almost ten years. I had some great tricks, but being with Tim and Kimmy for eight hours a day, five days a week, presented a new challenge. I'd never considered being open about it. I hadn't once stopped to think that other people might have afflictions or issues to hide that equaled mine. Things like not ever knowing what to say, or being insecure, or having bad teeth, a wife, fat parents, or being gay or ugly or unloved. In the end, I really just wanted everyone to leave me alone. I wanted to sleep.

I certainly didn't think Tim or Kimmy had anything to hide until, for some odd reason, Kimmy told me she was a virgin. Her confession came at me out of the blue, like looking up into the sky to find a giant horse or house or snail floating, perfectly shaped by billowing clouds, both plump and narrow-striped. And just like seeing a cloud take recognizable form, Kimmy gave me a little wondrous shock. She told me her secret about two weeks into the summer. During a lunch break, she was rambling on and on about her life, and Tim had wandered off to pee. It popped out of the drone, the blue, and there I was staring at the cloud.

Later, as I mulled over why in the world she would tell me such a thing, sweat dribbled down the side of my neck and down my back. I was hotter than I'd ever been. My backside pointed toward that beautiful Betty Lou space, and although my mouth wasn't close enough to touch the dirt, I could taste it. It was particularly humid that day and my jeans clung to my legs in a gross, heavy way. The Ag Center had a rule against its summer employees wearing shorts. The pesticides we were studying might seep into our skin and harm us at some basic

level not yet understood. I pulled a handful of weeds from the brittle ground, and three bugs scurried away. I thought it odd—they weren't supposed to be there. I'd just spent the last half-hour teasing all the insects out of my designated section. The only explanation was that they'd crawled up from farther below, deeper than I'd been instructed to dig.

I spat to keep a bug from flying in my mouth. My head hurt. The way I was bent at the waist to avoid plopping my knees into the dirt wasn't helping. I kept trying to remain clean in what was basically a huge pile of dirt. I squatted low instead, and for a moment wondered what it might feel like to give in and roll in the dirt. It reminded me of Betty Lou and I imagined her under the dirt, beneath a frozen pond, swimming on her back, breath held, hands to the ice. I touched the ground, palms down, fingers widely spread. I scratched at it as if to make contact, to pull her out, but when I lifted my hands, I had nothing. So I searched the sky instead. Moments earlier it had been clear and blue but now clouds were rolling overhead. In Louisiana, everything can change within minutes.

"Why are you so strung out all the time?" Tim asked. "Are you on drugs?" He liked to talk and shock.

I didn't answer.

"Ignore me if you want, but I know it when I see it. You cleared those bugs before I even got my gear set up."

I straightened up, ready to confess. "I have narcolepsy, okay?"

"What's that?" asked Kimmy, genuinely interested.

"It's a sleepin' disorder," I said, pulling weeds again. "It's no big deal."

"Yeah, I think I've heard of that," said Tim. "It's like you're just goin' about your business, livin' your life, and Boom! You fall." He fell limp into the dirt, drama-queen fashion. Kimmy and I watched a brown cloud swirl around him until he disappeared. Then, from out of the dust, "How does that make you hyper? You *look* tired. I don't get it."

"Sometimes the medicine I take makes me hyper. I really don't wanna talk about it," I said, as nicely as I could.

“So you mean you don’t normally shake your head and wave your hands around like that every time you talk?”

My head started to shake harder. Before I could answer, the sky rumbled.

“Never mind,” Tim said, tossing a handful of weeds over his shoulder. “Alleluia! Let’s go.” He ran in a girlish way to the driver’s side of the dirty pickup that brought us daily to what seemed the most deserted spot in the center. We had strict orders to head indoors at the first sign of thunder and lightning, which often turned out to be a refreshing break.

“You drive,” I said, climbing into the other side. I scooted toward him, making room for Kimmy. She squeezed in, slamming the door against her leg. Tall and big-boned, she didn’t seem to belong in a cotton field any more than I did. She was a sad girl. Actually, she wasn’t a girl. She was twenty-six, but now I knew she was a virgin and, in my opinion, that made her a girl. And I knew it made her sad. She told me so. Her sweet, lonely face told me, too. It bore the knowledge of feeling big and being plain. But I thought she was appealing. She was normal, average, and ordinary, exactly what I wanted to be.

“Why don’t we just wait it out?” she said. “Half the time we hear thunder, drive back, and nothin’ happens.”

As they stared at me from either side, it struck me that there was something else sad about her, something more than what she’d told me and how she looked. I saw it in Tim, too, but couldn’t figure out exactly what it was or where it came from. Besides the fact that we were all in college, this nameless feeling was the thing we had in common. Despite the virgin white cotton and clouds, we were in a soiled place. None of us were gritty enough for it. We were each soft and swollen, bruised in our own way.

My foot started tapping and wouldn’t stop.

Finally Tim said, “I like ridin’ back. All those bumps feel good, real good, if you know what I mean.”

Kimmy looked embarrassed.

It began to rain and I wondered if we should have gone in. The water ran down the windows of the truck, blocking our view. After

thirty minutes of it, I began to fear we might sink, and the field that promised liberation would trap us. “We should have gone in,” I said. “I think your idea was good, Kimmy, but it’s not gonna dry up quick this time.”

“We’re gonna get stuck,” Tim said, twisting around, searching for a way out. “Crap. In another thirty minutes, this is gonna be part of the frickin’ Red River.”

“Relax,” Kimmy said. “All we can do now is wait and see what happens.” She had a knack for calming Tim. “Just take a deep breath and pray for patience.”

My foot tapped harder.

Tim’s eyes rolled. “Well, we might as well get to know each other a little better then,” he said. “Let’s play this game I know. Each person has to tell a secret.”

“We already know each other,” I said. Kimmy looked worried and I decided she’d better start praying a little more.

“Not really,” Tim said. “I don’t know anythang personal about either of y’all, except now I know Angel has narco-whatever-shit. All we do out here is talk about nothin’.”

These were the moments I hated most. The ones when I felt cornered into becoming a closer friend. The atmosphere condoned it and they wanted it. The close space. The rain. It’s not that people weren’t interesting to me. They were, but I always seemed to focus on their weaknesses, their self-centeredness, and their undeniable march toward death. When you have a dead mother, you’re closer to death than most. And you know they’re close, too. Every time I began to see a potential friend’s life rounding out around me, I realized how small a dot I was upon it. I was too small to matter and, subsequently, too small to make the required effort. My attitude was selfish, but the piece necessary for unselfishness was the piece I couldn’t find. My lack of that mysterious element enabled me, time after time, to refocus on the smallness. Their insignificance. My worthlessness. Everything appeared petty without the piece I called *mother*. Mother, I’d finally concluded, was something soft and warm, accepting and positive. The thing I’d never had.

Of course there was my father, who should have made me feel better but didn't. He and I were a team always coming up one player short. We sat together on the sidelines, holding hands. "Trust me, my life ain't that excitin'," I said, finally.

"Sure it is," Tim said, turning on the radio.

The ancient truck only had an AM dial, and Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs' whining oldie, "Stay," swirled around us like a plea for unity I didn't want. "Did you ever fall asleep durin' sex?" Tim asked. "You know, right at that *Xanadu* moment?"

"Oh my God," Kimmy said, reaching over me to slap at Tim. "What is wrong with you?"

Tim ignored her, singing, "Why don't you stay-ay-ay? Just a little bit longer . . ."

"No comment," I said, knowing they were both waiting for an answer.

"See, I knew it," Tim said, grinning. "She has some weird stuff goin' on with that narco shit."

"Will you grow up already?" Kimmy asked. She tried to turn down the music, but Tim pushed her hand away.

"Patience," he said, waving his finger in front of my face.

"What about you?" I asked Tim, trying not to shake my head. "You're the one who's dyin' to tell a secret." He wouldn't have suggested the game if he didn't want to talk. Despite his complaint, he was the one who most often brought up the subject of nothing.

"Okay, if you really wanna know. My secret is . . . The secret is . . ."

His tone changed and I looked at Kimmy. My thick ponytail hit Tim in the face. "Oh, forget it," he said.

"What's the secret?" I asked, head shaking, hands gesturing.

"I cain't."

"Why not?" asked Kimmy.

"Stay, a little bit longer," the DJ said, saving Tim, who looked relieved. "Straight to us from 1960. What a year, what a song! In fact, Maurice Williams committed a crime when he made that song so dad-gum short," he said, his voice small and far away. "A mere one minute, thirty-seven seconds. So, let's hear it again. Let's stay . . . just

a little bit longer, here on WYZE, where old is gold.” And it began all over again.

“Just tell us the crappy secret,” I said, feeling guilty already for being a jerk. “You started the stupid game. We didn’t even wanna play.”

He turned and looked at us with a face we hadn’t seen, and then opened the door. Rain splashed into the truck, drenching him and me. Kimmy scooted closer to the opposite door, trying to keep dry.

I grabbed his wet shirt to keep him in the truck. “What the hell are you doin’?”

He gave in easily and closed the door. He folded his dripping arms over the steering wheel and buried his head between them. “I’m gay,” he said, his voice muffled.

Kimmy sat up ultra-straight, shoving me closer to Tim. “Oh my God,” she whispered. Tim’s head shot up, and I moved back closer to her. See, we lived in the Bible Belt where, even in the late ’80s, gay was hidden like a sin. Children never saw it—it came to us in whispers.

“Kimmy, aren’t you breakin’ one of the Ten Commandments?” Tim said. “Thou shalt not judge.”

I thought he might be crying. “Is this serious?” I asked. His clouded eyes told me it was, and I realized that he was already feeling the pain of our rejection. I could see that he’d felt it before, and the depth of his sadness became clear.

“I’ve been wantin’ to tell. I like to get it out of the way so I don’t have to worry about it.”

“But how can you be gay when you’re only twenty?” I asked, feeling the dichotomy of our southern innocence, a confusing mix of public Bible Belt purity and bull-riding heterosexuality behind closed doors. We were taught to ask such questions, even when we already knew the answers. It kept the buckle closed.

“What does that have to do with anythang?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I just . . . never met anybody who was.”

“I’m not gonna judge,” Kimmy finally spoke. “I’m a virgin. That’s my secret, I guess. Angel knows, but I thought that maybe it would make you feel better if I told you. I don’t even know what it’s like.”

“I already told my secret. I have narcolepsy.”

“That’s no secret,” Tim said. “Surely you got somethin’ else.”

“No,” I lied.

My father taught me well.

The winds changed, and rain slapped the windshield. I sat in the uncomfortable silence between them, trying to grasp how Kimmy could fully understand herself without having come to terms with her sexuality and how neither of us had realized Tim was gay. They’d just suckered me in to knowing them better, and I wondered if I could pass through the friendship developing between them without having to participate. I could almost see Kimmy’s prayers floating in the air, sealing us together. The song ended for the second time as the rain weakened. We could all see again, just enough to know we were stuck.

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After a tractor dragged us from the muddy field, I watched Tim drive away. “Don’t you think that was strange, him tellin’ us he’s gay?” I said, turning to Kimmy.

“I think he’s the kinda person who has to be known.”

“I don’t get it,” I said, knowing I was the kind who had to hide.

“Well, I don’t necessarily agree with the way he acts, but at least he wanted to be honest. I think he felt like a liar all this time.” She suddenly seemed smarter than she looked, and I wondered if I had misjudged her.

“But wouldn’t it be better to keep stuff like that to himself? I always thought he was the one who liked talkin’ about nothin’.”

“Yeah,” she said, shrugging a shoulder. “Maybe he always talked like that because what he really wanted to say was so serious.”

“Well, it’s odd. I mean, I don’t feel compelled to go around volunteerin’ the details of my sexual exploits.”

“I don’t think he wanted to do that. It wasn’t about anybody else. Just him.”

“Well, I wish he hadn’t told me. Now I’m gonna feel funny around him.”

“Do you feel that way around me, ’cause I’m a virgin?” she asked without looking at me, because she was embarrassed. I knew what she meant, but it was only an issue because *she* felt funny about it. I realize that now; people create their own issues.

“At least bein’ a virgin is somethin’ I’m used to,” I said to make her feel better even though I was a little uncomfortable. With men, the weirdness always turned into a sexual feeling, a sudden awareness of my body. With women, it just made me feel isolated.

“I guess you’ll just have to get used to him.”

“What do you really think about it?” I asked.

“I’m not gonna judge,” she said, opening her car door. It was time to go.

“Because you’re a virgin?”

“No, because I’m human.”

“You mean because everybody makes mistakes and stuff like that?”

But she didn’t hear. Waving at me to hurry and get in the car, she stared through the window as if looking into a foreign world. Mine.

* * *

By the time I got home that day, everything had changed. “What are you doin’ here?” I asked Carla, who stood in our hallway with fabric swatches and a wallpaper book in her arms.

“You’re late,” she said. “We already ate dinner.” I followed her into the dining room where, amidst their dirty dishes and my clean place setting, Carla’s Persian, Bippy, lay in a fluffy heap.

I pushed past her, making my way into the den and then to the kitchen. “Where is he?” I asked as if she’d done something with my father.

“He ran out for champagne.” She smiled. “We’re celebratin’.”

“What did you do with Betty Lou’s pictures?” I stared at the faded squares on the foyer wall where Betty Lou had displayed her cloud photographs, all twenty-two. She hadn’t hung them in a row like most people would, or even in two rows. Instead, she creatively placed them in an abstract pattern, magically allowing me to see the same sky.

They'd been hanging there for years and I couldn't imagine beginning each day without that view. It was all I had left of her.

"I put 'em away," Carla said, as if discussing the china or heavy winter coats we rarely used.

"What's your cat doin' here?" I suddenly felt tired and realized that without the aid of that familiar lethargic dip my narcolepsy offered, I'd lose control. "What are you celebratin'?"

She dumped the decorating mess on the table. "I'm movin' in with you and your dad. He was gonna tell you at dinner."

"He wouldn't let you move in here without askin' me first."

"Well, too bad. I'm already in." She moved in front of me in her cool, confident way, blocking my view of the empty wall. Bippy followed close behind, rubbing my legs on his way. I took a deep breath and prayed for patience like Kimmy always suggested. I knew she'd be gone the minute my father saw the empty wall. "Where are my clouds?" I asked again.

"I think you and those pictures could use a little time apart. Trust me, it's for the best."

"What's wrong with you?" Even after a tense year and a half of putting up with her, it was the boldest tone I'd used. "I don't appreciate you rearrangin' my life."

She walked over and grabbed my shoulders. Her nails dug in, and just as if she'd opened a hole, the last bit of energy I had drained. Her chunkiness overwhelmed me, but I didn't struggle. Instead, she held me like a girl holds her doll, her strength coming from a place I didn't understand. "Your daddy taught you that 'A is for Betty Lou,' 'B is for Betty Lou,' and 'C is for Betty Lou.' The whole thang's sad, and I'm tellin' you, it's time to go back to kindergarten and relearn your ABCs." She was choking me, perfume stinging my eyes. All the while I kept thinking, *Where is he?*

"You both need to relearn a few thangs, because he loves me, whether you like it or not, and because I'm not leavin'. And I'm also not prepared to live in a goddamn shrine." She winked.

I didn't cry. "You're just jealous."

I never cried.

“I’m more mature than that.” She let me go and bent down to pet Bippy. “I don’t need to be jealous of someone who died over twenty years ago.”

“She was his one true love.” I moved closer to the wall, searching for a ghost. I felt childish.

“Have you ever been in love, Angel?”

She didn’t give me time to answer, but even so, I wasn’t sure.

“I didn’t think so. Why don’t you call me in ten or twelve years and we’ll discuss love.”

“You’ve never been married,” I said. “Don’t you ever wonder why?”

“I’m thirty-seven years old, and trust me, I know a lot more about love than you do.” She smiled again. Bippy froze and then slithered toward the front door. My father was home.

“Sorry I couldn’t pick you up,” he said to me as he strolled past the complete set of faded squares to kiss Carla’s forehead. “Why did it take you so long?”

My head began to shake despite the fact that my medication had worn off hours ago. “We got stuck in the mud. By the time they got a tractor to pull us out, it was already six. Kimmy gave me a ride, but she had to run an errand first.” As he listened, he looked at the empty wall. No reaction. He seemed to have lost his sight. “I slept all the way,” I said, realizing we’d both lost something.

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For twenty-plus years, my father said he was destined to be part of a duet (the two of us) and nothing more. For as long as I could speak, I reminded him that Duet was just our last name, nothing more. He said, “It’s ironic.”

But after he met Carla, I wondered whether what he’d said was true, and if so, where that left me.

“Does Carla ever ask about Betty Lou?” I’d asked him the previous summer as we sat on the edge of the pool in our backyard, feet splashing.

“It doesn’t really concern her,” he said, staring into the water. “She doesn’t care about the past, and I like that about her.”

“That’s why I *don’t* like her. She’s cold.”

“Carla has good and bad points just like everybody.”

“Not like Betty Lou.”

He stood up. “I can’t dwell on your mother, not anymore. You should be happy about that.”

“But I still need you to answer my questions,” I said, holding my hand over my eyes to block the sun. “There’s stuff I gotta know.”

“There’s nothin’ to say.”

“It’s not fair,” I said.

He pulled me up then and hugged me, patting my back harder than he should. “It wasn’t fair from the beginnin’. We just have to move on.”