

**Better Angels**

4, 826 words

The moment he stepped into the coffee shop, Donny wondered if he had made a terrible mistake.

The tiny bell jingled above his head and he was assaulted by haunting waves of familiar and flavorful smells. Instead of the bitterly delicious aroma of warm and alluring coffee pulling at his taste buds—the scent *was* at its obnoxious best today—the smell wafted up through his olfactory and dropped like a bowling ball into the pit of his stomach. It was like being stabbed in the back by an old friend. For a brief moment he wasn't sure if he would cry or vomit all over the freshly swept floor. Maybe both.

*Get off it*, an angry voice sparked in his head, demanding and unsympathetic. It was the voice that had kept him somewhat steady since—well, since *she* had gone away.

*Since she died, you old fool*, the angry voice berated. *She ain't 'gone away' and she ain't coming back, neither. She's stone cold dead and buried. Even if she were to*

*walk in those doors, d'you think she'd stick around with you holding your guts down and getting all mop-eyed because you smelled some coffee? She'd probably turn on her heels and leave your sorry ass alone. Now you just put one foot in front of the other and go get your damn coffee.*

“You’re right,” Donny mumbled, ignoring the strange look from an elderly lady who squeezed past him through the door. She mumbled something under her breath about foolish old farts talking to themselves. Donny smiled politely back. ‘*Kill ‘em with kindness,*’ his wife always said about dealing with the cranks and grumps of the world.

Stepping aside, Donny turned to look out the window. A small crowd of people spilled out from a city bus in front of the coffee shop. The last lady had barely stepped down from the bus before it took off with a wheezy gasp, leaving a dirty plume of exhaust lingering in the air as it weaved angrily back into traffic. Across the road, a tall, twiggy man in a grey tweed jacket on the curb absently mined for fool’s gold in one overstretched nostril.

As Donny watched, the man stepped off the curb just as a car started turning the corner. The driver was forced to swerve and flipped off the Grey Man (indeed he was a grey man; the man’s pallid face and time-turned hair were nearly the same shade as his worn tweed coat) before roaring away with an indignant honk.

“The Grey Man cometh,” Donny said to himself. A slight feeling of unease tickled the back of his subconscious. He pushed it aside and pushed forward.

Donny joined the miserably uncaffeinated throng alongside the shielded snack bar, his stomach settled enough to move deeper inside. He quickly forgot about the Grey Man. After sixty years in the same city, one crazy was the same as another.

Standing behind a young mother and her daughter, Donny noticed the hard grip the woman had on the girl's wrist. Glancing at the mother's tight, impatient expression, he thought she was probably more afraid of losing her spot in line than losing her kid. The girl looked up at him and stuck out her tongue. He answered back in kind, thumbing his nose for good measure. She giggled and mom cast a dour look down, shaking her head before turning her glare on Donny. *Mind your business, you old coot*, the look clearly said.

The bell jingled. Donny turned to look at the Grey Man as he stepped inside the cafe. From this close, the man's ashen skin looked even more sickly and sallow. Double bags of dark sleeplessness hung below his eyes, giving him a comical look that reminded Donny of a bloodhound.

The Grey Man paused just inside the door, blocking the path of a man in a business suit who was dropped his cell phone as he looked up just in time to avoid a collision. Business Suit fixed the Grey Man with a loathing stare, like his stocks had just plummeted because he had lost a few precious seconds in his quest for coffee. The look reminded Donny of a quote his wife had once told him.

*'We are not enemies but friends,'* Honest Abe Lincoln had said during his inaugural speech after becoming President back in 1861. *'We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break the bonds of affection. The mystic cord of memory will swell when again touched, as surely it will be, by the better angels of our nature.'*

Gwen had loved that quote, even after Donny looked it up one day and discovered it was actually a bastardized version of the real thing. Gwen had dismissed his discovery.

“It’s the feeling of the words I like, not the words themselves,” she had explained. He supposed she was right. Even misquoted, the words held a distinct air of truth. It also made it all the more ironic when Abe’s mystic cord was cut and his better angels were splattered all over a theatre box by John Wilkes Boothe.

Something about the Grey Man made Donny uneasy, like he was harboring some deep secret, something beyond a scattered hobo in an old tweed coat. A light shiver caressed Donny’s skin. Looking down at his arms, he frowned at the sudden scattering of goosebumps.

“What’s wrong with that man, mommy?” the little girl asked, echoing Donny’s thought. Mom cast a sidelong look at the Grey Man. If she had given Donny a dark look, the one she gave this new stranger was like the devil himself had just stepped in for a tall mocha. “Don’t stare,” she scolded her daughter, cupping the girl’s head and turning it away. “It’s rude.”

Despite her cool words, Donny could tell the woman felt the Grey Man wasn’t right. Her eyes flickered nervously over him and she pulled her daughter closer. The little girl squirmed loose and looked back at Donny, searching for a more satisfying answer.

“He’s just outta luck, sweetheart,” Donny assured her. Her mother fixed him with another steely glare.

“I think I can handle it, thanks,” she snapped. Donny, in no mind to carry on with someone who clearly was in no mood to be carried on with, raised his hands in quiet surrender.

*'A foolish man sticks himself between a momma-bear and her cub,'* Gwen once said after reading an article in the newspaper about a mother who had caught a burglar sneaking through her daughter's bedroom window. The mother had pushed him right back out the window, landing him with thirty stitches, a concussion and jail time for his efforts.

Even thinking of Gwen in the smallest sense hurt. Since losing her to cancer last month, Donny had kept himself locked away in their small two bedroom townhouse, surrounded by thirty years of tokens and memories of a life together dead and gone. Picture albums, her small collection of homemade pottery—a collection he had criticized often over the years and now doted over obsessively—even the ritual eight o'clock post dinner tea that had been their ritual, he held onto them all, using them as a way to keep some part of her alive. Instead, it only made the stinging loss worse. He had tried using alcohol as a healing swab. That had only led to a couple of embarrassingly tearful nights and sickly mornings. His father would have switched him for acting like such a fool.

*Time to let her go, Donny,* the angry voice had finally arrived and announced late one evening. Death was a bitch, but there was nothing you could do about it except let it carry you with it down into the dirt. Once you got down there it was near impossible to dig yourself back out before you suffocated. He had seen it happen to a few passing friends in recent years, husbands or wives who couldn't bear a sudden life of solitude after so many years together. That was what had finally forced him out the door and into the open air, driving him into the next and likely last chapter of Donovan Nicholl's life.

Of course, just because it was time to move on didn't mean he was *ready* to do so, which explained why he was standing here in the same coffee shop that he and Gwen had frequented on a weekly basis for the past five years.

As though it had been waiting in ambush for that very thought, one of Gwen's favorite songs drifted mercilessly out of the speakers set up in the corners of the café, a lively little number by Elton John. The Rocket Man's impassioned mewling thrust a swell of emotions straight down Donny's throat. They may have overwhelmed him had they not been interrupted by the happy barista behind the computerized cash register.

"Mr. Nicholl!" she exclaimed brightly. "I haven't seen you for some time. We've missed you! The Normal today?"

The words slithered out of his mouth like a cold serpent of habit. "Dark roast for me, Orange tea for her." The Normal. Like the saying went, old habits died hard.

The barista girl nodded knowingly, already expecting this. "We were starting to think you'd found a new watering hole, some hip new joint for the Missus. Maybe that place just down the street where all you young couples go." Leaning out past the countertop, she cast a quick look around the shop. "Where is Gwen? I'd like to throw her a wave, if I could."

Donny felt instantly ashamed at his order. Looking down at his hands—his wrinkly old mitts—he shook his head. "Couldn't make it today," he lied. "She's not feeling well today. I'm gonna need those drinks to go." He had planned to stay, but that idea was a dead duck now.

"Of course," she answered, pouting teasingly. "Well, tell her hi for me, and that I hope she feels better soon."

“I will,” Donny answered and thumbed out a pocketful of change, to which the barista shook her head. “If Gwen’s sick, you can put that away,” she told him with a confidential wink. “It’s on the house. Just don’t tell my boss.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Thanks.” He knew he should feel grateful, but inside the offer made him irrationally angry, as though the girl was purposely suggesting a free coffee should make everything okay. He swallowed his anger. It wasn’t her fault. She didn’t know Gwen was dead.

She winked conspiratorially. “Not at all.” Nodding her head slightly, she gestured to something behind him. “What’s with Mr. Shady in the corner? You ever see him before?”

Donny turned to look. The Grey Man was standing in the corner below one of the speakers, cocking an ear up to Sir Elton. “Just today,” Donny told her. “I think he’s harmless.”

*(we are not enemies, but friends)*

The voice caught him off guard for a moment with the quote. The barista didn’t seem to notice his sudden pause.

“Some of the customers might not agree with you, Don,” she said, unconvinced.

She wasn’t lying; a couple near sitting near the Grey Man had shifted their table a few feet over. A lady who had been enjoying a few pages of some gardening magazine gulped down her last few sips and hurriedly left the café.

*(we must not be enemies)*

“He’s probably looking for a little loose change,” the barista added. “We get them all the time in here – just another perk of being downtown. I’ll get Jake to chase him out.”

Donny sniffed sympathetically and plopped a couple coins on the counter. “Give him a coffee for the road, my treat. Looks like he could use it.”

Sympathetic or not, Donny couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to the Grey Man than the tweed-covered wreck standing and listening as Elton gave way to the soft crooning of Van Morrison, another Gwen Nicholl All-Star.

That slow shiver returned, tickling the fine hairs at the base of his neck with invisible skeletal fingers. Something about the man’s aura – Donny couldn’t think of a more suitable word – told him that he should recognize this man, though Donny knew he had never seen him before.

*(the mystic cords of memory)*

“Something wrong?” the barista asked, this time noticing Donny’s shift in behavior. Donny didn’t answer, but glanced from the Grey Man to the window. The sky outside had darkened noticeably, smothered in a field of colorless clouds. Thunder pounded in the distance. Donny stared out the window, hypnotized by the sudden shift in weather. It had been clean and clear only moments ago. It took him a moment to realize the barista was still talking to him.

“You look like somebody just stepped on your grave, Sweetness.”

*Sweetness?* Donny thought, a sour taste rising up into the back of his throat. Only one person had called him that before, and she was trapped in a glorified plastic box six feet deep. “Why did you call me—”



The words froze, his tongue suddenly thick against the roof of his mouth as he turned back to the barista – no, not at the barista, but at the spot where the barista *should* have been standing. Another lady was looking across the counter at him, leaning on the edge with the barest of smiles, one corner of her tinted lips turned up ever so slightly, a faint dimple pocketed in her cheek. Her eyes watched him, unnaturally grey in the soft clouded light seeping through the windows.

It wasn't just her eyes, though. Her entire face was grey, her skin, her hair, her eyebrows—even the clothes she was wearing, like someone had painted over her with intricate care, had made her a Technicolor outcast, an obscure fugitive from the world of life.

Staring into those eyes, he didn't need to see their true color to know it. They were brown, light brown with two small dark spots around the pupil of her left eye. He knew this as clearly as he knew her long hair should be brown. The hair *should* have been grey, or at least it was a few short weeks ago, but this woman had also been at least thirty years older the last time he saw her, before he had watched her coffin lowered in the ground.

“Cherry,” he whispered, the familiar nickname rolling off his tongue as smoothly as the drinks he had ordered from the vanished barista. He had given Gwen that nickname after they had made love for the first time, a couple of young and unseasoned college lovers. Staring into her deep brown eyes, he had kissed that crooked smile.

‘*Mon cherie,*’ he said, trying to impress her with his very limited French. It came out sounding like *Mon cherry*, which made them both laugh in each other's arms. The pet name had stuck with them for the next thirty years.

The café was unnaturally quiet. They were alone in the coffee shop. The line-up had disappeared, the tables were empty, the barista was nowhere to be seen. There was only Donny and Gwen, his dead wife.

No, that wasn't true. He could still feel the tickle of cold fingers on his neck. There was one other person still here with them. The Grey Man, still standing under the speaker, watching them. Donny didn't have to turn around to feel those grey eyes on him.

He felt the shiver along his spine grow into an outright chill—a *deathly* chill that frightened him more than this apparition smiling crookedly at him from beyond the (*grave*) counter. The fingers at the base of his neck turned to needles, pricking lightly into his skin.

"Gwen," he said again. "Cherry, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be..." He couldn't bring himself to say the word.

"Dead?" she finished the thought for him, as she had done so often in their lives together.

"Yes," Donny nodded. "How can you be here? And looking like...that?"

Gwen didn't seem bothered by the question. "That's for me to know and you to find out, my love," she answered with the same evasive humor that Donny had known and cherished over the years. "But I'm sure if you ask, *He* would be very happy to tell you."

She pointed over her shoulder at the Grey Man, who was looking intently at them – no, not them, but *him*; those bloodhound eyes burned into Donny as surely as he could feel the bony fingers pulling at the small hairs on his neck.

“Of course, you have to be *sure* you want to know the answer,” Gwen continued. “Because once He gives it, there’s no turning back.”

Slowly, Donny turned to face the Grey Man, only there wasn’t a Grey Man anymore. Where the man had stood moments ago in his bedraggled tweed jacket, a Black Man now faced him, dressed in a sharp black suit jacket, so black it might have been weaved from the fabric of space itself; staring at it made Donny feel as though he was looking into some great void. The man’s face (and it *was* still his face, right down to the bloodhound eyes and pallid complexion) was shaded beneath a thick layer of shadow. Yet even though he carried the same visage, this man inspired a different feeling in Donny, a feeling of finality—dark finality. The Black Man craned his neck to one side, listening. Donny heard tendons popping and creaking.

“Are you ready, sweetness?” Gwen whispered. She was standing right behind him now. He could smell a light whisper of cotton candy, the perfumed body spray she had bought just for him after he told her how much he liked that scent. Her breath was cool but not unpleasant against his skin. Her voice in his ear sent shivers of longing through him, touching him deeply in places he had nearly forgotten.

“Are you ready for the answer?” she asked again. Feeling her so close, Donny wanted nothing more than to feel her arms wrap around him, draw him close, but somehow he knew she couldn’t do that. She wasn’t *allowed* to do that, not yet—not until he knew the answer.

The answer.

Was he ready for the answer?

He looked past her shoulder into the reflective glass of the snack bar. His breath caught in his throat. The reflection that stared back at him was not the same as the sad, ancient one from his bathroom mirror every morning. The white hairs and aging wrinkles were gone; the sallow skin hanging loosely underneath his chin had tightened across his jaw. Even the small liver spots that had tracked across his skin more and more of late were gone, erased by the pencil of Time. Instead he saw a young man, full of life and promise, a man he had forgotten ever existed. A man that belonged with the beautiful young woman with the spotted eyes and thick ponytail – that belonged with his Cherry.

“I don’t...I don’t know the question,” he lied. He knew the question, but was he ready to ask it?

“Yes you do, Donny, my love, my Sweetness,” she said, picking through his lie as easily as if it were her own. She had always known when he was lying. “You know the question, but it’s okay if you’re not ready to ask it. Soon enough you’ll have to, just like I did. Sooner or later we all have to ask it. I can wait until then. The choice is yours, and it is forever.”

Donny looked at Gwen, stared into her deep eyes, vibrant even in the dull grey light. His heart beat madly in his chest, a wild drum growing with each frenzied pulse.

*(the mystic cords of memory will again swell)*

He turned to look at the Black Man and suddenly knew who this man was, or at least what he represented. The Black Man stared back, content to wait. His grim face was a flat mask, devoid of emotion. No vile hate, no love or sympathy either. It was the face of Death, and right now, Donny was keeping Death waiting.

Donny looked at one then the other; wife to man, love to fear, knowing he couldn't have one without the other, not until he made his choice. Gwen smiled and reached out a hand as if to brush his lips, but couldn't touch him. He could see the sadness in her eyes, the longing, the sympathy for forcing him to face this decision, when he had thought the biggest choice of the day would be whether he should leave the house or not.

"Time's almost up, lover. If you're going to ask, now's the time."

Despite his dead wife's warning, Donny still hesitated, thinking back over his life, wondering if he was ready for this, if he had left anything wanting. He had never been a travelling man, content to live out his days in the same city and drink from the same tap. Given the choice between a nice glass of wine or a cool, crisp beer, he would take the beer. There were a few regrets, but not many he would take back even if the opportunity presented itself. They were lessons learned, experiences to be taken for what they were, nothing more, nothing less.

Had he lived his life to the fullest? Donny looked back at his wife and the answer was obvious. She *had* been his life, and without her it was empty, a vase with a single wilted rose, the rotting leaves falling away like so many fading memories.

"Will it hurt?" he asked her, knowing she wouldn't lie to him; she had never lied to him before, no matter how much the truth stung. And she didn't lie to him now.

"Yes. But it will all be worth it."

Donny nodded. Yes, of course it would hurt. The question had been as rhetorical as the next one he would ask, the one that would be forever. Turning to face the Black

Man, he took a few tentative steps forward, close enough to smell the dark cologne that made him think of old wet dirt and petrified wood. The scent of eternity.

Fear gripped his heart, swam in his gut, as Donny made his choice. He opened his mouth to say the words and his voice cracked. His tongue grew swollen and dry. He forced the question through anyway.

“Can you give me back my wife?”

With a sucking gasp the air was pulled out of the coffee shop. Thunder boomed outside, ear splitting, shattering the windows and pulling the glass into the dark grey nothingness beyond the café.

Donny looked back, no longer afraid but terrified. He thought of pleading for his life, dropping down to his knees and telling this harbinger of Death that he had made a mistake. One look into the man’s face was enough to tell him that there was no turning back—his Cherry had already told him that and she didn’t lie, not to him. Forever, she had said. Once you asked the question, it was forever.

With a vicious twist, the Black Man pinched the sallow skin of his chin between two long, bony fingers. With a sick sucking sound his face came away, peeling off like a latex mask and exposing the glaring bone beneath. The Black Man’s eyes remained buried deep in the hollows of his eye sockets; he stared down at the old man frozen to the spot before him. His lipless teeth clacked together and a long tongue materialized from the shadows beyond, licking over the stained teeth, hungry to take what he had come to claim; seeking the soul that no longer belonged to any earthly body. A soul willingly given.

The Reaper stared down at him through androgynous and all-seeing eyes. Reaching into the black jacket, it pulled out a long, bone-handled knife, the blade scarred and jagged from an eternity of use. It held the knife up to Donny's eyes for him to see, and Donny knew that it wasn't for any sense of cruel amusement or pleasure, but out of a sick preparation, giving Donny a chance to ready himself for what was to come. A cold hand pressed against his shoulder, bracing him...

*(when touched, as surely it will be)*

The knife came down and underneath, raising up to meet his flesh. The blade slid deep into him, in hotly and easily, meeting with little resistance from this old man's tired body. Gwen was right; it did hurt, worse than anything Donny had ever felt before. The pain sheered through him like a white hot flame, excruciating and tortuous as it sliced through the threads of his soul, severing them one by one. He tried to scream but the pain was too deep for him to draw a breath.

Then it was gone, trickling away in a cool river, the white hotness replaced with a cool but refreshing relief. Donny looked down at the knife, buried to the hilt in his chest, and watched the silver blood of his soul drain out of him. Instead of dripping to the floor, the silver soulblood hovered around him, each droplet glinting in the grey light.

The Reaper inhaled deeply and began sucking Donny's soulblood into itself. Donny felt a momentary panic as he watched his life's soul disappearing into the blackness of the Reaper's skeletal mouth, but as the last silver droplet disappeared, a wave of peacefulness washed over him. A flash of color drew across his eyes. For a moment he was back in the café, back in the living world. People were staring at him,

some in fear, others with concern. A light hand pressed against his shoulder, a girl; the barista. Her hand was warm and gentle.

Donny's hands were clutched to his chest. He looked down, expecting to see the bone-handled knife protruding from his chest. He could feel it inside of him, but in the light of the living world it was invisible, the unseen blade of Death. Standing before him, the Grey Man watched and waited, his eyes ablaze.

Then it was gone. Donny was back in the other world, the Grey World, held deep in the Grey Man's true embrace. The embrace of the Reaper.

With a sigh of rapture, the Reaper pulled the knife free and Donny fell to the floor. Gwen crouched over him and she touched him, finally permitted to run her warm hands over his sweaty brow, to comfort him. She leaned down and kissed him.

*(by the Better Angels of our nature.)*

"Forever, Sweetness," she said against his mouth and he smiled, drawing one last heaving breath.

In his world—no, not his but another world that no longer belonged to him—the barista girl stood over him and watched as he drew in a long, grating breath, his hands still clenched up across his chest. Nobody noticed that the Grey Man had silently slipped away, not through the coffee shop door but beyond it, into a world they would all come to know in due time. Nobody would remember seeing him that day, not even the Business Suit. Like his true jacket, the Grey Man would be a void in their memories until the time came when they would meet him personally.

The barista looked around with panic and desperation, pleading for someone to help. Donny looked up at her and smiled. She smiled back timidly, somehow comforted



by the warmth in that smile, unaware that it was meant not for her but for another woman, a woman with spots in her brown eyes and long brown hair pulled back in a tight ponytail hanging over her shoulder. He opened his mouth and a gasp of air escaped over his lips, carrying a faint whisper of words on silent wings.

“Mon cherie,” he said in a voice so quiet that the barista barely heard, understanding only something about a *cherry*, and would later question whether he had even spoken at all. His hands jerked, squeezing convulsively. He twitched spasmodically one last time and lay still.

As Donny slipped away from the world of the living, he felt his wife’s arms wrap around him, the comforting warmth of her embrace stealing away the last threads of fear and pain.

“Is that what it feels like to die from a broken heart?” he asked her. She smiled, her lips no longer grey but a light shade of pink. Her brown eyes twinkled.

“Does your heart feel broken, Sweetness?” she asked him tenderly.

“No, Cherry,” he shook his head. His heart didn’t feel broken, it felt full. For the first time since Gwen’s death, he felt whole again. Looking up into her radiant face, he smiled.

The Better Angels smiled with him.