

3900 words

Dairy Barn Angel

Everyone was so into Angel. He drove this car with purple undercarriage lights and fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror. His girl Francine was with him sometimes, her arm hanging out the car window like she owned his ass. But there were lots of other girls. That one from the neighborhood with the low-cut number and the chick with braces he said cut him a few times but was totally worth it.

If Angel got the shoes with the badass stripe, I got the shoes with the badass stripe. If he got some huge belt buckle that said his name all surrounded in sparkling jewels, I got one too but with my name instead.

When he walked down the street there was always a centipede of little kids trailing him just so they could say they went to the store with Angel. I even had a picture of the dude in my wallet; this fake baseball card thing the moms from the neighborhood put together after he pitched a perfect game against Southey in the sixth grade.

Angel and I worked at Dairy Barn, which was like Dairy Queen but bigger. Fifty-five flavors and a few extras Angel made up himself. "Watch me mix raspberry and Oreo cookie," he'd tell a gang of kids hanging on his every word. He worked behind the counter like some kind of ice-cream scientist. "When you mix them real good, it looks like...BRAINS!" He'd yell and

the kids would clap like he was a magician who'd just sawed his assistant in half and pulled away the sheet. He always made sure to flick a little bit on a few standing close. It made me think of that sign I saw at Sea World that time Grandpa took me when I was a kid: *Splash Zone!*

On Fridays after work me and Angel would go for drinks at Gunners. We were only eighteen but since Angel was dogging half the girls in the place no one ever asked us for I.D. After that we'd drive his car around the neighborhood like it was a glowing dance party and whenever we pulled over there would be at least three girls leaning their Boom Booms in through the window. From what Angel told me, Francine thought he worked late on Fridays and I could never figure out how he kept that story going, but Angel was magic like that. At the end of the night he would drop me a few blocks from Francine's apartment and I'd walk the three miles home so the two of them could get down to whatever it was they got down to.

After he missed that first shift at Dairy Barn I didn't think much about it because there was Dairy Barn time and there was Angel time. *I* tried not showing up once and the owner Vince suspended me for a week and said that my ass would be grass if I ever pulled some shit like that again. Whenever Angel missed, Vince would stand by the window watching for him like a lost puppy and not say anything when he finally rolled in.

When the cops found Angel's car parked at the airport, that's when everyone started to worry. I didn't figure much about it because Angel was always telling me about how he was going to sneak away to Puerto Rico one day to live with his his dad.

"You should see the chickas down there, Robbie," he'd say. "Like every one of them got a TV show and being sexy is numero uno." I think I'm the only person he ever told that he missed his dad, though now that I think about it, maybe he told Francine too.

She came into Dairy Barn the day after they found the car. There was a line out the door because Vince had stayed up all night coming up with this custom flavor called Angel Swirl. People were buying it up like crazy so I didn't see her come in. When I finally looked up, she was beside the Coke machine rolling her hair between her fingers and chewing on a piece of gum like it was her last meal on Earth. She gave me this "can-I-see-you-outside" look, so I got someone to cover for me at the register.

We walked out back next to the dumpsters and as I watched her spit out her gum and light up a smoke, I got real excited because this was Angel's girl and she'd never said shit to me before.

"Hi, Robbie," she said. Her wrist was cocked back and holding a cigarette like she was waiting for a tray of dishes. "You Angel's friend right?"

"Sure." I rubbed ice cream from my hands hardly believing she remembered my name. I'd met her once. That time at work when I dropped a bucket on my foot and Angel said, "Damn, Dog! I think you might loose the nail. You won't be walking home tonight." He told Vince we were leaving early and helped me outside and told me to get in the back seat because we had to stop and pick up Francine first.

"Franny, this is Roberto," he'd said to her when she got in. She turned to him and said, "He ain't with us all night, is he?" and Angel leaned over and whispered something to her I couldn't hear. She laughed and looked into the backseat like she just learned something about me and that one thing was as much as she ever needed to know. As Angel slammed the car into gear Francine rolled down her window and rested that arm of hers on the edge. When we got to my place she didn't move to let me out. It was Angel who got out and helped me up the sidewalk to my front door.

So, we were out behind the ice cream shop and Francine said, "The police might be around asking when you seen Angel last."

"Okay," I said.

"You know when that was?" she asked.

I didn't want to tell her the truth because she was acting all hot and giving me this look like no girl had ever given me before. The truth would have laid her out—that Angel dropped me off on his way to her house on Friday just after making me sit at the side of the road while he got a Rub Out in the car from some girl he picked up at Gunners.

But Francine had this look and it was a hot look, but also kind of nervous, because she was hauling on her cigarette like she couldn't wait to get on to the next one so I just said, "Friday."

"Friday. Friday," she repeated under her breath.

"Friday," I said again because it was all I could think to say. I was totally bad around girls and Angel usually did the talking.

"Okay, thanks Robbie." She dropped her smoke and pushed past me, her perfume dangling behind her as she walked toward the street.

It took a few days for the cops to work their way around to me. When they knocked on the door Grandpa answered and pointed his cane at one of them and said they weren't taking his boy alive. "Easy, Old Man," I said, and helped him back into his usual spot on the couch. "He gets like this," I said to the cops, and they asked if we could talk somewhere private.

"Is it just you and him?" they asked on the way to the kitchen. I told them that it had been me and Grandpa since as far back as I could remember. They wanted to know when I'd seen Angel last so I told the whole story about Gunners and the hand-job at the side of the road, and

how he dropped me off in the usual spot and how as far as I knew he'd been on his way to Francine's. They asked me how I got home that night and I told them that I walked like I do every Friday night.

"What is that, three miles?" one of them said, and then Grandpa started making all this racket in the other room so I had to go see what was up.

"Anyone with you on the walk home?" they said as I turned to leave.

"Just me," I said and then Grandpa really started wailing about some thing or another so the cops thanked me and said they would let themselves out.

"I think he went to Puerto Rico to live with his dad," I said as they were leaving.

"We're looking into that," they said.

After a week there were so many flyers around the neighborhood with pictures of Angel you'd think there was nothing else going on in the world. Vince set up a special fund from the sale of Angel Swirl, told everyone he was already up to three grand, and offered a reward for information on Angel's whereabouts. Down at Kroger's they put little boxes with Angel's face on them near the register so everyone could toss in whatever change they had after buying groceries. Vince told me the same group of mothers that got together on Angel's baseball card back in sixth grade were sewing him a quilt. A few kids came into the store and asked if I could do that thing where I mix the ice cream and come up with some story like Angel did. I gave it my best but when no one clapped I told them the only flavors we got were what's on the board and they walked out.

That night I stayed around a little longer helping Vince mop up. I could tell we were both hoping Angel might walk through the door and say some shit like he always said—*Had you*

pussies worried didn't I?—and we'd all laugh and Vince would tell him about the three grand and then me and Angel would head to Gunners. Vince kicked me out when Angel didn't show and told me not to be late to work in the morning, so I got my stuff together and walked home.

"What are *you* doing home on a Friday night?" Grandpa asked me when I got in.

"How's that your business?" I said and he reached over and whacked me with the end of his cane. After I made dinner we were sitting on the couch with the TV trays in front of us when the doorbell rang. "Don't just sit there, Boy," Grandpa said. "Answer it!"

Francine was in heels and wearing this short skirt and had a smoke dangling between her fingers. "You know where I live?" I said.

"Can I come in? It's kinda cold out here."

I let her into the house and when Grandpa saw her he stood up from the couch like he was suddenly twenty-years-old. "Amadeo Podereo," he said holding out his hand. "You know my grandson?"

"Roberto and I go back," she said shaking his hand.

"Would you like something to drink?" I said to Francine.

Grandpa interrupted, "That would be nice, Boy. Bring us something to drink." He patted a spot on the couch and told Francine to sit down. I went into the kitchen and poured two glasses of water with ice. When I came back Francine was next to Grandpa smoking another cigarette. I put the water on the coffee table and said, "He doesn't like cigarette smoke."

"Relax, Boy!" Grandpa said to me. "You'd think the kid never had a guest before," he said looking at Francine and put his hand on her knee. She smiled and didn't move it.

It took an hour for Grandpa to fall asleep. The three of us sat around watching his favorite show, his hand on Francine's leg the whole time like it was glued there. I went into the kitchen to

get some more water and when I turned around Francine was right there all up in my shit, so close I could smell her perfume, the same stuff she'd been wearing that day behind Dairy Barn.

"Your Grandpa is nice," she said running her fingernails lightly down my arm. "I looked after mine for years. He died last year."

"More water?" I said. She took the glass out of my hand and placed it on the kitchen counter.

"Where's your room?" she asked.

"Upstairs," I said, pointing toward the stairs. "Second room on the left." She took my hand and led me there. I sat on the bed and watched as she cased my room. She looked at my Star Wars posters on the wall, the Transformer comforter on my bed.

"A little young for you, isn't it?" she said as she sat down next to me. She looked at my feet. "You have the same shoes Angel had," she said and moved in a little closer. "And the same belt buckle, too. You guys get some kind of special deal or something?" She laughed and tugged at my belt and the thing came undone faster than I'd ever managed it. She'd pushed me onto my back and before I knew it she had my jeans rolled down and I was in her mouth. *So this is what it's like*, I thought. Angel always said blow jobs were the best and that when I got my first I'd think so too.

It must have been like fifteen seconds when Francine looked up at me and said, "So quick?" I was all embarrassed and jumped off the bed and did up my pants.

"Sorry."

Francine laughed. She got up, kicked her heels into the middle of my room, pulled off her skirt and climbed under the covers. "Mind if I stay here tonight?"

"Okay," I said walking toward the door.

"No, with you, stupid." She pulled the comforter back and motioned for me to crawl in next to her. "Take off the shoes and belt," she said, "and turn off the light."

I took off my shoes and threw my belt on the floor. After I turned off the light I pulled off my jeans and crawled into bed next to her. She ran her hand down my stomach and into my underwear. "Is this nice?" she said and I said it was. "If I tell you what to do, will you do it?" she said, and I said I would. She grabbed my shoulders and gently pushed me under the blanket. In the morning I came downstairs and Francine already had Grandpa fed and dressed. He looked ten years younger and they were sitting quietly at the kitchen table reading the paper like they'd been doing it every morning for a hundred years. I had on my Dairy Barn uniform so she asked me if I was on my way to work. "Yeah," I said.

"I'm going to stay and get cleaned up," she said.

"Okay," I said. "Can you give him his pills? They're in the cabinet above the fridge."

"I'll show you where they are," Grandpa said to Francine. She smiled, got up and gave me a kiss on the cheek before disappearing back upstairs. Grandpa looked up over his paper and said, "Special girl you have there."

It felt strange walking to work knowing I'd had Angel's girl. When Francine came in to Dairy Barn that afternoon and brought me lunch, Vince gave me this look like, *What the fuck is going on?* so I had to play it cool. She stayed over again that night and this time we did stuff I'd only seen in magazines.

"Am I as good as Angel?" I said when she was almost asleep.

"Yeah baby, sure, you're as good as Angel. Bedtime now," she said.

The cops came into Dairy Barn the next day. I was stirring Vince's secret ingredient into a batch of Angel Swirl when they asked me if they could have a word with me in the back.

"Francine insists she was with you the night Angel disappeared," said one of the cops reading from his notebook. "She says she walked home with you that evening."

My mind was doing this crazy-ass dance. Just before the cops walked in I'd been thinking how I could still smell Francine on my skin, that perfume of hers, so sweet that I just blurted it out. "She was." I said. "With me, I mean."

"And the reason you didn't tell us earlier?" The cop said.

"We didn't want Angel to find out," I said, hoping I didn't sound as unconvincing as I thought I did.

"She knew about the other women, Roberto," the cop said.

"The other women?" I said.

He read from his notebook. *While Angel was with the girl I waited outside the car for them to finish.* "Your words," he said holding up the notebook so I could see.

"She was with me," I said. "She's my girl."

One cop stifled a laugh while the other one wrote stuff down in his notebook. "Stay close to home," one of them said. "We'll need to talk to you again."

When I asked Francine about it later she was in the middle of getting Grandpa ready for bed. "Can you hand me his comb," she said. Grandpa was sitting in his room all dressed in some fancy PJ's that I forgot he even owned. I couldn't remember the last time he'd spent the night in his own bed and not on the couch like he usually did.

"How did you get him upstairs?" I asked.

"Gently," she said. "I've put an old man to bed so many times I've lost count." She ran the comb through Grandpa's hair in long wet strokes and he sat there with this glazed look in his eyes. She pulled away the covers of his bed and helped him underneath. She placed his cane next

to the nightstand and told him it was there in case he needed it during the night. Then she kissed him on the forehead and Grandpa was asleep in like seconds with the happiest look on his face I'd ever seen.

"You're really good with him," I said. She pulled me into the hallway and closed the door.

"Mom told me I should have been a nurse," she said. "Angel never understood how much care I got in me." She tugged at my belt buckle and licked me under the chin. "I remember that time I first met you in Angel's car," she said.

"Really?"

"How do you think I knew where you lived?" She dragged me into the middle of my room, slid off my shirt and started kissing my chest. "All the other girls love this chest as much as me?"

"The other girls?" I said. She slid my pants down so they were around my knees, reached her hand down there, and started going to town.

"I love you, Francine," I said.

"I know," she said.

Six months later there was still no sign of Angel. The news stations stopped talking about his disappearance. The flyers were gone. At Kroger's the boxes with his picture on the front were taken down and the money was given to who knows where. Vince bought the quilt the neighborhood moms knitted and hung it on the wall at Dairy Barn next to a blown up picture of that baseball card with Angel on the front. The cops had me and Francine down to the station a

few more times, they even pulled Grandpa aside once when they came by the house asking more questions.

"She was with him when they came home that night," he told them. "It's the God's honest truth. I remember it like it was yesterday."

Francine took better care of Grandpa than I ever did. And he loved it, you could tell because I ain't never seen him lie like that to anyone before.

Angel told me once that when you fall in love with someone the rest of the world falls away.

"Do you love, Francine?" I remember asking him.

"You can't love a girl like, Francine," he told me. "Because it's never enough."

The Angel Swirl sales dropped off and when I asked Vince what he planned to do with all the money he said, "You think those doors stay open by themselves?" Francine was pretty much living with me and Grandpa full time by then and I was working doubles because she said she needed nice things for when the baby came. When I mentioned to her about how I thought there might be better things out there than Dairy Barn, she said our kid needed his daddy to have a job not dreams. "Dreams don't put a ring on this finger," she said to me. So I asked Vince for more hours and he said, "I hear paternity tests go for fifteen bucks these days." But he still gave me the hours.

When Francine and I were alone in my bed, her head all nestled into my shoulder, I would place my hand on her stomach and feel the baby kick. "Did you feel that?" she'd say and I would say yes and she'd pull me on top of her and I'd do everything she'd taught me to do exactly the way she'd taught me to do it.

When the baby finally came there was still no Angel and everything had pretty much quieted down with the cops like Francine said it would. We had a christening for the baby and Francine invited a bunch of friends. They passed the baby around like he was some kind of toy and said, "He's an angel! He's an absolute angel." A few of them laughed when Francine shot them a look.

There were a few reports that Angel had been spotted in Puerto Rico. His dad had been calling Vince at Dairy Barn trying to collect the reward money.

"What if he comes back?" I asked Francine when it was just her and me and the sleeping baby. "He ain't coming back," she said, and put her finger to my lips.

The wedding was on the top of this super-green hill outside the city. Grandpa was there in his wheelchair, Francine had dressed him up in this expensive white suit she had me buy. I asked Vince to come but he said something about Dairy Barn not running itself, so other than Grandpa I didn't have anyone there. Francine looked seriously sexy in the dress I'd bought her. The priest called us to the makeshift altar and pretty soon he was saying, "Do you take this woman," and I was saying, "Yes, I do," and Francine's girlfriends clapped. He said, "You may kiss the bride," so I did, and when Francine tried to pull away I held her there a little longer. Because I was more Angel in that moment than I'd ever been. And I wanted it to last.