The Angel of Death

by John J. Clayton (June 2018)

Sleep, Edouard Vuillard, 1892

The old house, like a ship, sighs and creaks in the dark.

The Angel of Death, the *malach hamavet*, comes to Peter in his sleep. Not to take him, not now, not yet. Then what? Is it to admonish? The angel comes night after night, in female form, riding a power mower across a dream field of tall grasses, and she glances Peter's way for only a moment. She has curly gray hair and wears jeans. A grandmother. *A grand mother.* Waking, he takes the dream vision as a sign: he will be cut down, and soon. His heart, congested, will fail. It has already begun to fail, and soon will fail utterly and forever.

He's only in his early seventies.

Is he afraid? Oh, yes. Though he can't say why.

In his dream the angel shuts down the mower and points

her finger.

It's as if his dying has already begun. And why say "as if"—it really *has* begun. Muscles grow slack, a sluggishness invades his brain. The energy and intelligence that he once took for granted are hard to draw upon. He forgets names. He takes little naps and doesn't get the nighttime sleep he needs. He's rehearsing. Slowly, slowly, the Angel of Death sucks out the marrow of consciousness. He'll never fully experience his own dying—the *self* won't be there to do the experiencing.

What can he make out of his own dying?

Can he use the time left to make up for the mistakes in his life? To come to God with a clear soul. What repentance can he make? What reparations?

Rabbi Eliezer said, "When should you repent? One day before your death." A rabbinical joke, for of course we don't know the day of our death. Hence, we are to repent every day.

Is his soul smudged, corrupted? In need of cleansing? In what way? Hasn't he been a loving husband, a loving father? He's worked hard for his family. He hasn't cheated in business; in the Talmud we're told that at the Heavenly court the first question we will be asked is, *Did you conduct your business affairs honestly*. He has, he has.

Well—has for the most part. There was that manipulation of stock options. And what about false advertising?

He's given his reasonable share of help for those who are suffering—to Doctors Without Borders, for instance, or to a homeless shelter. When Diana's friend Sheila became busy taking care of her husband in the hospital, he picked up her kids, he cooked for her family.

Is that good enough?

He's given to the arts. He's on the board of a local chamber music group.

He could have done more.

The fact that he feels the need to list his virtues tells him that he knows he's somehow guilty.

Remember not the sins of our youth.

Oh, yes, what about the sins of our youth, oh, yes. Between marriages, before the kids, before marriage to Diana, when he was in his late twenties, he was so full of himself. And what a womanizer he was! What a bum. What a fake. It's not the sex he regrets, the wildness, the fierce hunger, the delight, but the shopping around—charming women, raising expectations, making women think he was serious. All that love that wasn't love. What about Anna, whose heart was broken and who left a hand-written note in their mailbox, his and Diana's: *I curse your family. May you all rot in hell!*

But his family was blessed instead. If the Angel were to take him, his family would still be blessed.

But it's especially what he was like in his thirties and forties, married again, that makes him ashamed.

Working hard, he often neglected his family. Years ago, decades ago, when he'd started his company, returning home in the evening, when Nan and Doug and David were young children, returning late, tired to the bone, he used to pour himself a drink and listen to everyone's day. But he didn't really listen; he'd only pretend. Irritated by their high-pitched voices, by their frenetic energy, he'd turn away, tune the TV to the news, and if the kids protested the loss of the program they'd been watching, he'd snap, "Listen: I bust my butt. You can decide the program we watch when you work for a

living. Till then you don't get to choose." Finally, to avoid confrontation, he bought a second TV and shut himself up with the news.

Puffed-up, too much a big shot to listen.

He wishes he could return to that time of his life and this time do it right. He wants to sit with the kids, with Diana and the kids, and listen to them and play with them. But now the kids aren't kids; they're grown up—Nan thirty-six, Doug thirty-eight, David forty-one. What he's made of them, what they've made of themselves, is settled. They're good, creative adults.

He doesn't deserve the gift.

Most, he repents his sometimes anger. Times he shouted at one of his kids and, if he didn't get obedience or apologies—if they talked back, if they didn't straighten their rooms or take out the garbage or finish their homework—he'd storm out of the dining room.

Storm out, pouting. As if he were the victim. Fool—you fool!

It's easy to say now, decades later, that the shouting was an assertion of strength defending against suppressed weakness. That's certainly true. Having no power, he yelled, certain he was justified. He'd learned it from his own father. That's true, but no excuse.

He pretended not to see his younger son and his daughter roll their eyes and exchange looks; his older son, David, became like a stone.

That stone still lodges in David and weighs him down. *If only I could lift it off him!*

A few years ago, David, said, "You're not hurtful now, Dad. You've changed a lot. Now that we're grown up, you've

softened. But when we were little and you got that way, righteous and demanding, it's as if you were trying to hurt us, but Dad, we—we were resilient. You were mostly hurting yourself—were swallowing your own poison, poison you've compounded."

"I never wanted to hurt you. But yes, it's true, David. Too often I was my own enemy. It's true. At times, I was an arrogant, self-righteous bastard. I wanted to believe that I was the victim—like, here I worked and worked for you all and you didn't appreciate. My anger hurt you, too—hurt all of us. Your mother tried to make peace. Remember? That made me more mad."

"My job now," David said, "is to carry forward with my kids, with Sam and Uri, the good things you gave us—curiosity, tenderness, goofiness—and to choose to bury the bad stuff."

"I want that as much as you do. That you may surmount what you were given."

"It wasn't all I was given."

"Thank God."

So here he is, now, his soul tainted by the old self-importance, by anger. He has already repented in front of his kids. It wasn't Yom Kippur, when we are asked to repent and turn to God; it was Thanksgiving, five years ago. All three children and their spouses and their children were together, and a goodly amount of wine had been drunk. A football game was just starting on TV. The grandkids were playing tag outside in the big back yard. Peter sat down in the living room with Doug and David, told them how sorry he was. Nan, too, was there to listen to his apology and take his hand, but Nan he'd never bossed around. She was the placable one. "She didn't have to face my grumpiness or my demands."

Tears were shed that Thanksgiving; they sat around the

dinner table; then David remembered a night that Peter stormed because David wouldn't get out of the bathtub. So, David became stubborn; he stood up in the bath and, as if he were his own father, he pointed an accusing finger down at an imaginary self still in the bath and parodied his father's speech: "YOU GET THE HELL OUT OF THAT TUB!"

"Sorry, Davie," Peter said. "So sorry." Then, mischievously, he laughed and said to his adult son, "It's okay, David. Tonight you can stay in the tub as long as you want."

But suddenly he was in tears. "What a fool I was. I'm so sorry."

His sons listened and forgave him, and they in turn asked that he forgive their old rebelliousness, their self-righteousness. So? Is that good enough? It felt good. But damage has been done. What else can he do about it? There's repentance, all right, but with no possibility of reparations—is that good enough?

And what about the good, the loving times?—the times he played with them, really did listen to them, suffered with them, opened his heart to them? Not that such times cancel out the bad times. It doesn't work that way.

In what way *does* it work?

Ask Diana. *My level-headed wife.* My supportive wife. He saw tears on her cheeks when she listened to his repentance that Thanksgiving. He fought hard against milking the moment, encouraging a too-easy tender forgiveness. He tried to be clear, to tell the truth.

That was the first night that he dreamed of the Angel of Death with the curly, gray hair.

Waking tonight, he whispers, "What do you want of me?"

The Angel smiles. In both his dream and waking he understood her smile. Her shrug. She tells him that she isn't keeping score; she doesn't care about Peter's guilt, about his soul. When it's time, it's time. You are what you are. What you've been, you've become. Whatever you've managed to become, so you are. She's a busy messenger, the *malach hamavet*. No, she doesn't come in admonition. You're not punished by death nor punished in your death. Your punishment, your reward, is to end up as you are. The angel will simply take you. Not a judge, she reaps the living—the grass—with power mower instead of sickle or scythe. She brings a broader vision: no need to make a fuss. Why do you think you're so special? You think you can make nice and influence God? You think God is holding up a set of scales? Please!

Just another dream, Peter says as he wakes. "Let God take me," he says—"I won't make a fuss." So yes, he's been imperfect, Peter, as his father and his mother were imperfect, as their parents were imperfect, going back and back to Sinai and beyond. In turn his children have made, will make, their mistakes, only partly because of him.

He wrestles with himself. He wants to come home.

We suffer, all of us, we bring about suffering, we transcend suffering with love and clarity.

Love obviously. But what does he mean by *clarity*?

He means knowing his defenses; seeing them clearly. Not letting himself get away with self-deceit, with self-importance disguised as wisdom. The angel says, *Who do you think you are? Why are you struggling? I cut the grass, the sea of grass; you—you're a part of that sea. That's all.*

But no, that's *not* all. Like Jacob, you must wrestle with an angel—ford the river and wrestle by the water. *Let me go,* the angel cries, *for the dawn is breaking.* And Jacob replies, *Unless you bless me, I will not let you go.* And so

Jacob is given a new name*: Yisroel, God wrestler—wrestler* with the divine and human. And he can go home.

So much like the story from another tradition: In *The Odyssey,* Menelaus needs the old man of the sea, Proteus, to tell him how to get back home. Proteus' daughter teaches him how to trap her father. *You must wrestle with him, you must pin him down. He'll change shape, become many creatures—a panther, a wild boar, a storm of fire, a torrent of water—and you must hold him down till he resumes the shape he had at first and begins to ask you questions. Then he will not lie. He'll tell you how to cross the seas and return home.*

Home.

The old house, like a ship, sighs and creaks in the dark.

John J. Clayton has published nine volumes of fiction, both novels and short stories. His collection of interwoven short stories, *Minyan,* was published in September 2016, his collection *Many Seconds into the Future* in 2014*. Mitzvah Man*, his fourth novel, appeared in 2011. His stories have appeared in *AGNI*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Sewanee Review*, *Commentary*