

Writing the Balloon

I always begin with the balloon. You won't understand me otherwise. I'm the girl who sees things, knows things, because a foil, carnival balloon—red on one side, silver on the other—hovers between the floor and ceiling of my thoughts. If I read the shiny colors right, I know what's going to happen before real-time grabs hold and twists what could be into what is. Momma, Papa, and my brothers can't see it, even though on occasion the balloon floats over their shoulders, a strange moon rising over their soon-to-be-lived horizons.

When Rhett, my youngest brother, fell from the barn roof two springs ago, the balloon had slunk around him one whole day before showing silver and revealing his fate. The balloon's face was red just before Momma won a hundred dollars from the state lottery. When businessmen bought our farm and turned our chicken coops into killing factories, the balloon had hung about Papa shining silver for a week until finally giving away what it knew.



The balloon doesn't just haunt me and mine, of course; it has also attached itself to kids at school or to people at the market. When I was younger, not seventeen like I am now, I felt compelled to tell friends and strangers both what I witnessed play for them across the balloon's mylar sheen until I got a reputation for cultivating trouble. Pregnancies, accidental chokings, bathtub falls, suicides — knowing that the balloon has marked a person and telling that person are two very different talents, and I've only been given the one.

Folks—be they kin or otherwise—just don't like to know that they're going to be hurt or that their lives are going to change. The balloon is present for both sides of life, the pleasurable and the painful, and every red event is always trailed by a silver one. Always. We want the certainty of change if the forecast is for happier times, but we hope against hope that if tragedy is coming, there might yet be some way to avoid it right up until that tragedy crashes down upon us. Hope holds no currency when you're playing against Fate and Destiny.

And I'm no different. After years of reading the balloon for others, even I resist the truth when that truth announces itself across the balloon's sheer face and dimpled edges. This was no less true one morning last autumn when, as I was brushing my hair, the balloon glided to the shoulder of my reflection and marked me.

He came for me the next night. He was holding the knife he had used to slice the screens on our porch windows, but the weapon wasn't necessary. I knew he wouldn't use it. Not on me. I was already packed, and I didn't take much. We would be traveling on foot or by hitchhiking, and I didn't want the extra burden.



Malachi was a veteran of the oldest war. Although he was ancient, he possessed a middle-aged man's paunch and patterned balding, which should have but did not prevent him from maintaining stringy brown locks that he draped along his neck; locks he sometimes cinched into a ponytail. The hair on his face changed frequently from beard to mutton chops to Van Dyke, and each style altered his features in subtle enough ways that he was able to pass through towns and cities he had visited many times before without being recognized. You might say Malachi possessed a talent for being invisible right before folks' eyes.

For example Malachi had first passed through our town six months previous and boarded with my family; renting out one of our bedrooms being one of several ways we replaced the income we no longer made from raising chickens. He didn't notice me until we had a moment alone together while I was clearing the dinner dishes, and I told him what the balloon perched at his shoulder was declaring.

"They're waiting for you at the bus station," I said.

I now know that Malachi isn't the type to show surprise, so I should have been honored when his forkful of baked chicken clattered upon Mama's green Fiesta Ware. A dark eye beneath a bushel of brow trawled me up and down and made me want to cover the curves of my body. At least at first.

He asked how many, but the balloon wasn't specific. I had already strained my abilities just to determine what was conspiring in the shadows. At least I knew where the beings pursuing him were hiding.

Malachi dropped a wad of cash that was well short of what he owed us next to his unfinished meal, gathered his belongings and was gone. Hours after he disappeared down



the lane, I lingered on the porch and pretended to watch the cascade of fireflies out near the willow trees while I waited for him, but he didn't return.

He was back now, these many months later, while my family slept. We lingered a moment, I prone, he looming with the knife still in his hand. He was more observant than most men, especially Papa, and he noticed right off that I was dressed beneath the covers. He also noted my packed satchel set beside the nightstand. He returned the knife to the sheath hidden beneath the clothes on his back, and he helped me to my feet. He then led me through the living room, waiting like a gentleman at each doorway while I sneaked ahead of him, until we reached the screen porch where he had slit open the windows. We slipped away.

He was on a crusade, he informed me not long after we crossed the state line, and he needed me because of what I could do with the balloon. As Malachi told it, he was prophet to a missing God, a God who had either abandoned His reign or a God who had been removed — Malachi did not know for certain which. The Celestial throne was chaos, much derelict and overrun, as hordes of angels from higher castes fought those from the lower castes for control. Only a few of the servants to the old order, be they hallowed or fallen, even dared seek out the missing Father in hopes that He might be located to restore order. Some, like those who had waited for Malachi at the bus station, thrived on the chaos and strife caused by God's continued absence and found the current state of affairs satisfactory enough to prevent any one being from reverting reality back to the way it had once been.

About the time we arrived in the South, Malachi told me we were searching for an old book. Centuries ago, when God had sensed that His laws were being challenged by



some within His kingdom, He appointed two upper caste angels, who once possessed different names but were now known as Fate and Destiny, to channel God's laws into Creation, to write existence into being and bind it into reality with words.

Malachi believed it was Fate and Destiny who had engineered God's disappearance. The twins, as Malachi oftentimes referred to them, proceeded to use their writings to protect themselves from attacks against their influence. Factions of angels from all castes flocked around one cause or another, some aligning with Fate and Destiny, some aligning with the anarchists, some few like Malachi, rallying around the old order. The ever-shifting loyalties and the never-ending back-stabbing were as bad or worse than the wild, hormone-driven machinations at my high school. And those angels fought and fought with no one camp gaining traction over the many centuries until just recently when someone—Malachi believed it was a human—had stolen the twins' book and brought the book to the world in order to hide it from all who sought out the text.

The shift in power, and the vacuum created within a Universe where nothing was no longer known or certain, where nothing could be written to favor one outcome or the other, had reinvigorated each angel caste, and the recent battles had been the bloodiest that they had ever been.

This brings us again to the balloon. With the twins as powerless as the rest of the angelic masses, their narrative now as lost to them as to the God they had displaced, Malachi believed the balloon shouldn't have existed. And yet, as he learned when he arrived at the bus station months ago to confront his would-be attackers, my balloon-inspired readings were accurate. How could my balloon function when the larger plottings of Fate and Destiny were currently curtailed? He believed my balloon and the



twins' text must somehow be connected, and if this was so, then he might be able to use me to locate the book.

For my part, to this day, I am not sure that Malachi's hierarchy of wayward and warring angels who were all battling to locate a single book was real, but I did come to witness that what was pursuing Malachi, and me, was not human.

I first glimpsed one of our pursuers when we arrived in Florida that winter. Malachi had brought us there not only to avoid the severe weather up north, given that we were sleeping on streets or in fields, but also to explore the miles and miles of freshwater caves that perforated the western middle and lower parts of the state. He would explore the underwater labyrinths with his knife clamped in his teeth like a pirate, and I would take in the sun while he did so because water and I have never gotten along. What wasn't clear until later was that he was searching for something more than just the twins' book, and his descents were only part of the hunt.

One afternoon we were panhandling outside a Wal Mart near Fort Myers, a rural community somewhat like home, except for the nearby wetlands and crocodiles and the fact that they traded in citrus and tomatoes instead of chicken or livestock. We didn't see many white folk, except those guarding over the workers; no, the population was mostly fruit pickers from Mexico, El Salvador, Columbia, Paraguay. A woman, her age undetectable for the millions of lines etched upon her face, dragged past us in torn sneakers and gathered with the others at the single payphone. It was Sunday, and the fruit pickers who still possessed minutes on their calling cards were given their one afternoon off a week to phone the long distance home.



The balloon showed a silver face as it bobbed at the woman's shoulder. The reading told of a camp farther south where hundreds of men and women like her slept huddled in groups within old shacks or rusted and mildewed mobile homes. Where men and women spent twelve to fourteen hours a day earning forty cents a bucket and where much of the fifty dollars a week that they made on a good harvest went to renting floor space in the shack, to purchasing food, and if there was extra, to procuring the calling cards. The woman's brother, in another camp in another town, had tried to make a run for it last week. She did not know of his fate, but she feared the worst. As she should have. The balloon showed me the swamp where his body lay.

That's when I paid better attention to the two pickups nearby, and to the men with the guns who waited inside those pickups. That's when I recognized beings of the kind who had attacked Malachi at the bus station months previous. They wore human form, but the balloon wasn't fooled. I thought angels would look different, and maybe some do, but the angels who imprisoned the migrant workers were mostly like birds. Not exotic colorful birds, either. They were dingy, angular and sinewy, and in their darting, jerky movements, they were not unlike the chickens back home.

After the calls were complete, the men and women clamored back into the pickups. When the caravan was finally out of view, I realized Malachi had watched the entire scene with that same razored attention he often employed to study me. We then followed the road the trucks had taken, and I wondered if we had truly been panhandling or if we had been there to encounter the migrants all along.

At nightfall, we crept through marshland that smelled of spoiled eggs and hid ourselves behind toppled cypress trees at the edges of their camp. I complained about



crocodiles, but Malachi only grinned as if to say that we should be so lucky. Pit fires crackled and smoldered outside the circle of shacks and mobile homes. The men and women farmers sat motionless and stared through the flames to some other place, either too numb or too exhausted for much more than breathing. Then we heard noises coming from a trailer separated from the others. I hadn't been at it long, but the swaying and squeaking that that trailer was making told me enough about what was going on in there. The scene was of much interest to Malachi, and right then I learned I was the jealous sort.

“What exactly are we after here?” I said.

He shushed me, as there was a man, one of the chicken-angels in disguise, who was cradling a rifle and guarding the door. Malachi led me to the trailer's other side, where a ratty t-shirt ineffectively served as a curtain. He didn't try to protect me from what I saw, and I cursed aloud before I could stop myself. The woman inside was straddling a worker, who was flayed and ruined beneath her. Malachi didn't even give me that disappointed glance he was fond of sending my way, for upon hearing my cry, the guard with the gun came charging from the other side of the trailer.

I wish I could better recall the fight because it was my first non-ballooned glimpse of an actual angel. The attacker threw off his disguise in an erratic flutter of musty wings, and Malachi leapt at the body, which had a contortionist's flexibility. They flipped and tussled and then it was over and only Malachi was standing.

The woman inside showed her appreciation by leaping at the window and slashing a line through the glass, causing it to halve and fall away. I believe she would have dived at me, but rusted chains bound her feet and served to restrain her. Malachi hefted me onto



his shoulder and swung the angel's rifle over the other, and we fled through the swamp until we found the road, but even then, we didn't stop moving until daybreak.

Over a diner-served plate of bacon and eggs the next morning, I voiced my opinion on the atrocities we had witnessed the previous night.

Malachi picked at his hash browns as if thinking of something else, then he told me the creature most likely desired the men's seed.

“And I'm sure those men don't mind giving it. Hell, they were paying to give it,” I went on, as I sometimes will when the state of the world gets me riled, “she didn't need to....” I glanced away from the smear of yolk and ketchup on my plate.

Malachi considered this and eventually contended that the creature, and he did finally use the word, probably didn't kill many of the workers because their labor was still essential to the fruit-picking company — a front for a corporate conglomerate that maintained the most tangential of relationships with the camps, just in case there were ever a Federal investigation. The few men that the creature was allowed to feed upon, he guessed, simply helped sustain her, not unlike how my breakfast was sustaining me.

“And the seed, as you put it? What's that about?”

The she-thing was one of the workers' gods, he said, and as trapped in this foreign land as they were. The semen cemented her here to this place, made her more real. Why this caste of angels needed her, Malachi could not guess, but he thought if we returned to the camp, the balloon might possibly tell us.

I recalled, as if I could have forgotten, what she did to the trailer's window with a flick of her finger. She didn't seem particularly keen on being visited by the likes of us. Besides the balloon came and went as it fancied. I didn't control its appearances.



Malachi of the subtle gestures shrugged and said perhaps the god could help him understand what he had been seeing during his swims into the caverns. Gods like the one we encountered also played roles in the pursuit of the twins' book, for Fate and Destiny had no love of the pantheon of ancient personifications, and they had written the deaths of almost all of the old ones, as Malachi referred to them. No, the old ones wouldn't care to locate God, who had demoted and or displaced them, but they would most certainly want possession of the text, which dictated the amount of power they held in this supposed Celestial war. With the book in hand, the old ones might again rise to power.

"We need to set those workers free," I told Malachi, focusing on sensible matters.

He didn't disagree. In fact, he didn't much respond. If I hadn't known better, I would have said he seemed afraid. I didn't ask then what he had been seeing in the caverns hidden beneath the crystalline water, but I wish I had.

We spent two days and nights splitting our time between skulking about the camp and foraging for food. Hard to say which was more dangerous. Both the camp and the orchards were patrolled by armed men, most of whom were angels. Sometimes they even had Rotweilers, but they were just regular Rottweilers. Malachi said the dogs couldn't smell him on account of his origins, and he made me douse myself in all manner of swamp sludge so that I was indistinguishable from the miles and miles of bilge and methane that encroached from the south. While I'm complaining, those two days we ate more tomatoes and oranges than a body should. I haven't touched either of the damned fruits since, unless it was orange juice or tomato sauce, and even those still give me pause.



So after two days of the balloon not appearing, Malachi crafted a plan. You'd think that he would have come up with a heavenly-inspired strategy, given that he is some kind of spiritual warrior and all. Hardly. His plan was for me to create a commotion while he maneuvered the goddess out of the trailer. Contrary to the demonstrations of his powers of observation, Malachi wasn't what you'd call a detail-person, and he seemed irritated that I'd want to know something specific like what sort of ruckus to cause while he was carousing with the goddess. That's when he told me one of those secrets of the Universe, which, when you think about it, isn't much of a secret. Angels despise humankind because it was written that they must serve us as conduit to the higher realms. That's why they turned on God -- to liberate themselves from their slavery to us. He told me I would be safe. The angels would feel compelled to help me.

"Ah-ha," I said, happy to finally have the upperhand in an argument with him, "but God is gone and Fate and Destiny are out of power and all the rules no longer apply, remember? You said so yourself."

He nodded and frowned, as if he were sad for me that I had lost a version of existence without even knowing it. He even touched my cheek with the scarred backside of his hand. And he said that while this was true for almost anyone else, the balloon made me different. The balloon was part of the twins' power. In fact some day, when I truly grew into my abilities, when I stopped seeing the fate and destiny of others not as pictures on a foil balloon but as lines written in a dusty book—lines that I myself could one day shape—then I might even be able to control the angels themselves. And a lot more, if I so chose.

I didn't say much after that because I knew he was speaking true.



When darkness seeped in a black rain upon the camp, and the fires were lit, and the women went off to sleep in the dilapidated trailers, the men lined up to give seed or blood to the goddess. We took our positions. I counted to one hundred like Malachi instructed me, and then I walked into the firelight. The workers hardly noticed or cared, but two angels fluttered over to me, their shotguns still shouldered, as if I wasn't a threat but a curiosity. They spoke to me, but the words were gibberish - a language I couldn't decipher. Finally, the guard at the trailer door could not contain his compulsion to serve any longer, and he also came for me.

The balloon appeared, but for the first time, it didn't hang on one person's, or even one angel's, shoulder. Instead it floated above us all—just out of reach—and showed silver and even though only a wavering firelight splintered the darkness, I could easily decipher what played across the balloon's surface. Words formed in my head but they also scrawled across the balloon as if a current ran from my mind to its reflective sides. I used those words, let them roll about my mouth in a delicious tangle, and I told the angels what lay in store for them. They listened, the angels did. In that instant, I wasn't sure if their fates and destinies were originating from me or from the balloon. Suddenly the world was much more malleable, controllable, just as it was more structured, more predestined. Two sides of the balloon were no longer enough. Malachi was right, again. I had cowed them with my gift.

Then the goddess came.

Released now from her pen, her shriek pierced the canopied environs. She streaked at her captors, nothing more than a coppery, growling flash. The balloon



disappeared as did the words on it. I dashed for the swamp and hid, more scared of her than of any native creature lurking in the waters.

The fires had died and the sky blossomed with sunrise before I returned to the camp. Everything, including the trailer where she had been held captive, was deserted. Feathered remains of angels and visceral remains of people lay scattered, and I didn't get any closer than I had to. The smell has kept me out of the chicken coops and away from barbecues ever since. I worried on Malachi's fate, for I had never believed that he was in harm's way until seeing the carnage. Risking even the goddess' wrath, I called to him, but he did not respond. No one did.

Somehow I found my way back to the road and then on to town. An elderly couple in a run-down house took me in and let me rest, bathe and eat. I stayed with them overnight, not thinking of anything, not remembering anything, just existing. The next day I was about to catch a bus up north to return to my family's farm when the old couple found a letter for me on their porch. Well, it was two discarded business envelopes with a strangely proper cursive scratched upon it. Malachi.

Some of what he wrote was personal and no one's business but his and mine, but he did tell me about what he was seeing in the water bound caverns during his dives. There used to be crossroads between here and elsewhere, and if you looked proper, you could find paths that led you to other worlds. He likened it to a kind of underground railroad for people like him, and people like me. What he found was that many of the caves were no longer linked. They were just caves. The earth was being disconnected from the community and left to rot, as it were. Sure there were still accessways, but they were nowhere near as common. And there would be fewer and fewer as time went on



unless something was done to find the twins' book and reverse this circumstance. Funny, even authorless, the book was still in control, still charting the slow decline of the Creation surrounding it and everything else, as my condemning of the angels showed. Malachi begged me to keep searching for the text.

During the bus ride home, I didn't think about the amount of trouble I'd be in with Papa and Momma. There would be plenty of time to reflect on such things and really, what could they do? No, I thought about the twins' book that even authorless was still plotting our lives, and I thought about the migrants and how Malachi told me how the ones the goddess didn't consume had simply scattered to other camps in the area instead of returning to their homelands. The farmers had no way of paying for their transport back to Mexico unless they wished to deal with the Border Patrol and Immigration, and no displaced souls wished that. Their families in their home countries still needed money, so the farmers simply searched out more work picking fruit. Nothing had changed for them. I thought about how very shitty the world could be and how we deserved to be disconnected, written off, ended.

Then I thought of the image that the balloon showed the day before Malachi came for me.

It was of me and my baby. I recalled that image on the red face of the balloon to get me through the days until he was born. Malachi had such hope for what our son and I would do.

