

Angels

by Zack Wentz

Not everybody sees Father. Not Mom, not Dad, not even my little brother, Andre, and he see lots of things. Me, I need to.

Hit the old elementary, closed now because it isn't "earthquake proof," whatever that means, so who knows what the hell they'll end up doing with it or if they'll just 'doze the thing. Get it before the quake does. I tap down the steps to the cafeteria and pull the bell cord and wait. It takes him a while.

"Yes?"

"Father, it's me."

Double doors split open and I get in out of the cold, puffs of nervy breath still clinging to me.

Father smiles, heads back to the kitchen.

"So, Father, what's the good word?"

"God's work, boy. God's work. Never-ending."

He's got some candles going in the old tray-wash machine. Makes a nice fireplace, of sorts.

We sit cross-legged on some dusty gym-mats behind the counter, low. I check out his system of bowls. New pills he's sorting. I pinch one quick I haven't seen before while he isn't looking, pop it and feel a lift before it even hits my throat.

"You don't have to sneak them, son. Please, help yourself."

Oops.

"Sorry, Father. I haven't ever had one of these. Something new."

"Novelty," Father says, and cracks his knuckles.

Father has got to be pretty old. Maybe really old. When he smiles it looks like it hurts his face, wrinkles so deep you think they might go all the way through, like gills. But he smiles. A lot.

"I'm down, Father," I say. "Feel like shit."

He nods, pushes the bowl toward me. Like a thing of party mints.

"You aren't alone," he says.

He uses that one a bit too often.

"Yeah, but things are getting bad. Real bad. My little brother . . ."

"Andre."

"Yeah, Andre. His 'retarded thing,' or whatever the hell it is, has graduated to an entirely new level. I mean, he used to be a pain in the ass, always running around and grabbing and screaming weird shit and all that, but now it's like everybody else is acting like he makes sense. Like it's infectious or something. Even Mom and Dad doing all these 'Andreisms.' You know what happened the other day? Shit, asked Mom for a few bucks while she was doing the dishes, you know, just to have some spending money, and she gave me this fucking face, stuck her fingers to the sides of her temples and twisted them around, making this 'EEE-AWW' noise and rolling her tongue. Jesus. Like Andre. At first I think it was kind of a joke, but now I seriously believe they fucking think that way. Like they get it."

"Maybe they do," Father says.

I shake my head, "Okay, whatever, but I sure as hell don't and, to tell you the truth, I don't wanna. I just wanna be left alone, you know? It's like everybody around me can't wait to go fucking crazy."

"Have another," Father says, and taps the edge of the bowl full of newbies with his thumbnail.

"Thanks," I say, pop another.

"We all walk different paths, son," he says.

"But they all lead to the same place," I answer. "Yeah, I know that one, but I'm just not really getting that right now, Father. I need something more than that. Shit, I think maybe I need some fucking help."

Father nods, is quiet. I go hot in the face for a second. Did that sound desperate?

"Help is all around you, son. Already inside you."

I'm about ready to write that off as another fucked-out platitude, but it is Father and I haven't heard that one yet and I'm actually starting to feel better.

"God, right?"

Father laughs, a bit of his teeth showing.

"Right, God," he says, "if you can get there as simply as that, and I think you are capable, but yes, maybe you need help."

I lay back on the mat. Stinks. Watch the candles drooling black ribbons up flickering metal to the ceiling. It's good.

"More direct guidance, perhaps. Many find the ways of the Lord too subtle and difficult to follow in this hectic day and age."

I fumble my fingers through the bowl. Pinch up another. I like these. Different.

"Damn straight," I say.

Father gets up, moves over to the washing thing and unsticks one of the candles. Brings it over to us and fixes it in an empty bowl. The light from it licks the underside of his chin, making his face long and yellowy white.

"So you're looking for an angel. Some sort of emissary who will come knocking at your door to let you know when the city will burn, or perhaps engage you in an invigorating wrestling match to help deepen your spirit and sharpen your wits."

The ceiling looks soft. Like some sort of hot cheese or cookie dough. It starts to breath. Not like visuals. Like it wants to kiss me. Even the cold squares of kitchen metal look kind. Organic. For some reason I want to go to the boiler room, dead for years, just to see if it will magically start up by itself and sing with heat.

I look down my chest without moving my head. Father has taken all his clothes off.

"That sounds good," I say. "Whatever happened to those fuckers? How come they don't come around like that any more? You'd think God would have the sense to be sending us some brand new, state-of-the-art, bad-ass angels to help us get a fucking clue right about now."

Father blows the candle out, leans over me like a slow bird
in the dark.

“And just what, pray tell, do you think you've been eating?”

