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The Angel of Pessoa

I was maybe six or seven years old when I first saw the angel. A stone statue sitting in the window of a tiny shop, her wings unfurled in their full glory, a meek smile gracing her lips. She looked down at me like a benevolent mother (the kind I never had), as if she would welcome me in her arms as soon as I approached her. If only the glass weren't there! If only I could get to her!

It must have been quite a sight, a small child screaming in the dirt road for a stone angel, falling to his knees and begging his father to save him. Those were my exact words, I remember them well despite the blurriness of my memory: "Please papa, save me. Save me." This was before I had truly grasped the concept of poverty, or even of money. Every day, I pondered over those little slips of paper and bits of metal that caused so much anxiety in my family. Books were also paper, and yet they barely seemed to matter. Sections of rusty pipe were thrown away without ritual, and yet they seemed so solid in comparison to those silly disks.

Needless to say, I didn't get my angel. But, in a way, she never left me either.

I worked at a factory alongside my father. Quite literally, as he manned the machine directly to my left. After work, he would drive me home, we would eat and sleep in the same manner, talk over the same events, express the same opinions. In the morning, we would wake with the same groans and pains from the day before. We were inseparable. There was only one thing I ever kept from him, and that was the angel. I didn't resent him. He was a good man, a fact I realized more and more as time went on, but the angel had taken on a significance which he would never understand. It was everything to me. Everything beautiful, everything loving, everything I had never had. And he would feel guilty if he knew I was still fixated on that stone angel—like many of those in poverty, his pride abused him for what was ultimately the world's failings—so I kept it to myself. Unknown to him, the angel slowly took over my life.

We crawled our way through. He wanted to send me to school to pick up a trade. I refused. He insisted. I didn't budge. For the first time since I was a child, we fought. The problem was this: nothing was worth doing unless it moved me closer to the angel. Working in the factory let us survive until such a time when I could return to the shop, and perhaps I could save enough money on the side to eventually buy it as well. Being sent away to a school, spending years in an apprenticeship, it would only move me farther away.

I continued to work in the factory. We never spoke of school again. He could see how useless his arguments would be, it would only drive a wedge between us which couldn't be removed. Not without my help, anyway—something he couldn't count on.

I had just turned twenty two when I returned to the tiny shop with the angel in the window. Somehow, it had never crossed my mind that it might have been sold to someone else, as no one could stand in the way of destiny and this was mine, and, though the name above the shop had changed, the statue indeed remained. What ruined me was another unthinkable possibility; the statue was disappointing.

It wasn't as large as I had remembered. Her gaze, rather than falling on me, its loved one, fell to the street, onto the dust and dirt. Its stone was a flecked grey rather than the perfect white marble of my dreams. Her hands were less distinct, blurry around the edges, as if they had been accidentally melded together. A lone cobweb travelled the distance from the tip of her wing to the back of her shoulder. The most damning flaw was only visible after I entered the shop. The statue was hollow, with a crack running down the length of its back through which you could see the untreated stone, with its rough lumps and sharp edges. Looking into the crack, it was as if the rotten soul of the angel had been revealed.

I walked out of the store and hid from anyone who might have known my name. Since then, I haven't been back to the factory and I haven't seen my father. Perhaps, if I never return, this will remain a separate reality, one less true than that of my childhood. Or perhaps I'm simply afraid.

The tale needed to be told. Now a life needs to be lived. If only I knew which one.