Jerome and the Angel

Jerome had two secrets, both of them so beautiful that he wanted to burst open, just burst right open at the seams, spilling himself everywhere, all over the floor, all over the ceiling, filling the whole room up like the sky, filling it and filling it until there was no Jerome anymore, and no room, either, but just one big Jerome-room, walls, floor, table, dresser, comb and hair sheen on the dresser, all the same thing, all of them shouting glory hallelujah, praised be God.

The first secret was: Jerome had an angel, his own personal angel who visited him regularly, coming through the window at all hours of the day and night, whenever he felt like it, because that’s what angels do: they come whether you’re expecting them or not, or even if you believe in them, which Jerome didn’t do at first. Even after he’d seen him with his own two eyes, he didn’t believe in angels, and the angel had had to come back again and again for Jerome to finally believe in it, for Jerome to finally know what he knew. But the thing was that his angel, at the same time that he was Jerome’s angel, was also Jerome: he and the angel were both separate and merged, the both at the same time, only it was kind of hard to explain. He didn’t much want to explain, anyhow, seeing as the angel was a secret. Not that the angel had told him to keep quiet. The angel didn’t much care one way or another if other people knew about him. It was more Jerome’s idea, because Jerome liked the idea of having a secret, particularly here at Hope House where everyone was into everyone else’s business,
they couldn’t much help it, all of them living side-by-side like they
did, and taking their meals together, and nothing to do all day but sit
around and talk, sit around and watch the TV, sit around and eat, and
sit around and talk some more, because there just wasn’t nothing to
do, and even if there had been, it wasn’t like he could just go out and
shoot a few hoops with the fellas, not with his legs not working right,
and his eyesight all but gone, and his hands all heavy, and everyone
waiting on him to die. That was the hardest part, the part that even
after the angel started coming to visit him, he couldn’t much face,
and didn’t want to think of: how he had come to this place to die,
how they’d put him here—his sister, his mamma, the doctor at the
hospital where he finally went after he’d had that first stroke, when
he was just minding his own business and there was a storm in his
head and down he goes and the next thing he knew he was up at
Earl K. Long, tubes stuck in his vein, in that room he’d never seen
before, and a sign up over his bed that said: Jerome Johnson, HIV
POS. Meaning that the doctors and nurses and everyone, all the
people coming and going there were so many of them that he couldn’t
keep track, they had to wear special gloves and special masks because
they didn’t want to touch no Jerome, couldn’t handle him too closely,
especially not his blood, no, because his blood was where the culprit
lay, his blood was infected, filled with tiny uncannily intelligent
creatures, like fish with scorpion’s eyes, like something from the
bottom of the deep sea, only so tiny that you couldn’t even see them
under a microscope, and those creatures—and the doctor who finally
sat on the side of the bed to explain it to him said so himself—were
responsible for what had happened to him when he’d suffered his
collapse, back there in where is it you say you’re from? Sunshine?
Back in Sunshine. They'd put him here to die. Thirty-four damn years old and they'd trundled him up like an old potato and put him here to die. Didn't make any damn sense at all, how someone his age could just up and die like that, his body turning on him, all invisible inside his skin, but that's why they'd put him here, after all. So he wouldn't die alone and raving out of his mind like Grace had, screaming about devils and Satan and what-not, all crazy-eyed and skinny, pus pouring out of the sores in her skin, pus filmimg over her eyes, spit and saliva everywhere and his pretty little Gracey—his Grace, his good-time girl, knew how to love him up and loved him up good and plenty—she's dead and buried in the ground, gone to Jesus, and there ain't a damn thing he can do about it.

You go try lying here up in the bed day and night just day and night I be lying up in the bed ain't not like it used to be and I got me a pain so bad in my side but I gon get better I'm taking my medicine every day I take them and just as soon as I get my strength back, just as soon as I get the strength in my legs back, I be moving back home, going back to Sunshine, I'm going to get my old job back, you ever been to Sunshine Miss Beatrice?

Well now, sweetheart, I can't say I have.

Even when the angel first started coming to see him, taking him by surprise, Jerome didn't say a damn thing about him. Not a word. He talked about everything else: about home, and Grace, only she died, and their little boy, Jerome Junior. Jerome Junior was living with Jerome's sister Yvette, being raised up right, but never would know his mamma or his daddy, though once or twice or maybe it was more than that, because Jerome never could much remember, his sister Yvette had brought the little boy in, held him on her hip over
Jerome's bed, saying: that's your daddy, boy. Don't you want to say hello to your daddy? A little boy with his mother's enormous brown eyes and his father's wide, square head. How you feeling today, Jerome? You looking like you doing okay.

Yeah, well.

And sometimes she brought clothes and sometimes she brought shampoo and batteries and things like that, things she thought he might need, even though he didn't really need much of anything, not the way he was, lying up in the bed like that, all day long, his legs long and heavy and useless below his waist, just lying there like two sacks of grain, filled with all kind of shit and not working right, they wouldn't hold him if he tried to stand, wouldn't much do anything but just lie there, part of him but not really; part of who he used to be. Only that was a dream too: who he used to be. A dream that he'd sometimes think was only a dream from start to last, a dream within a dream that he'd had one day when he was lying up in the bed, like he does every day. The volunteer brought him things too: skin cream, a chocolate bar, a Bible. Sat next to his bed reading from the Bible only she was white and pronounced her words as if she were chopping them off with her teeth, it wasn't that she didn't know how to read good, it was just that she didn't know how to get right into it, reading the word of the Lord the way it was meant to be read. But it wasn't her fault, being white and all. The very first time that the angel came he told him exactly that. He said: ain't her fault she don't know how to read good. She doin' the best she can and you can't right ask her to do no more than that. And Jerome had just had to sit back and agree, because—and this was the point—there wasn't much use in arguing with an angel.
That first time he came to visit, he just walked on through the window, all regal and grand, like maybe he was some kind of celebrity, a movie star going to the Oscars. He'd seen that show, once, but it was a long time ago: all those skinny white movie stars in slinky dresses, showing their titties off if they had them, which most of them didn't. Most of them skinny as boys, with hip bones that stuck out and bottoms with nothing to hold onto at all, no meat, no motion, no nothing. He didn't know a thing about it, not a thing about these white movie stars, couldn't much see what the big deal was all about, the way one and then the other clutched at that little gold statue and started to cry, thank you thank you, thank you so much, oh oh oh!

His angel was so beautiful that at first he couldn't do anything but stare. He could see him as clear as day, too, even though most of the time he couldn't see anything and nobody, just shadows, swirls of colors, outlines, blurs. Miss Lilly would come in and hover over his bed like she did, writing her hands together and trying to be cheerful, telling him that yes, Jerome, we're going to get you some glasses. I've put a call in to Medicare to see if we can get them to pay for your prescription, but the glasses never did come, and in the meantime the world shrunk and shrunk until he couldn't see much of anything anymore, not even his room, not even the TV or the window or the closet where his sister Yvette had put the new clothes she'd bought for him at the Walmart, comfortable track suits, the kind he liked, with that nice new-smelling fresh smell. But presto! That angel just comes sauntering in through the window, like it was the easiest thing in the world, like it happened every day, no big deal, ain't you never seen an angel before? Comes on in like that in his golden robes and all that white light shining off him, and just like that Jerome can see again.
Hey, he said.

Who you?

Don't jive me, baby. You know who I is.

You my grand-daddy?

Do I look like your grand-daddy?

How would I know? My grand-daddy done passed before I even born. Mamma used to talk about him all the time, is how I know about him.

No, baby, I ain't your granddaddy. Try again.

Jerome closed his eyes. He felt like hiding. He felt like pulling the blanket up over his head. But he didn't. And when he opened his eyes again, the angel was still there, only now he was sitting down. He was sitting in the chair in the corner next to the bed.

You my angel? Jerome said.

Now you got it, the angel said.

What you want from me? Am I dead?

No, you ain't dead. Do you feel like you dead?

Nope.

Well, you ain't.

Then the angel got very big—he got very very big—filling up the whole room with a kind of sparkly radiance, like he was made of glitter, lots of glittery light, and then, in a whoosh, he was gone again. And Jerome didn't tell a damn soul about him, not even Miss Beatrice, who sat with him nearly every day, or Annie who came to feed him and was always quoting the Bible at him and telling him to put his trust in Jesus.

That was his first secret.
The other secret was: Jerome loved the cleaning lady, Wanda. It was that simple. He loved her with all his heart, loved her from the first moment he set eyes on her, which was way back when, when he first came to Hope House, when he could still see good, before he needed glasses, before he could only see shadows and light and shade and dark, blotches and patches of color, swirls of nothing where outlines and solid shape used to be. Now he loves the sound of her, the swish swish of her mop in the hall, her deep-throated laugh, and he loves the smell of her too: the smell of cleaning fluids combined with warm skin combined with some kind of baby oil.  

Hey, Wanda!  
What you want?  
When you gon go out with me?  
Where you gonna take me?  
I take you out to get you the biggest juiciest steak in Louisiana.  
How about that?  
I better go get me a new dress, then. Something pretty.  
You pretty no matter what.  
She was, too, but not in the way his sister Yvette was pretty, with her kind round face and soft shoulders, or the way Grace was pretty.  
No doubt about it, Grace, his Gracie, had been something else, all swishing her behind up and down the street, wearing those tight shorts, driving him crazy, but that had been before she'd gotten sick, when she was still young, still driving all the boys crazy. Would have married her too, married her in a big church wedding but she went and got pregnant with his baby and didn't want to walk down the aisle with her stomach sticking out, said that they could wait until
after the baby came, but then, one, two, three, before you know it, she was nothing but skin and bones, big eyes sticking out of her head, arms like sticks, and throwing up all the time, because that's what the virus does to you, you gave it to me Jerome Johnson. You some kind of faggot only you don't tell me? You doing it with guys?

I ain't never gone near no man and you know it. Ain't love no one but you.

Doctor told me that you get it from bodily fluids, Jerome, that means sex, which means I get it from you. Who else give it to me? Santa Claus?

I swear Grace.

You swear what?

I swear, he said again, because what else was there to say? He wasn't no homo, never had been, that was just plain ridiculous. And once he'd hooked up with Grace, that had been it: She'd been the only one for him, he weren't interested in no other woman. Only he didn't say that. He didn't say anything. He done gone and killed her, is what she was telling him, and there wasn't anything to say to that, and anyway, she didn't last much longer after that, a week or two only, the whole time lying in the bed at her mother's house on Peach Street, in the big bed in the front room because that's where her mother, who was sickly herself, who had some problem with her legs and couldn't move real good, could take care of her best.

Little Jerome Junior went to Yvette and Grace lay up in the bed moaning and groaning and when Jerome went to visit her after work or on the weekends she'd look at him and yell: You did this to me! You nothing but a murderer! Faggot! Get out of here before I call the police, you the Devil come to get me, Satan! Mamma! Satan! Satan!
eating me, Mamma, he eating my stomach get him off me! I'm gonna call the cops! Only he knew that that was impossible, too, that Grace didn't have the strength to get up to use the phone, and that half the time the phone was turned off anyhow, because Miss Mary, who was Grace's mother, didn't always pay the phone company on time, not with her other worries, and her legs that didn't work quite right, giving her shooting pains down in her shins, shooting pains like needles going into her shin bone.

Wanda was pretty in an old-fashioned, old-timey kind of way, almost like she reminded him of his grandmother or someone like that, only of course Wanda wasn't anything like his grandmother at all. His grandmother had had sharp long fingers and all kinds of frizzy gray hair, whereas Wanda was soft and round and dimpled, as shiny as newly-laid tar, her hair patted down smooth on her crown, and smooth and quiet with her push broom and her mop, her hips broad and her behind soft, the way he liked women to be.

Hey Wanda!
What you want, Jerome?
When you gon go out with me?
When you gon ask me?
I asking you now.
All right then. Just let me finish up what I got to do here.
You do that, Wanda. But don't forget!
I ain't forgetting nothing, baby.

He could hear her out there, in the hall, swish-swishing her push broom along, and then the smells—her own warm smell of smooth skin and soap and sweat, but not a lot of sweat because they kept it
pretty cold inside, the air-conditioners going full-blast against the
summer heat, and also the smell of Lysol, of disinfectant extra-
strength Ajax, of toilet cleaner.

Wanda!

I coming, Jerome, I really is.

But she didn’t come. He waited and waited, but still no Wanda.
He wondered if maybe he was fooling himself, if maybe Wanda had
no intention at all of stopping by to see him, but then the angel
popped up, saying: Why don’t you do something nice for that girl?

Huh? What girl?

That girl you so sweet on.

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Other people came to visit him too, other than Wanda and his sister
and Miss Lilly and Suzette the volunteer and the angel. There was
Miss Beatrice, who came just about every day, because that was her
job, she was retired but now she came to Hope House every day, it
sure beats sitting around at home and worrying myself sick over my
daughter—my poor daughter? I tell you about her? Cancer. She’s gon
be taking her journey soon. I goes to see her every day, but I can’t stay
there all the time, not without getting in the way, and at my age it’s
time to give a little something back, praise Jesus. And that priest,
Father Ralph, you could tell he was white by the sound of his voice,
sometimes he visited too, but he didn’t do much talking, just read a
prayer or too in his quiet white voice. The other person who came
once a day was his nurse, his new nurse because something happened
to his old nurse, either that or they’d sent someone else, he couldn’t
right remember what Miss Lilly had told him, all he knew was that
his new nurse came every day, usually in the morning, to bathe him, bathing him right there in the bed because he couldn’t get up any more, telling him about where she was from, which was Canada, a special part of Canada that he couldn’t remember the name of, is where she was from, way up North, so far North that it wasn’t even America any more, it was Canada. He couldn’t remember her name but he could remember that she was from Canada. She said: where I grew up, every winter it snowed so much the snow covered the cars and came half-way up the walls of the houses and sometimes covered the windows on the lower floors too, that’s how much snow there was, snowing day and night, the whole world white with snow. Not like now. Now it hardly snows at all. And she’d hum and whistle, picking up one limb and then the next, rubbing the damp wash-cloth along his legs and arms, even over his private area but there wasn’t nothing sexual about it but even so it made him uncomfortable, the way she wiped him down there, like his pecker was no bigger, no more potent than a baby’s, but at least she did it fast, going down there in a hurry and then lingering over other places, over his neck and face, his hands, his feet. He couldn’t much see her and didn’t even know what she looked like and that’s because she was a new nurse, she’d started coming after he’d lost his eyesight, all he knew was that she was white. Had to be, the way she talked, drawing out her vowels, flattening them like they were pancakes spreading on the griddle, plus who other than white folks live where there’s all that snow? Jerome didn’t know much about snow, and that was a fact. In Sunshine, when he was coming up, it had snowed precisely once, and that had been on a Christmas Day when he was maybe ten years old. Woke up early
expecting to find a tape-recorder waiting for him under the little silver metallic tree that his mother took out once a year, saying she didn’t want no big old pine tree in her house, no sir she didn’t want to have to go picking up pine needles in her own damn house and anyway only rich people is fool enough to pay good money for a dead tree that they only going to go and throw out. Tape recorders were expensive but his friend Roger up the street had one and he wanted one with all his heart, wanted one that he could sing into, pretending like maybe he was on the radio, the next new thing, ladies and gentlemen this next act that I’m going to introduce comes all the way from Sunshine, Louisiana, let’s hear it for Jerome Johnson, the J.J. Kid we call him, put your hands together, folks, let’s give him a nice warm New York City welcome.

Oh yeah.

But instead of a tape-recorder there had been a brand-new Bible, picture of the baby Jesus on it, right there on the corner, and a red sweater wrapped in green paper, and instead of sunshine in Sunshine, that day there had been snow. It snowed on and off, little chunks of wet white snow coming down all day long until in the back yard the Iron Plants were speckled with it, and kids went out in the street, trying to make snow men. But the snow was too wet, and in any event, by the next day it was warm again and everything melted and people went around saying: What did you think of our white Christmas? Which was kind of a joke among black people, saying white Christmas like that, because even though no one he knew paid much mind to white folks one way or the other, just kept to themselves and kept out of trouble, the way you’re supposed to, everyone
knew that it would be a cold day in hell before white people gave
black folks anything much more than the time of day.

But this nurse of his, the one from Canada where it snowed all
the time, snowed and snowed like the end of the world, like a giant
refrigerator, like Alaska and the North Pole all wrapped up into one,
she was white, and she bathed him every day like he was her own kin,
bathed him and fussed over him and said things like, Jerome, baby,
how long you been here now?

Gordon visited him, too. He was a new resident, but he wasn't
like the others, talking like they didn't know anything about anything
and never would and never wanted to. Gordon had been around.
He'd had him a life, with kids and a wife, and his wife had been a
good woman, only he'd driven her off, but before he had, she'd wait
at home for him every damn day of the week, just waiting for him to
come home so she could give him some of her good home cooking,
some of that etoufee that she made so good, some gumbo and you like
gumbo? Jerome? How you like it, hot or not so spicy because me? I like
it hot-hot. Came and sat in the bed and talked to him about Jesus.
Talked to him about Jesus like he personally knew Jesus, like Jesus
maybe was his brother or his uncle or someone. Miss Lilly rubbing her
hands together. Surette who was the volunteer saying: You want me
to read something to you? What do you want to hear? Do you have
any favorites? And sometimes saying: What, Jerome? Say it again, I'm
having a hard time hearing you today. And Wanda, of course. There
was always Wanda.

He was going to marry Wanda is what he was going to do. Have
himself the big church wedding that he'd wanted to have with
Grace—a wedding with a big old party afterwards, with fried chicken and corn on the cob and sweet potatoes and mashed potatoes and plenty of gravy because that's what makes it all so good, but nothing fancy, he didn't want a fancy party, never did like people putting on too many airs. No, his wedding would be solemn but not fancy or stuck-up, and afterwards, why, people would just have themselves a good old time.

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Put yourself in Jesus' hands, Annie said.

Put your trust in Jesus.

But what happened was: Well, it was so bad he didn't even want to talk about it. He put the blanket over his head and refused to talk. Refused to eat, even. Why should he eat after what they done done to him? Oh Lord, they're trying to kill him!

It wasn't right what they done to him, neither, slipping him into the operating room like that in the middle of the night, and taking all his bones out. Taking every last bone out of his body, so that he didn't have any more bones, so that he was just a sack of flesh, of blood and sinew, of skin, and maybe some other things too, the things you have to have or you die, but still it wasn't right. Do you see the scar where they took my bones out? Right here, right on my side, do you see it? Do you?

I don't see nothing, Jerome. It was his angel again, come to see him after a very long time, because frankly, after the wedding, Jerome hadn't wanted to see much of anyone, not if he could have his Wanda all to himself, and those other guys were just going to have to sit back and be jealous, because she had chosen him after all, saying: now Jerome, you know I love you best, don't you?
His angel was wearing a suit and tie, which was very un-angel-like, Jerome thought. Usually he wore robes, like in the Bible. Big, white, flowing robes, and sometimes they were white, and sometimes they had little stripes in them, and sometimes they were more golden, but always it was robes. Not today. Today his angel was wearing a conservative dark-gray suit with a red tie and black leather shoes.

Looked like he was all dressed up to go see his lawyer. Either that, or like he was maybe going into the mortuary business.

What you want?
Hey, You the one called me. What you want?
Where my wife?
Your wife is fine. Everything’s fine. Calm down.
Why I be calm when you come to take me to the grave?
Why you say that?
Just look at you, man. You look like you a damn undertaker.

The angel glanced down at himself, then went over to the small mirror above Jerome’s dresser to take a good long look. When he turned around again, he said, I think I look pretty good.

Well, I like you better the way you used to come. In your God-clothes. The way you all slicked up now, I barely recognize you.

What you going to do now, Jerome?
Huh? What you mean?
You getting ready?
He had to think about that then, thinking about what that meant, to be ready.

I just got married. I’m going on my honeymoon. I just got to finish packing, and then I’ll be ready.

Where you going? The angel said.
Florida.

Well, the angel said. Congratulations.

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It was Easter. That's what they all said. They said: It's Easter, Jerome, what you think the Easter Bunny going to go get for you for Easter? But he had plans of his own. He had plans, and he had the money too, and the next time Susette came he told her to just go on into his drawer, the drawer right there next to the bed, just go on in there and get out his wallet where he keeps his money, and just go take that money, and go buy the biggest prettiest Easter rabbit you can find, hear? Because I need a big pretty one. Pink. Big and pretty and pink, and you just go get the best one you can find. And an hour later, or maybe it was two hours, he didn't know, all he knew was that Susette was standing over the bed—he was the volunteer, and she came in every week, came in and read to him in her funny white voice, deep like a man's—and she said:

Jerome! Jerome! Look! I got you your bunny rabbit. Can you see it?

Oh! It was beautiful. It was big and pink with sticking-up ears, just like he wanted it, and in its little paws was a big old Easter egg, all wrapped in shiny foil. He couldn't see it with his eyes, but he knew anyway. He knew in that new way he had of knowing, from inside his eyelids.

Can you see it?

Yes indeed. Go get her, Go get Wanda. Wanda! Wanda! Where's Wanda!

What you want, Jerome!

I got something for you!

Oh yeah! What you got for me Jerome?
No! I mean it! Come see what I get for you!
Oh Jerome! It’s beautiful. Look at that.
It’s for you.
He’s beautiful.
Want to know what his name is?
What?
His name Glory Glory Hallelujah.
Yes indeed.

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He is flying. Flying with the angels. And he can see so clearly it’s as if his eyes had become magnifying glasses. He can see the whole world, and he can also see all the people in it, he can see houses and trees, and squirrels and leaves and TV sets and pillow cases and lamps. It’s so beautiful, his heart can barely contain it.

Come see! Come see!, he says, and his voice has expanded too, expanded and melted at the same time, so it flows out of his throat like honey. My darling, my darling sweet Wanda, my lover, my wife, my life, my darling sweet thing, my beauty, I love you, I love you, don’t ever leave, I consecrate my life unto you, I give you my heart, my soul, I am coming, my darling, don’t ever forsake me! Gracie! Gracie! Wanda! Mamma! My angels! My angels! My angels!

Yeah baby, I here. What you want, baby? What can I be doing for you?

But he doesn’t want her to do anything for him; rather, he wants to do something for her. He wants to introduce her to his angel. His beautiful, gorgeous, perfect angel, dressed all in blue in shimmery blue in golden blue he’s so big and so beautiful all light just like you my darling girl just like you like you like you.