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ANGELS

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As the senses dim, Pamela finds she takes in fewer things with greater intensity, such as the boy sitting in back of the SUV, Pamela's great-great nephew Peter. A wistful solitary child, he is the ideal companion for an eighty-one-year-old woman, both of them easily taken off track by small details, and prone to wandering. Pamela observes his immaculate profile outlined against the window, the tiny white hairs growing along the bridge of his nose, stone-blonde bangs moist against a forehead that dips just above the eyebrow, a mark of intelligence, she thinks. A scientist, an observer of nature, Peter is the son she would have wanted, had she married and had children.

Next to her sits a pudgy good-natured toddler everyone calls Ruckey. Pamela is not drawn to the little girl. In fact she finds her annoying. Thus the chocolate stars she brings along on Sundays, hoping to distract Ruckey and win her vote for the next outing—everything in the Samuels family seems to be handled democratically.

Look at my shoe, Ruckey says, lifting her small Nike in the air.

Pamela notices the pulsing light inside the heel. I've never seen a shoe like that, have you, Peter?

Everyone has them, he says, his breath spreading and retracting on the glass.

They're so you don't get run over by a car, Ruckey explains.

What a terrible thing to think of. Can't anything just be for fun? Pamela feels sorry for parents today, her great niece Maryellen and her husband Linden sitting in the front seat, so intent on keeping their children clean and safe and intellectually stimulated that they barely speak to one another. Such hard work they make of life, Linden in particular, a tense narrow man who rolls his head in circles, trying to unburden himself from a family that includes an elderly aunt folded into plans at the last minute.

Can we get hamburgers? Peter asks.

We packed a picnic lunch, don't you remember? says Maryellen.

Pamela looks at the picnic basket Maryellen has filled with her nutritious snacks, homemade raisin-nut rolls, chutneys and jams, the yogurt she makes in a machine with berries from her garden. An inspired homemaker, she is brilliant at tempting tender new palettes, and Pamela means brilliant; Maryellen turned down a fellowship at Yale to start a family.

They are passing the Pancake House where they sometimes stop for breakfast. Just beyond is a clearing where six prehistoric animals sculpted from brown metal pose close to the road, teeth and nails bared.

Look, the dinosaurs, Pamela says.

Ruckey doesn't like dinosaurs, says Linden. The crease deepens between his eyebrows as he looks at Pamela in his rearview mirror.

She must not know enough about them. Dinosaurs once ruled the earth. Some only had three toes. Imagine that, Pamela says, giving Ruckey's knee a squeeze.

Can I sit up front with you, mommy? Auntie Pam is scaring me.

A skillful smile from Maryellen. Auntie Pam only comes with us once in a while. You're very lucky to sit beside her. A few gentle words and the toddler, who always seems sticky and sweaty to Pamela, settles back against the seat.

They were once our relatives, Pamela pushes on, a word that makes her uneasy. A lonely childhood—she and her sister Enell (Maryellen's grandmother) lived in a rental house with their widowed father. Pamela can't remember a single thing about her mother, other than the fact that she and Enell stole from her purse during the final days of her illness. Wretched children—Ruckey is an angel in comparison. Pamela has still not grieved; her father saw to this. Other than a few framed photos, cosmetically touched up so you couldn't tell what a person looked like, he got rid of everything down to a long black hairpin Enell found in a moving box after they'd sold their house—the kind used to hold up heavy hair, which their mother must have had.

Let's not talk about dinosaurs, Linden says.

Fine. It's just that children sometimes work through their fears if given enough information. It's what's not talked about that people are afraid of. Pamela sends her words Linden's way. A stubborn temperamental man, his wiry intelligence seems to buzz inside his skull. Pamela swears she can hear it as he drives, taking the curves too fast, changing lanes for no reason. Dangerous and impulsive he seems, as though he might swerve off the road, dumping them all down the side of the mountain.

Ruckey squirms in her seat. As Pamela reaches for the chocolate stars, the road turns windy. She hasn't eaten anything all morning. Generally she keeps crackers and bananas in her apartment, anything to avoid the hoity-toity dining room at the Fair Meadows where couples dress up at seven thirty in the morning

to eat a bowl of cereal. Good solid investing, Pamela tells people when they ask how she can afford to live in such a nice retirement home—more of a retirement community, everything from independent living through to the infirmary, where Pamela occasionally spends a day or two. A touch of dementia that comes on like allergies—loneliness from missing Enell. She's been caught wandering beyond the grounds, has been known to sit waiting in the lobby for hours and sometimes days before the Samuels are due to arrive, all the well-to-do's passing her by, a nod and quick reference to the weather the only conversation that comes the way of an aging spinster holding onto a vinyl purse filled with chocolates and breath mints, so as not to offend.

Ruckey grabs at the chocolates. She's trying to open the bag when without sound or change of expression, a stream of vomit slides down the front of her overalls.

Good heavens, Pamela says.

Ready hands on a beach towel, Maryellen whips around and begins blotting up the mess. The unsung hero, undaunted by bodily odors or excretions, Maryellen is also the yin of the yang; Pamela knows she'll be lost without her husband. Linden is sure to jump ship, leaving her with two and possibly three children to care for—Maryellen has been looking pale, another pregnancy Pamela suspects.

Linden looks for a place to pull over. If you hadn't given her chocolates.

I didn't give her a thing, says Pamela.

You were about to.

Only if she'd asked.

As good with sparring adults as she is with children, Maryellen says, Why don't we all stretch our legs?

Pamela forgets how short Linden is until he gets out of the car and tries to slam the door, impossible with technology designed to soften sound. Hard to be a man in a world growing quieter as more atrocities abound. Even on impact, a gruesome car crash for example, Pamela imagines polished metal folding quietly around the picnicking family, a piece of chocolate stuck in Ruckey's fierce grip. But these aren't thoughts to be having on a bright Sunday afternoon, the Samuels off to the beach.

Pamela follows Peter toward an oak tree mixed within the pines. Linden joins them along the side of the road. Over his shoulder Pamela sees Maryellen in the SUV stripping off Ruckey's overalls.

Why don't you help your wife?

Why don't you?

I was about to offer.

Then do it.

Pamela believes deep down that she and Linden like one another. An independent woman, she has always identified with and intimidated men. Not to worry, she adds. It's the unexpected turns of kindness that take people to the most interesting places.

Linden looks as if he might strike her, then fall sobbing into her arms. A small timid man, he has always seemed on the verge of collapse.

Peter lifts his slender hand, running his fingers along the dark ridged bark.

Watch out for poison oak, Linden says.

I don't see any poison oak, says Pamela.

There can be oil without the plant.

That's a good one, Pamela thinks but doesn't say.

Stopping at the lodge makes sense, the only restaurant before the coast, a famous Hell's Angel's retreat on Skyline where movie stars, such as Elizabeth Taylor and Jack Lemmon, have had their photos taken sitting on the backs of motorcycles. A more thorough cleaning up of Ruckey is planned while Linden wipes up the mess in the SUV.

A biker sits near the front steps straddling a Harley painted a rich vibrant red. Pamela can't help but stop to run her hand along the tank as she passes by.

I'll bet you could go just about anywhere on a bike like that.

The man glances at her, then he looks at Peter climbing the steps with Maryellen, Ruckey gurgling messily over her shoulder. Want to go for a ride? he says.

The layout of the lodge is confusing, hallways on either side of the bar, the men's and women's bathrooms on different floors.

I'll take Ruckey, Maryellen says, as if anyone has offered to help. Pamela glances up the stairs. Impossible to think she could make more than a few steps without peeing all over herself. Her bladder has been pinging since leaving Los Gatos; pinging is the way she describes the sensation to her doctor, although sometimes it burns, a more precise pain than the steady ache she's had in her side ever since Enell died. Psychosomatic, her doctors have agreed, including a psychiatrist Pamela saw briefly after Enell died.

Would you mind if I—? she says, indicating the men's bathroom just down the hall.

Go ahead. We can wait.

Pamela ignores Linden's smugness and walks down the hallway past the line of framed movie stars sitting on bikes. She passes a storage room where things are stacked on shelves—canned goods, napkins, condiments, cleaning supplies obviously not used in the stall-sized bathroom where she goes next, hovering above the moist toilet seat so as not to make contact—men seem to just let it fly without aiming when away from home. Pamela's legs tremble, her bladder pings, the ache grows stronger in her side, making her think of Enell, the two of them living in the rental house with their father, a room just off Enell and Pamela's bedroom that was kept locked and declared off limits by the landlord. An odd ashy smell came from under the door, inspiring stories about people who had been tortured and murdered in the room, their bones piled high in a corner. Enell had kneeled on the floor and twisted their mother's hairpin in the lock until it came open. Nothing much in the room besides some old boxes, a stack of thin frayed blankets used to protect furniture, everything yeasty and sharp smelling like an old woman's breath.

Pamela washes her hands and stands looking at herself in the mirror, a silly Sunday outing smile her only hope of not scaring small children. Loose grayish skin gathering along her neck and arms—even Peter looks away when she gets in the car, his silence so private and enticing it seems intended for another land, another time. As if in his meanderings, he might one day walk right out of his life.

Linden makes a point of checking his watch when Pamela gets back. Your turn, he says to Peter.

I don't have to go.

Are you sure? Another fifteen minutes to the beach.

Good for you, Pamela thinks. Linden has found it in himself not to fall flailing onto the floor, punishing her by cutting the day short.

I'll go then, Linden says. Don't wander off.

Peter moves along the hallway, running his hand over the photos, his neck delicate and birdy, exposed is the word that comes to Pamela's mind, the skin so soft it looks as if it's never been touched. She can't resist cupping the graceful curve of his head, perfect and complete in her palm.

Do you recognize anyone in the photos?

No.

I don't imagine you would. They're from before your time.

Peter walks toward the cluttered storage room, the walls and wood shelving painted the faded lichen green Pamela remembers from her childhood, interior places—pantries, bathrooms, hall closets packed with blankets and sheets sealed in mothballs—all painted that color. Like most children, Peter is drawn to clutter, decay, the smells of mold and wet wood and the mouse droppings she can see along the baseboards of the storage room where old newspapers are stacked on the floor.

Let's play Am I getting warmer, Pamela says. Surprised when Peter knows the game, she follows after him, closing her eyes and retracing his steps. Am I getting warmer? she says.

A little, Peter replies.

They've come to the other side of the room, a stack of comic books in the corner that Pamela nearly trips over, old ones from her time she sees once she opens her eyes, Flash Gordon on top. The son of a man who worked for her

father comes to mind, both of them driving out to the rental house on Sundays, the man helping Pamela's father with the books while the boy sat in the living room reading his comics. Husky with short nicked fingers, and always a cold sore on his lip, he'd followed Pamela outside one Sunday and chased her around a tree. Around and around they'd run, avoiding each other until they'd fallen onto the grass, the boy pretending to stumble on top of her, his breath moist and figgy as he moved his hand under her blouse. He'd held her breast the way Pamela cups the back of Peter's head. She'd pretended to squirm, then had lain perfectly still, letting him run his other hand along the inside of her thigh, his rough dirty fingernail catching the soft skin there.

Pamela hears Peter moving along the wall. When a door opens, she moves in the direction of a closet she noticed as they entered. The sound of another door opening and closing confuses her. Her memory fast fading, she relies on physical markers to get through the day—the planter box on the third floor of the Fair Meadows where her apartment is, three stars next to the elevator button that takes her to the Lobby, the glass dish of hard candy on a table near the entrance of the dining room.

Warmer? Pamela calls softly. How safe the darkness had felt with Enell in it, even the off-limits room dank with its enticing promise of dead people, the two of them crawling along the filthy floor of the place they began calling the dungeon.

Now she finds herself kneeling down in the restaurant storage room and feeling for her mother's hairpin. Warmer? she calls to Enell instead of Peter. How ashamed she'll be to tell her sister how far she's let a dirty stubby boy with a cold sore on his lip go. Surely he must be telling the boys at the private school he

attends how a skinny girl with a space between her front teeth let him get all the way to home base. Longing for her sister, the baker of Christmas hams, the buyer of flannel pajamas from the Sears and Roebuck catalog, Pamela moves her hand in circles, expecting to come across her mother's broken hairpin in a crack of the curling linoleum. Perhaps her mother has come back from the dead and is sitting across from Enell, both of them holding onto the hairpin, pulling on the ends like a wishbone.

Pamela hears something. She opens her eyes to find Linden standing over her, his face splotched with sweat, one eyelid pulsing with the intensity of Ruckey's Nikes.

God almighty. What have you done with my son?

Pamela sits in a booth with Maryellen, the baby scooping soup out of a bowl, the jarring scrape of her spoon making Pamela want to reach across the table and slap her. Maryellen barely moves. She hasn't spoken more than a word all afternoon.

The bartender comes with coffee. Thank you, Pamela says. She looks out the window at the policemen's flashlights arching the sky, colorless except for a final streak of sunset lifting from the ocean side of the mountain, deep violet streaked with orange.

They'll find him, Pamela says, aware of the air moving thinly inside Maryellen's chest. Linden is outside helping the police search for Peter. Pamela has offered to help—she and Peter think alike, she's sure she could find him. But they won't allow her to join them, an old woman, what good is she, especially after having caused this to happen? If only she hadn't closed her eyes. If Ruckey

hadn't vomited, they would be safely to the beach by now. Maryellen would have passed out her picnic treats, and Linden would be starting on one of his meticulously engineered castles, using the tools Maryellen brings along for "children," while Peter, having long ago lost interest, would have wandered off, dropping bits of buttered roll onto the sand for the birds.

I'm cold. Would you mind if I brought a jacket from the car? Pamela says.

Maryellen reaches inside her purse for the keys.

Shall I bring you one?

No thank you. Maryellen's voice is flat, lifeless.

It's cold and brisk as Pamela steps outside, an unfriendly evening for a boy to be wandering alone in the woods. She has done her best to describe the Hell's Angel who sat in the clearing beyond the steps, overweight with brown hair she thinks; she would remember if his eyes had been blue. A shame to blame an innocent man, although she repeated what he'd said, asking if someone wanted to go for a ride. Linden smirked when she said she wasn't sure if he were speaking to her or to Peter.

The parking lot has been taped off, no customers inside the bar besides Maryellen and the baby. Pamela observes her through the window—graceful in her loss. Although no one has come out and said it, it's clear all but Pamela suspect the worst, that the Hell's Angel has whipped Peter away on his bike and done God knows what with him. How easily they give up on life, with so much of it still ahead of them. A slip of a boy, Peter could be hiding anywhere, inside the crawl space between floors, where he might have fallen asleep. They have found him in odd places before, sleeping inside a merlot-saturated wooden barrel on a Sunday drive through the wine country. Drunk as a skunk, is the way

Linden likes to tell the story, imitating the way Peter's legs had wobbled as he climbed down from the loft behind the tasting room. He wasn't drunk, Pamela insists as Linden recalls the afternoon. His legs were asleep.

The policemen's voices come through the trees, along with the eager whine of the *canine* they've added to the search, a stiff-coated steely-eyed police dog certain to scare the life out of Peter if they get to him before Pamela does.

Go where no one has ever gone, she tells herself, walking past the SUV and starting toward the road, an expression she's used with Peter—sad to think this may have led to his disappearing. Not many cars this time of evening, just a few locals driving home from the valley, slowing down to get a good look.

Somebody get hurt? says a woman, poking her head out the window.

Pamela ignores her and crosses the road, looking for a place beyond the guardrail where she can work her way between the bushes and begin her slow descent. The hill stays level for a stretch before sloping toward some houses she sees clustered along a dirt road, one with a kitchen light on. The mountain itself continues on into the valley, where Linden and Maryellen's spacious two story sits facing the bay.

The silly beach shoes Pamela has worn are no good for hiking—bright yellow canvas slips-ons that looked fun in the catalog; she does what she can to appear younger, both for the children and for Linden, who clearly considers her used up and ready to be tossed out. How hatefully he'd stared at her as the police asked their questions. She can't blame him, such a dark and terrible twist the afternoon has taken. And yet despite her heart tightening like a fist inside her chest, she feels confident she will find Peter safe and warm.

The ground is moist and dark. Her shoes slide along the dried needles that have fallen onto the rocks and the low weedy grasses that have begun dying in late spring. Pamela begins to slip; she breaks her fall by running the heel of her hand into a tree trunk. A fine line of pain shoots from her wrist to her elbow.

Peter, Pamela whispers. Are you hiding here?

There is no answer, just the peaked eagerness of the police dog on the other side of the road, the excited cry of an animal searching for food. Pamela pictures the unintelligent policemen wearing the ground thin searching the same fifty yards in back of the lodge. She moves carefully between the trees, too dark to see whether she's passing through poison oak, not that she gives a damn. She would gladly give up her life to find Peter sleeping next to a tree stump, such a fearless wanderer, headstrong she's proud to say, but in a different way than Linden, whom Pamela hopes will fly the coop before whatever has sucked the life out of him starts gnawing at his son.

Peter, you come out now, Pamela calls softly, starting toward the small flat-roofed house, the one with the light on. She sees a woman inside, long hair and a broad face she begins to make out as she nears some ivy circling the yard. A clothesline just down the way; next to it a picnic table covered with a plastic cloth.

Warmer, am I getting any warmer? Pamela says.

She hears something pass through the bushes, a dog coming toward her, gray and thin, the sort of breed that comes to be when dogs are left to mate freely, it's small head bowed low to the ground, growling and wagging its tail at the same time.

That a fellow, Pamela says, holding out her hand.

The dog approaches. One small lick in the soft place between Pamela's thumb and first finger and they are friends. Stroking it gently behind the ears, she says, Have you seen my boy?

The dog raises its head and looks up at her as if she's said the magic word—dinner, leash, bone, kibble. Stretching back on its thin front legs, it squeals and yawns, beckoning her to play.

Imagine a boy not being able to have a pet. Nothing but a goldfish.

The dog starts toward the house. Pamela follows, her legs growing weaker, her stomach cavernous—she hasn't touched food all day, not even the glass of tomato juice the bartender set before her.

As they come to the picnic bench, the back door of the house opens wide enough for the woman to slide a saucepan onto the step, still steaming with whatever's inside.

Yeawol, says the dog, running toward it. The smell of simple good cooking comes from the kitchen, reminding her of the woman who came to cook for her father after her mother died, a neighbor who'd lived a few houses down the street. A cheerful woman, Pamela remembers her making meatloaf, pot roast, casseroles—things that would last a few nights. There early one morning when Pamela and Enell woke, she sent them off with packed lunches; neither of them put two and two together until years later, that their father must have taken a lover soon after their mother died, perhaps before.

Circling the pan, the dog nips at the hot food then jumps back. Cruel it seems, sticking the saucepan outside before it's had a chance to cool. Pamela considers knocking on the door and asking the woman if she's seen Peter, but she's distracted by a detached garage to the side of the house. The door is open;

the yellow porch light spreads into the opening, drawing her inside. Dusty and cluttered, a place where Peter would want to hide—bikes and tools and lawn chairs and car parts, the miscellany of a couple that doesn't seem to have children partly covered with plastic tarps. Garden tools hang from a wall, an axe with a red handle makes Pamela think of the man on the motorcycle.

Exhausted, her bladder beginning to ping, she reaches for a blanket stacked on a shelf next to an ice chest. Pulling it over her shoulders, she squats down next to a red lawn mower and closes her eyes. The dog goes on scraping and tipping the pan against the step, licking what it can from the bottom. Her boy, Pamela will say to the woman inside the kitchen—Peter has always seemed a misfit for the Samuels, too sensitive, too inquisitive to be part of a family that has no imagination. Even Maryellen's excellent good mothering has begun to seem scripted, as if she's replaced scholarly study with having a family and is moving steadily toward her goal of perfection.

Pamela allows herself to drift off, still aware of her surroundings, the dog outside, comforting smells coming from the kitchen where the woman must be making dinner for her husband. In this half-dozing state, Peter comes to her, not as a dream but as an angel, his face brightly lit, his eyes wide and alluring. Pamela knows at first glance that he's found a remarkable place to be, a land so filled with mystery and promise he'll never want to come home. She wants to follow him. Rising from the blanket, she reaches for his hand. My darling boy, she says, pulling a reluctant seven year old into her arms and spreading the blanket over his thin precise shoulders.

The dog finishes eating the stew or rice or whatever the woman has given him and comes inside the garage. He finds Pamela with the blanket draped over

her, a corner hanging down, enough for a thin-boned mongrel to curl up on, a satisfied yawn as it stretches out its front legs, lowering its contented belly next to her, grateful for the warmth of an old woman's body, the evenness of her breath.

Pamela startles awake to find a man kneeling down on the cement, broad-faced like the woman inside the kitchen, his long hair widely parted down the middle. He passes his fingers over her cheek, then reaches for her hand.

Linden and Maryellen are inside the bar when the couple drives Pamela back to the lodge, the mongrel sticking its head out the window sniffing for the police dog still panting and pining in the woods. She looks through the window at the grieving couple sitting close together, Linden's arm around Maryellen—the first affection she recalls seeing from a man who pecks the cheeks of his children before Maryellen carts them off to bed, freshly bathed and filled with nourishing food.

Thank you, I'm fine now, Pamela tells the man.

I'll see you get inside safe, he says.

Linden is first to look up, the hatred he feels for her settling efficiently and accurately over his face.

Your aunt thought the boy might have wandered down our way, says the man. Pamela is glad he doesn't mention her falling asleep in his garage. She doesn't plan on telling anyone about Peter having come to her; no one would believe her—besides, it's their secret.

Maryellen rises from the booth, something sexy about the way she moves, passing in front of Linden now, their hands brushing together, as if losing Peter has brought them closer.

Thank you for bringing her, Linden says, his tongue growing thick—drugged he seems by Maryellen's touch.

We live just over the hill. I don't mind helping you look.

Thanks. I'll tell the police.

Just let us know. Your aunt knows where to find us.

Pamela watches the man walk outside and get in the car that has the woman and dog in it. She envies them, the simple private life they have together in the mountains.

You should eat something. A sandwich, some yogurt. Something, Maryellen says. Beyond her on the seat next to where Ruckey is sleeping, Pamela makes out the open picnic basket. So the Samuels have managed to have their picnic lunch, their coffee mugs filled with Maryellen's creamy hot chocolate.

They seem only vaguely aware as she steps back outside, the night still cool but not as unfriendly now that she knows Peter is safe, that he has beaten them all to the place where they will all eventually find solace, even Linden. Peter will visit her from time to time—perhaps Pamela can call him forth just by saying his name. As she approaches the SUV, she realizes she no longer has the keys. The door is open—the police began by searching the car. One of the officers bunched Peter's jacket in his hand and held it out for the dog to sniff. Hard to pick up much of anything, Pamela suspects, with the reek of Ruckey's vomit overpowering everything.

She gets in the car. As she reaches for her fleece vest, she sees the shape of what appears to be a boy sleeping under the spare sweaters and jackets Maryellen keeps on the rear seat, a pile of them in all different sizes and colors. Peter's wrap is on top, a green and beige baseball jacket Maryellen bought for Christmas, thinking Linden might want to take his son to a ball game.

Pamela knows instinctively that the sleeping boy isn't Peter. She runs her hand over the small chest rising and falling, sensing the presence of a sturdier more predictable child than her great-great nephew, one less apt to daydream and wander. Not even the stone-blond bangs sticking out along the zipper of Peter's jacket convinces Pamela this is her boy.

Edging onto the seat beside the sleeping child, she looks in the lodge window at the family that no longer has Peter in it. Smug they seem in their grieving, Maryellen moving between the booth and bar with such elegance it seems as if all the excellent mothering, even the care she's taken to make sure Pamela is included on family outings, has been for Linden's benefit. Now that Maryellen has her husband, she doesn't seem to need anyone else.

Warmer, am I getting warmer? Pamela calls to Peter. As she waits for him to come to her a car passes, the headlights seeping into the start of evening fog. Pamela's bones grow lighter, sharper—as if she could slip through her skin and follow Peter to the new land.

All in good time, she tells herself, keeping one hand on the chest of the boy Peter has sent in his place, feeling a certain fondness growing. Soon she will wake him and send him inside, but for now she lets the sleeping child be.