

# The Tattered

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A loud crash came from the balcony. Mariya shot up from her nightmare and gingerly made her way to the back door of the apartment. There was some shuffling coming from the snow outside. She flicked on the porch lights and a great rush tore through the snow and she could hear what she thought were great wings flapping about like a flag at the mercy of heavy winds.

Outside, the battered Angel crawled into the farthest corner of the small balcony that overlooked the screaming city night below. He hid among the only shade from the light of the moon. His wings were tattered and torn, drooping and held up as if by tape and glue. His naked old body shivered and lurched in the snow; and he could not help but dance about for warmth as his bare feet sunk deeper again and again into the frigid melting frost.

His body reeked of old age. His gray beard was thick and mottled with dust and tire-washed snow and dirt. His skin was pale, near luminescent, his veins like blue lightning, large and bulbous and protruding, shooting out across the girth of his form like fantastic lightning.

As the wind howled, he was rocked back and forth; forced to hang onto the railing for support. Suddenly, the drapes pulled back and there against the glass was Mariya, along with a band of light from inside. The Angel thought that she was no older than six. Her clothes were old and torn in some places, her hair a mess and she was wrapped in three equally worn and thin blankets.

He tried wrapping his naked body in his wings but the pain was too much; and so instead he huddled himself further and further into his corner and ceased all movement until his feet began to freeze.

From inside, Mariya wondered what that sound had been. Her mother and her usually had a Ukrainian flag on the porch but it was kept inside during winter. Slowly, she slid open the balcony door. Then quickly slammed it shut. Her face was instantly frozen cold and her nose was red and swollen. She closed the door and slid the

drapes back shut and shuffled her way back to bed to wait for her mother to return from work and school. The apartment was small, mostly empty; with only suitcases and some essential furniture thrown about.

Outside, it was still snowing now and the Angel could no longer help it. He had to dance again, and so he did—childishly. In the time it took Mariya to leave and for the angel to feel comfortably hidden again, snow had piled onto his body and he now he resembled a gargoyle covered in white clean frosting. He shook this off rabidly like a dog, making similar sharp grunting noises while flailing his hair and wings about.

With that finished, he knew that he needed a fire, or something to warm his body or he would die. Death, he wondered. He did not remember what it felt like to die, and was not sure where a fallen Angel might go upon death. But he was sure from the pits of his being that the end was now a possibility, and for the first time, in a long time, he felt human fear.

He looked up to the sky, wondering how far he had fallen from heaven. But all he could see were thick white clouds and falling specks of snow. He would make it back there though. Eventually he would earn his place among God again, and be back through the gates of heaven. It was inevitable, only he was not sure how.

For now he was only cold. His extremities and skin were freezing more and more, and frost had accumulated in his beard and wild gray hair. He began to snap at his fingers to give them life as he danced and danced to protect his feet and caressed his ears with his wings.

He wondered if he could still fly. But his wings were now frozen solid, and could barely be moved. What a pitiful sight he must have been. An Angel with broken, piecemeal wings, frozen and dying slowly of cold on a balcony; held at bay by a small Ukrainian child!

There was an unfamiliar thumping coming from his chest. Could it be? Yes! It was a heart beat! Dear lord what a memory. A phantasm dragged up from his distant past. A curse. It was growing in intensity. He was falling further and further away from the lord, now

he knew for certain. He fell back onto the balcony floor and let his himself sink into the snow. His mind rambled for some time. He no longer danced. He leaned his head against the side of the building and let it rest. Only for a minute, he thought. Everything had become quite slow, now. He thought that it had become suddenly warm, almost hot, and wondered about whether there was really any need to enter that house. He was truly quite comfortable and the snow was soft and gentle, and he was old. Only for a second more, he thought. His eyes began to fade in that quiet unassuming way that they do.

Then suddenly the door to the balcony opened again, and a wide-eyed little Mariya stood frozen with the three sheets wrapped around her body, soaking in the melting snow. Up, roaring, shot the Angel from his spot. His wings galloped ferociously. That old body stretched tall and erect. Like a storm of jagged lightning his veins crawled about his body as shinning blue worms burrowing about. It looked as if his skin crawled, like a shedding snake. He towered over the child, intending to flee over the balcony and into the night's sky as he had known himself capable, once before his wings were so broken. Mariya screamed. She cowered beneath the giant winged beast and began to whimper, stunned. The Angel finally thought.

He laid down his wings, having become suddenly aware of his nakedness. Then with a flick of the hand, he called away one of her blankets that had fallen into the snow. It rose up from the glittering wet ashes and enveloped his chalky body. Then with his wings he covered his other parts and was again aware of the cold.

He stepped closer to Mariya, but it had begun to snow more heavily now, and he slipped on a patch of snow and fell comically against the railing. He fell like a child might fall when pretending to fall as a fool or a cartoon might, wings stretching awkwardly against the air, hands flailed, and body contorted as if his head and body wished to move in different directions. He was quite clumsy, and had banged his elbow against the metal bars. Blood dripped from his arm and glistened and warmed the cold snow, as he lie on the ground still covered by the towel. He was embarrassed.

"I can get you a band-aid," Mariya said. "Just wait here."

So he waited. And waited. And waited some more—then became tired of waiting and finally noticed that he might enter that apartment now, as he had planned before.

But the door would not open! He tugged and tugged. Surely he was strong enough, but nothing. He pulled at the door again and began to grow angry and vile. Then he bashed at the door loudly but still nothing. He could not enter. He fell to the floor again and noticed little Mariya staring at him with her large beautiful blue eyes, shaking her head slowly back and forth as if to say, "you are an odd Angel indeed. And an impatient one at that"

"Open the door," said the Angel. "I am cold and tired."

"Have you learned your lesson?" said Mariya.

"What do you mean, girl? Let me in! I am bleeding."

Mariya screwed up her face, puffing it like a bloated puffy fish.

"Not until you learn your lesson!" she said. "Its up to you."

The Angel laid back in the snow, incredulous. What could she mean? What lesson should he have learned? He was dying? Didn't she see that? She was only a small child but she was being complicit in the murder of an angel of god! What graver action was there?

With renewed veracity he shot up from the snow.

"Dear child, I am an angel of god! Certainly you know what that is? You are a follower of the lord aren't you? I can still vaguely feel your aura."

Mariya stood. She said nothing, her face still puffed and angry.

"Its up to you!" she screamed suddenly.

"But child!" he growled back. His vision had become blurry. His hands were cold and his feet nearly frozen. He had not danced in some time and the towel was only so much protection.

The snake-like veins began to pulsate angrily, and viciously about his body. Quickly he rose up about the girl. His heart was now pounding rapidly against his chest. Outstretched, were his wings, the width of the balcony, white and decrepit and old, yet still very large. He stared into Mariya's eyes now and hated her deeply. So sudden was his anger. Truthfully, he was growing weaker by the

second, and with every second more filled with fear. It was not purely the physical cold that bothered him but his lack of self. He had fallen to this small balcony in the midst of a heavy snow, yet not once had he thought of why or who he was before his fall. And when he did now, he found that there were no answers, despite his efforts. It was this emptiness that had been growing from the pits of his stomach ever since he woke, crashed on this balcony, away from heaven and unsure how to return or why he had fallen at all. This lack of knowledge of one's self, spurred in him now a wild imagination. He wondered, what was it that cast him from the gates of heaven? What dark deeds had made him unworthy of God's grace? What crimes? What failing? What vile things were he capable of? So vile that even his own name he was not permitted to remember? Within himself, a storm of turmoil broiled and blackened. It gurgled and boiled, and crashed and turned his previous calm into dull anger and desperation.

“What is your name?” he asked

Mariya stamped her feet.

“Its up to you!” she said to the angel, smiling, proud as is any child who imitates their parents.

He grabbed the handle and began to rock at it violently with all his force, bashing his great wings against the glass repeatedly and with thunderous effect. The balcony shook from his power. He began to roar loudly like a cornered dying animal.

“If you do not open this door, child,” he bellowed. “I will rip you apart with my bare

hands. And feed on you and leave nothing for your mother to find! You will feel the power and grace of an angel of hell set upon you—so help me god!”

It truly was a beautiful night. What foreign words he spoke out there on that balcony. Such emotion. Pain. What was he?

It snowed heavily, now. The world continued to turn gracefully and apathetically and uncaring. Somewhere further off, it was someone's birthday. Somewhere else, someone was dying of old age,

or disease or of love. But here, a broken angel with tattered wings stood before a small Ukrainian child and was ashamed.

Mariya stomped her feet again. Shaking her head, disappointed, she turned off the porch lights, leaving the fallen angel in intense blackness.

She stood in awe of the electricity. It tore through his body, all frightened and pathetic. His large eyes sunk into near nothingness and he huddled upon the door to stay within the dim light projecting from inside. He had forgotten his bleeding. He had forgotten the cold and fear. His wings drooped as a scolded dog's ears.

"Please child...," he whimpered. "Do not leave me in the dark...I am afraid of this emptiness. Please let me in, child. I beg of you not to leave me here to die."

Mariya smiled.

"You only had to ask," she said. "Now you've learned your lesson."

The angel, dumbfounded, effortlessly pulled open the balcony door.

Inside, it was warm and comfortable and unlivable. Boxes were about, open but many still closed. Clothing strewn across chairs and only one room with any significant furniture. The living area was desolate and bare white, mountains of containers and old electronics not yet put up left to lie and collect dust. But the one room with furniture was not so barren but centered by a large bed and dressers and a small television against the back wall. Mariya carried the angel into this room, and brought clothe to fix any remaining wounds. Together they sat on the floor against the bed, right before the electric heater.

Mariya's eyes were bright and reflective, the angel believed that he could see his full reflection in them. And what a joy in them he saw.

"Where is your mother?" he asked.

"Work," replied Mariya.

"And you are here alone on a cold night like this? What of your father?"

"My daddy is fighting," she said coldly.

After reflection, "War is a horrible thing. No child should experience it."

A pause.

"But you are so strong, for being so young and on your own."

"I'm not alone," said Mariya. And she rested her head on the angel's shoulder.

"Could you stay with me?" asked the child sleepily. "Daddy used to stay with me, and talk with me until I woke up in the morning."

A tear lept from the angel's eyes and he said, "of course," holding her more closely. "You only had to ask."

From where they sat, the angel could watch through the window. The snow fell beautifully now, and so calm.

As the world turned, Mariya and the angel talked about a great deal of things. They talked about her life having just moved to a new country; they talked about heaven; they talked about toys; and about their favorite colors; about cartoons; and they found that they had so much more in common than they could have imagined from on that balcony.

In the relative silence, the Angel could hear the drum beat of Mariya's heart and he came to love the music of it. And he came to love the musicality of his own heart, as it beat synchronously with hers. The more he spoke, and she sunk deeper into blissful sleep, the more he no longer wondered about God, or heaven. Or himself, or ever returning. The more he no longer wondered about the reasons for his fall. The more he listened the more in love he became, the more wonder he saw, the more content he felt. His heart beat joyously in his chest, and his blood calmly channeled through his body. His wings came to lie by his side, and wrapped around them both for added warmth. The more he spoke with that small Ukrainian child, the more he feared not speaking to her. The more he longed. The more he knew he was at home.

When Mariya's mother returned home from work and school, she was not greeted by her daughter like normal. She quickly crossed the small, barren apartment towards the room she and Mariya shared.

Inside, Mariya slept--not tossing and turning as she had been, dreaming nightmares of her country's war and of her father. Instead, she was contently wrapped in her three sheets and the mother could not help but feel a sudden intense calmness spread about her body and soul, like a gentle warm mist or the presence of a calming force about her.

In her rush, she had not noticed the open balcony door, but not felt the burst of cold air. After having closed the door, she stripped off her clothes and felt suddenly good about their new life together. She was no longer consumed by doubt and fear, but by possibility and perseverance. What a beautiful night, she thought.

As she lay, she was sure that she could hear the galloping of great and beautiful wings, rising, rising, rising, further and further away, only to return again and again.

Asleep, Mariya dreamed of those great wings, visited by her angel. They were circling, playfully over her and her mother. Within the eyes of the angel was a joy he had never known before. They were saying to her, "you are my warmth. And I will be forever among you, forever watching."

