

SAMAEL

Word Count: 4343

Yesterday, I noticed a bookstore on Telegraph, looking weird and out of place next to the coffee shops and restaurants. A sign said it was run by the Daughters of Saint Paul.

I wandered in and tried my best to be unobtrusive, ignoring the glass display cases and heading straight for the bookshelves that lined the far wall. But in five minutes the woman behind the counter said, "I see you're interested in angels."

I ended up walking out a slim paperback called *Essential Guide to Angels*.

I didn't have time to look through it in the store, which was probably the saleswoman's intention -- she made me nervous and I just wanted to get out of there with the least possible embarrassment. As it turned out, the book was really boring.

Page three:

St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1221 – 1274) believed that the path of maturity in the spiritual life is a journey with a series of encounters with the angels, which leads to union with the Trinitarian God.

I was looking up 'Trinitarian' when Samael caught me.

"What did you expect? I let you see me and now you're *disappointed*?"

I didn't know I was *that* obvious.

"I don't know what I expected," I said, annoyed. "A chubby baby with wings? Flitting against a blue sky?"

Or, I thought, something brilliant, fiery. The angel Gabriel coming to Mary. But that angel looked like a girl (only with wings!)

“I’m sorry. I’m conventionally handsome. So what?” He sat down and picked up an apple from a bowl on the kitchen table. “I’m hungry. Feed me.”

“You took an apple,” I said.

“Not enough,” he said. “A gammon joint. With apple and whiskey sauce.”

“Potatoes over there. In the basket by the corner.”

“Got any rapeseed oil? To fry with?”

“Sorry. What are you good for anyway? All you do is eat. It would be great if you acquired some skills. I could use someone who could help me pay the rent.”

He shrugged and gave me a rueful smile.

“Why are you really here? I’m a student. I barely have enough for me. And, I’m sorry, I’m down to my last four eggs. You can’t have any of those.”

Again he didn’t answer, only turned his face away, as if he was hurt.

As if? I knew he was hurt, he’d been living with me for two weeks now. I’d been watching him from every angle, and at different times of the day. He ate a lot, but so far everything was fine. I knew I could go weeks, months like this.

My first question was How. How does someone become an angel?

I’d asked him at least a dozen times before. He always gave the same answer, some Latin shit: “*Dulcia domestica.*”

I asked him if he’d been with me since birth. He smiled and said, “What do you think?”

I tried again: “Have I been baptized?”

He rolled his eyes.

“Tell me,” I insisted.

“Of course you’ve been baptized. Filipinos always baptize their babies.”

Right then I wanted to say, “You don’t know anything about Filipinos.” But I didn’t.

He winked at me and said, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.”

Fishers of men! Please. My parents kept statues of the Blessed Virgin in each room of the house, and even in the garden. But I was never a religious person. I associated this behavior with the Philippines and it was just one more way I was different from them.

I walked out of the room. The next time I saw him, he was eating tuna straight out of a can I didn’t even know I had. “All right,” he said, without looking up. “Since you have the relentlessness of a spider monkey, I will tell you something about myself: I was born in the Garden of Eden.”

Do you know what it feels like to catch an angel going through your things? Well let me tell you, your heart races. He said he was looking for something, I forget what.

I look at him. Clearly male. Great – ass. That flat stomach. And not at all squeamish about walking around naked.

The truth is, if I had that body, I’d probably be walking around naked, too.

One day, I came home with irises. Samael’s voice roused me from a daydream. “Are those for me?” he asked. “Newp,” I said. “These are for *me*.”

Samael

I didn't even know why I decided to buy flowers. \$7. Think what I could have done with \$7? But, the sun was shining. I was off my shift at the Peet's on Vine. My parents had put off driving up to see me. And I felt something like happiness.

I took a deep breath. I grabbed an empty glass from the kitchen, filled it halfway with water, and popped the flowers in. I decided that this was as good a time as any to have the talk. I'd finished reading the pamphlet and knew there were nine classes of angel. "Which one are you?" I asked.

Samael turned to face me. For a minute I wondered if he'd take off: flap his invisible angel wings and take off like a spaceship. He didn't say anything.

I refused to be deterred. "Cherubim?"

He snorted.

"Seraphim?"

"Why do you need to know?"

"I just do. Archangel?"

"Stop it," he said.

"Where's your flaming sword? Does the name Gabriel ring a bell?"

He sighed. "Angels are messengers. Why would we need flaming swords?"

"I need you to convince me you're not just a homeless man taking advantage of my kindness."

Samael's eyes went wide. "I would never take advantage of you."

The conversation gave me a headache.

Samael

I decided I'd try to help find Samael – that's his name, Sa-MAH-el – a mate. A fellow angel. Preferably someone who shares his porn addiction and his fondness for beer.

Angels, according to my research, are supposed to be sexually ambivalent. Then why is Samael so emphatically male? Can angels switch genders, from male to female, or somewhere in between, according to the current project? How did I get to be the current project, anyway?

As if I didn't have enough on my mind already. Like studying. And acing all my classes. And stopping from my parents from sending copies of my Berkeley acceptance letter to all the relatives, even the ones in the Philippines we haven't heard from in years.

He gets cranky when I tell him it's my turn to host study group. For a moment, I wonder if things would get thrown, like when Grumpy Michael lived here. To tell you the truth, I have no idea how to deal with an angel's moods. After years spent watching *True Blood* and *Vampire Diaries*, I felt very well equipped to deal with two things: curses and fangs. I even know what happens during an exorcism. But angel hissy fits? Not so much.

He says he can contribute snacks.

“What kind of snacks?”

“Roast pine nuts, peeled and chopped nuts . . .

I wave my hand: “STOP! I'll get Nachos.”

“Nachos?” His mouth falls open. “Is that a thing?”

I get home from the store. Samael helps me unbag my groceries. He pulls out the bottles one by one and examines them carefully before setting them on the counter: “Bourbon, vodka, gin, rum, aquavit . . . is this all just for study group?”

“Umm. Yeah.”

“No beer.”

I cross my arms. “Beer is for wimps.”

He stares. Stares, stares, stares. Ever had an angel stare at you? Yes, exactly.

The way I acquired Samael was: he fell.

That’s right: he fell from a great height, right into the dumpster below my window. It just so happened I was staring out the window, starting in on my first coffee of the day. I saw a blur. Then heard a terrifying THUMP. I screamed, “Jesus,” spilled coffee all over myself, and ran to the window.

“I’m fine,” Samael said, getting up. He looked curiously around him. “Where am I?”

I should have screamed.

He says it’s fine if I kick him out, he’ll always respect my choices. He’ll be like one of those angels who drive vans and do Hollywood tours (does he even know how to drive, I wonder?). Or he’ll find a shelter. Hopefully he’ll never become the target of shakedowns. I can think of one other occupation for him, but I don’t say anything.

My phone rings at 5:45. It’s Maxine. Meanwhile, Samael has disappeared. The group will arrive in fifteen minutes and I have no idea where Samael is. I can’t focus. I have to find him.

And then he walks in the door, bearing a box and a huge grin. “What did you get?” I ask.

“Krispy Kreme doughnuts.”

“How much were they?”

“Nothing. I stole them.”

To his credit, he has clothes on (I’m scared to ask where he got them): jeans, a light, tan jacket over a white T-shirt, Cowboy boots.

I’ve been told there was a time when public nudity was not considered a crime in Berkeley. There are stories of a man who people knew only as the Cowboy, who’d march up and down Telegraph, dressed in just cowboy boots. But those times are long gone. Now, the only time public nudity is allowed is for a performance or if you’re breastfeeding.

I open the box and peer in. “There’s one missing.”

“Oh.” He has the decency to blush. “That. Umm . . . “

“It’s okay,” I say. “Thanks for get – I mean st – never mind. Sit down somewhere and try to look busy, all right?”

“I want you to know,” Samael says, looking very earnestly into my eyes, “that I will pay you back every dollar that you spent feeding me, and I know I should chip in for the rent.

There’s a Japanese restaurant down the street looking for help . . . “

“You’re talking about Beni-Hana?”

He looks at me brightly and nods.

Briefly, I close my eyes, trying to picture him there.

He would be absolute crap as a waiter. He’d engage the customers in conversation and forget to bring their orders to the kitchen. I wave him off. “It’s my pleasure, truly,” I say, and it

doesn't even feel like a whole lie. "It's not every girl in Berkeley who gets to be roommates with an angel."

The first of the group to arrive are Kyle and Edgar. It figures. They both like competing for my attention, even though neither of them truly likes me. It's exhausting. Given the fact that they are both Asian, I wonder if their parents told them they had to find a "nice" girl, someone who could cook, and sew. I can't do either of those things, but I'm Filipina so they must assume that I do.

Kyle is from Hong Kong, Edgar from Taiwan. They're technically sophomores but they waited out a year because of covid. Me? I was born right here in the Bay Area, in a house on Tipperary Street in South San Francisco. I was the first person in my large extended family to get accepted to a UC. They even framed my acceptance letter. I spent most of last year taking classes on-line. My parents were thrilled to have another year with me.

Kyle and Edward stop dead when they see a huge, blonde man in my living room. Samael takes up so much space, just sitting there cross-legged in front of the TV (What is he watching? Oh, CNN. I sigh with relief.) that neither Kyle nor Edgar manage to squeak out as much as a "Hi." Samael waves nonchalantly at them and then goes back to watching the news). I'll have to tell him to switch it off. Maybe he can read a book. I find myself wondering what he likes to read.

Then Maxine arrives. She stares at Samael with great, big, poodle eyes. Then Jean and Russell, holding hands (*When* did they start dating?) My living room feels stifling, the way a bus feels when it's too full.

Samael

“Rina can’t make it,” Jean says. “Asthma attack.”

“Oh,” I say. Then before I can say anything more, Samael pipes up, “That’s too bad.”

Every head in the room swivels around. “I’m Samael,” he says. “I’m her – “

“Cousin,” I say, quickly. “Second cousin. From Seattle. Just drove down.”

“Pleased to meet you, Samuel,” Maxine says, still with the big, poodle eyes.

“Sa-MAH-el, not Sa-MOO-el,” Samael says, grinning. Why do angels have to have perfect teeth? And dimples. It isn’t fair. And by the way, where does he keep his wings? Do they fold into his back, or -- ?

He jumps up – I swear, the floor shakes. He heads to the kitchen. When he comes back out, he’s balancing at least three plates in his huge hands, a doughnut on each plate.

“Refreshments!” he says, with his most winning smile.

“Uh, thanks?” Maxine says. “Care to join us?”

“No, thank you,” Samael says. “I have stuff to do.” Then he twirls out the door.

As soon as he’s gone, Maxine elbows me in the ribs. “That’s not your cousin. How’d you meet him? OK Cupid?”

“What?” I say. “I don’t go on OK Cupid!”

Jean snickers. “Yeah, right,” she says. “Where’s the good stuff?”

Samael doesn’t come back until late, really late. I’m stretched across my bed, too wasted to take off my clothes. Still, I know exactly when he gets back, because I feel him standing at the door to my room, just looking.

“Was it good?” he asks.

“Wha -- ? Shtu-dee group?” I shake my head, back and forth. Which is harder to do than I thought, especially lying down. “We shtu-dee’d. Yeah. Good.” Burp.

He stares at me more intensely than usual. “Are you unhappy, Lauren?” he asks.

Now he has my attention. I get up on one elbow and stare at him. “Nooooo. No you don’t get to ask that. You – you’re not . . . my parent. Fuck.” I love the way that word sounds. I say, “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

“I’m your friend.”

“You? How can you be my friend? You’re – whatever you are.”

“I can be a friend. If you want. If you need one.”

“No.”

I fall back on the bed and put an arm over my eyes. “Where were you?”

“Around. I’m always around. Lauren, I can tell you’re sad.”

“Sa-MAH-el, are you really an angel?”

“Of course I am.”

“Show me your wings.”

“What?”

“I want to see you fly. I won’t be sad if I can see that. Actually, can I fly, too? Can you teach me?”

He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

“Let’s go somewhere. I want to see you fly.”

“I can’t do that. But. Here.” He comes forward and puts something small but unbelievably heavy in my hand. I crack my eyes open.

“What is this?”

“It’s a lightning bolt. Well, not a real one. But this one’s from Dharamsala.”

“What am I going to do with this?”

“It’ll give you power. Or make you feel powerful, anyway. Give it a squeeze. Go on. Try it.”

I look at the thing in my hand. “Is this really from Dharamsala?”

Samael nods.

The thing is shaped like a barbell. It has an iridescent green patina.

“When were you there?”

He smiles. “A long, long time ago.”

“Did you have to save someone?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“How come you never say it?” I ask. “I keep expecting to hear you say ‘Go in peace’ or something. Isn’t that what every angel learns to say, first thing?”

Samaehl shakes his head. “You know nothing about angels, Lauren. For one thing, you didn’t think angels eat meat. Or that we know anything about sex.”

“What?” My face flames. He gives me a smirk.

“It’s all right. I’m celibate. Not all of us are, though.” He looks away from me. “The devil takes many forms. This time, it was a witch.” He begins to recite, in a strange, sing-song voice:

“How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!”

“Is that from the Bible?”

“Yes,” he says.

Samael

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“It’s all right. I’m celibate. Not all of us are, though.”

Great, just great. I want to scream. Samael is a beautiful . . . angel. He has just the right amount of down on his forearms, his shoulder bones have an elegant simplicity, and his hips are slender as a swimmer’s. He’s tall, but not preposterously so. I should kick him out.

Dead Week comes. I host study group again. Samael sits just outside our circle, listening intently, a look of curiosity in his eyes. But he doesn’t make a sound, and pretty soon everyone ignores him, too busy discussing what we think is going to be in the finals.

After everyone leaves, I go to my room, lie on my bed, and stare at the ceiling. *What am I going to do?*

Samael and I hardly speak, after. I’m too busy studying. I worry most about my Anthropology class under Professor Nesmith. I’m flailing under mountains of arcana: Market Systems in Rural China. I knew the course was over my head, but I took it anyway. And then, when I knew I was headed straight for a B, I should have dropped. But I didn’t. I gave an oral report, wrote a lot of stuff on the blackboard, and when I turned around to face the class, Professor Nesmith was smiling. That’s why I didn’t drop. Stupid.

Samael flits about, trying his best to be unobtrusive.

One day, I come home from the Library and walk into . . . a grotto. There are tiny blue lights everywhere: on the kitchen counter, along the bookcase, even on top of the refrigerator. It reminds me of Capri, of the one time my father had taken us on vacation. I was eleven. I wanted to see the Blue Grotto but my father said no, tours to there were expensive. So instead I looked it up on-line. I imagined myself entering the cave.

“Merry Christmas!” I hear Samael say. He comes and stands right in front of me. “Do you like it?” he asks, biting his lip.

“I don’t like it,” I say, and watch him flinch. “I love it.”

He opens his arms. Christ, I think.

Whereas before Samael moved in, I had dreams -- bright, technicolor dreams in which the occasional boy featured, and from which I would wake feeling a little angry at myself -- after Samael, my life felt very full and I was not chasing anybody, not even in my subconscious.

I can’t tell you exactly how it happened, but sometime during those weeks after I met Samael, I fell in love. No, not with Samael. I’m not that stupid. I fell in love with the guy who always sat on the purple beanie bag right next to the reference desk. I did the stare thing and after a bit, he looked up. That’s the thing with the stare, it works every time. It’s the one thing I learned to do to perfection.

I had never fallen in love before. Love, I’d thought, was not for the likes of someone like me. I was going to be something great but practical. Love, if it happened at all, would be a side thing. But having Samael around prepared me. That morning, I was ready. Or maybe I was just ready for change.

Samael was quiet when I got home. I realized that I didn't know how he spent his time. I should've asked, but I really wasn't interested. Usually, when I got home, he was sitting down. Sometimes on the bar stool in the kitchen. Other times, on the couch. I caught him watching porn once. His face had a sad look. After that, I only ever saw him watching CNN. "Why?" I asked him once. He paused, as if thinking. Then he said, "It's nice. It's comforting." On the other hand, he could just have been preparing for his next assignment.

That evening, the day I saw the boy who was going to be my boyfriend for the next six years, Samael was quiet. I was quiet, too. I wanted to fantasize about me and the boy in the purple bean bag chair. His hair had the perfect degree of flop, and his arms looked strong.

Finally, Samael said: "I should be leaving soon, Lauren."

My eyebrows rose but I didn't say anything.

Samael continued, "I have another assignment."

"Oh?" I said. "Where?"

"Berlin," Samael said, and added, facetiously, "which is in Germany."

And for the first time, I was just a little sad. "Who is she?" I asked.

"Not a she," Samael said. "He needs help."

"So you only go where people need help?"

"Yes."

"But I didn't need any help."

"You did."

"No, I didn't."

Samael said, "I will not argue with you, Lauren." Then he turned to face me. His eyes, which I used to think were an intense blue, were actually not. They were a dark, dark, dark green.

"Do you want to fall in love, Lauren?" he asked.

"No." Then, after a moment, "Why'd you ask?"

"You do want to fall in love."

"What makes you say that?"

"I can tell."

I asked him how soon he would be leaving, and he said, "Tomorrow."

That shook me. Tomorrow? I went to the fridge, grabbed a beer. I hadn't had to buy a beer since Samael came, he seemed to like Tsingtao best.

"How are you going to get to Germany?" I asked, after taking a long pull.

"I will get there, that is not your concern."

"You're flying. Flying on your angel wings. Ha. Ha."

"Stop this, Lauren."

I stared at something above his head. *Damn*. I swallowed. "You don't need me to drive you to the airport?"

"No."

I tried to imagine Samael moving around in a city I knew only from photographs. Samael speaking German. "Will I ever see you again?" I asked.

"Probably not."

I was quiet. "Lauren," he said, looking intently at me. "You are going to be okay."

Samael

The next morning, when I went to the kitchen to make coffee, I felt it right away. Samael wasn't on the couch, where he usually was when I awoke. I ran to the window overlooking the dumpster. The lid of the dumpster was closed. The street was just a street.

I didn't bother looking for him, I just knew.

I imagined Samael hurtling through the sky, his powerful wings extended. Would he miss me?

I missed him. What can I say? I didn't realize it right away. I was a bit distracted. First, there was the flirting and then the sleeping with the boy I first saw on the purple bean bag chair. He was my first. Even though we didn't last, I learned things.

One night, while my boyfriend was telling me about his family, and how he really wanted me to meet them on Thanksgiving, I got a flash, an image. *Samael!* I thought. *Are you all right? Are you really in Heidelberg? How come you never showed me your wings?*

I saw his face: it was very blurred, but I knew it was him. He had the softest, kindest eyes.

I remembered one thing in particular: how he pretended he found my jokes funny. I was only joking to fill the silences between us. He would duck his head and cover his mouth with his right hand, as if he was trying not to laugh.

Can angels die? I would try mental telepathy: *I hope you're all right, Samael. Wherever you are.* I would listen carefully for an echo.

Samael

I didn't, all of a sudden, start entering churches. I didn't renew the aspects of my faith I had abandoned so long ago.

My boyfriend told me once that the reason he fell in love with me was: he got the feeling I was always getting ready for something.

“You have so much hope,” my boyfriend said.

“Really?” I said. I thought: he’s just projecting. He doesn’t know me very well. I’ve made sure. I put off introducing him to my family for the longest longest longest time.

My study group was very concerned the next time we met at my place. They were hoping to see Samael.

“He’s back home,” I said. “He was just visiting.”

We opened our beers. I knew they’d stop asking me, eventually.

I still have *The Essential Guide to Angels*. I still look at it from time to time, though I’m still an Unbeliever. If an angel’s task is to save souls, how did Samael save mine? What arrows did he ward off? What lightning bolts did he hurl?

I could have learned a lot more while Samael was living with me, but it wasn’t until last week that I tried googling his name. I realize it’s been over a decade. Nevertheless.

Samael: alternatively Smal, Smil, Samil, or Samiel, an angel in Talmudic or post-Talmudic lore. He is believed to be the father of Cain, as well as the husband of Lilith. He is sometimes identified as a fallen angel. He also fills the role of the Angel of Death.

I see his face clearly, for the first time in years.

Samael

I still can't bring myself to speak about him to anyone.

Are you there, Samael?

There are so many things I still don't know, and probably never will.

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