

The Angel and the Barghest

by

Neil Ayres

I took my time back on a Tuesday, a week after I had seen the black dog. Riding the coach to Southampton in an effort to conserve money. I did not own a car, although I was able to drive.

When the coach departed Victoria, it was relatively empty. The driver had his radio on so I chose to sit towards the rear of the vehicle. I settled in my seat, my nose buried in a book, scarcely noticing the scant few other passengers, save for the trio of giggling teenage girls that had spread themselves out along the back bench of the coach. Only ten minutes into the journey and their outbursts had become too much for me to bear. I fished around in my travelling bag for my CD player and let the off-key twang of an Alt-Country band drown out the shrill shrieks of the juvenile gaggle.

After wading through a single, exceedingly dull chapter of my novel I put the book to my lap and turned the music up a notch, staring awhile from the window of the coach. We were travelling along an 'A' road, on our way into a leafy suburban town.

Winter was reluctantly giving way to spring. The clocks had gone forward over a fortnight ago and the daylight hours were slowly becoming longer and more pleasant. It was not yet three PM and the sun would not set for a good three or four hours. Perhaps it would still be light by the time I reached my destination.

The coach came to a halt with a lurch and a hiss of its brakes. The doors at the front slapped open to allow two new passengers to embark. After accepting their fares the be-capped driver pushed open his low counter and alighted from the coach. I was seated on the driver's side and so was unable to see the external activity that occurred, although it became apparent with the arrival of a final passenger, aided by the courteous driver, that a wheelchair had been folded up and transferred to the coach's baggage section. The passenger, an elderly man, propped up precariously on two wooden walking sticks, sat at the front of the coach, diagonally behind the driver.

Once the man was safely buckled in the driver re-ignited the engine and we were on our way once more. My CD player clicked and the disc whirled quietly in its compartment. I pulled the casing open and swapped the disc for a new one.

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The man had told me no matter what happened, I must not allow mum to go to the work Do that night. I managed to stop her from going out by making myself sick. In the afternoon I spent all of my limited pocket money on chocolate bars and Coca-Cola and pigged out in my bedroom, stuffing the vacant wrappers under my mattress and hiding the empty plastic two-litre bottle in my cupboard. Whilst she was getting ready in her bedroom I locked myself in the downstairs toilet and stuck my fingers to the back of my throat, pushing them further and further until the taste of bile rose up to soak my tongue. That had been enough to cause me to convulse noisily, fetching my mother hammering down the stairs. There followed a quick scrabbling noise, then a hollow thud.

I wiped my lips dry with cheap toilet roll and cleaned the toilet seat with it too, then rinsed out my mouth with cold water over the small ceramic sink opposite the toilet. Finally I pulled back the fiddly brass lock on the door.

"Mum." Called I, meekly, my throat made sore by the heaving. "Mum, I don't feel well. I've..." I remember clearly enough how my voice trailed off as I turned out of the claustrophobic washroom.

"Mum!" My mother had tripped as she hurried down the stairs. Her head rested on the dark carpet. A pool of blood filtered from her crown to mingle with the material swirls that patterned the floor. Mum spent three days in hospital in a coma before passing away.

It took me a few years to figure out just how cruel a practical joker fate could be. A rival too equal to accept at face value, a threatening competitor who I would rather be without. Although with hindsight, perhaps I may have acted differently had my competitive urge not been quelled even before that fatal day so long ago, yet nearer now that it has ever been. More valid to me then than it could ever be again. That day from whence I still recall the lilting Asian accent of the newsagent as he asked me whether I was having a birthday party, having bought so many sweets and fizzy drinks.

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I had been only eleven at the time of my mother's death, having met the man that same afternoon in the park, on my way home. A group of kids from school had started to shove me around. They had caught up with me midway between school and home and so there I was, the helpless victim. It is a visceral, immediate terror. Only people who have been subjected to such a treatment can truly understand, and obviously there are those treated much worse than I have ever had to endure. Still, life since starting secondary school had been a waking nightmare. I was taunted because my trainers were cheap, my sports-bag was the wrong brand, my trousers were too short and my hair stuck up at the back, all the usual stuff.

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The man approached us with a vengeful fix to his features. The group of bullies ran scared, all of them except for the one holding me by the collar, who hadn't noticed the arrival of my avenging angel. For his troubles, the boy was hauled away from me in deceptively strong arms. My gaunt saviour threw the boy to the floor. The bully fled, hobbling away with tears filling his already watery eyes.

I looked up at the man feeling grateful and excited, if a touch fearful.

"Don't worry." He reassured me with a soft, deep and familiar voice. Up close, the man's features reminded me of my father, how he looked in the photographs that mum had buried in the stack of family albums we kept in the bicycle shed. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to try and help." And so, trusting this mysterious, almost mystical stranger, I had followed his instructions.

And sure, mum had not died alongside her work colleagues on the ferry. Instead she had died in a hospital, trapped between dreams and darkness for the final three days of her life.

The paramedics had banged heavily on the door. I had not heard the sirens of the ambulance. I recall the sweet scent of a vase filled with yellow lilies, the heads of the flowers peering down at my mother's prone body from their vantage on the windowsill, by the front door, embedded as it was then with frosted glass, stained in bright primary colours. The stamen of an open flower dripped a sticky globule of moisture in its painful, slow motion existence. But once free of the murky life of the flower, the drop fell in flash-fast real-time.

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It took almost four years for the truth to start to sink in. I was bunking school and listening to heavy metal at the time. The genesis of my realisation occurred in the toilets of a club.

A band was bellowing out sub-Napalm Death anthems from on-stage. I could hear the wall of drop-tuned guitar echoing through the toilets like a distant earthquake when the recognition hit me.

In amongst the flitting memories of a near-abandoned childhood it was as if some ethereal mist had cleared.

All that was rational and simultaneously all that was improbable or fantastical, was erased by the way I caught hold of my features in the grimy, sticker-laden looking glass.

I slicked back long straggly hair and looked at my reflection. Maybe it was in the set of my jaw and the shadows under my eyes. All illusions fell in an instant. Cigarette smoke from the metallar standing at the urinal behind me wafted in front of the face that peered back at me from the other side of the mirror. Could I truly have the face of an angel? Some leather-clad, Valhalla-bound

Hell's Angel, but an angel nonetheless. My perceptions were then distorted and have forever remained thus, to this very day.

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The coach pulled into the station at Southampton. I had spent many a midnight hour and lonely Sunday afternoon debating what action I would take when today finally came. Each year my list of priorities would alter in some small way and sometimes, perhaps four or five times throughout my life, this list would undergo a fundamental shift. The whole thing would twist and turn with the impact of things too big to ignore. Love, religion, infatuation, heresy... It goes on. And afterwards I would find it difficult to remember what had changed, and later still to recall why these things had changed.

Had I lived without the burden of my knowledge then yes, my life would have been so very different, so much more honest. Perhaps it would have been more like his. I would have been alive, not merely playing at being such.

I walked from the station to the promenade I had haunted as a youth, in my black leathers. And there she was. The well of emotion at seeing her again almost overpowered me. My eyes became swiftly pregnant with silent brooding tears. She was alive still and so I had not killed her. Funny how memory distorts so much of the truth. Funny how truth has such a small role to play in our lives.

She is so young. Much younger than I am now. I follow her along the promenade until we reach the docks.

The streets are busy with Friday night revellers and I am not a conspicuous presence. She is so beautiful. I watch as she meets up with her boyfriend. They greet each other with a passionate press of lips. He is the man she never told me about, her secret pleasure. Christ knows she had little enough pleasure in her short, violent life. The two of them ascend the gangplank with care, arm-in-arm, and are finally aboard the boat. A member of the crew greets them. His face is shaded from me, hidden in shadow. My mother giggles, her companion laughs loudly and tips the man with a coin in return for his aid.

The ill-fated pair enters the ship-proper, no longer in sight. I have had many years to ponder these actions and so now I just relax into the moment. A dutiful tugboat crosses the harbour and I follow its lead across the bay.

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In time, the ferry carrying my mother makes its way out of port and heads towards the island. I sit on an iron bench beneath a shelter on the Front, this place one of the final bastions of memory for me. The others still within my reach I allow to slip by. I am content to settle here for the present. A sigh escapes my weary form and my gaze is raised to the horizon.

My vision blurs as sea-spray and spitting rain mingle before me. Saltwater tears float on the lower lids of my eyes momentarily but are quickly banished in a fit of blinking. I press the button on the side of my wristwatch and a back-light illuminates the analogue face.

The sky is dark now, heavy with storm clouds that were not there a minute ago.
A fresh sliver of moon has replaced the springtime sunshine and a small black mongrel has come to lie by my feet.

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