

*Death by Angel*

(2766 words; 6 pages)

Acerbic dramaturgy. What is the stowaway without his Dramamine? What is the house without its drama queen? And, lastly, what is the man without his Andromeda scene? Let these be asked in all sincerity.

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It was a bleak Friday in April, 1944. Not meteorologically bleak, but because of the war, bleak. I had meandered effortlessly toward my destination, the local schoolhouse, without my usual preoccupation with showers, drizzle, and the like, for the sun was unseasonably scorching. Upon entry, I found my pupils reticent, their attire consonant with the war's sacrifice. The students beheld no smiles, also in proportion with the sacrifice. I could only imagine how the homes of each were impacted by the war and its far-reaching consequences.

On that day, papers were shuffled, hands were raised, chalk was worn, wood shavings filled the sharpening canister, a moment of silence was observed, but no punishment or censure was meted out. It was not needed on this day. In fact punitive measures were nearly obsolete in our collectively sober atmosphere. Following these motions, students exited methodically and patiently. All but one. At first I didn't notice, for the desks had been emptied. She blended at the back of the room. Thinking myself alone, I allowed myself a sigh. The students needed my strength, and I had risen to the challenge yet another day. Still, I fought back tears.

"OK, next task," I thought. I was very task-oriented these days. But the students had tended to the board, their desks...everything so thoroughly that I had little to do. Instead of a task I found Laura. Silent and stationary, Laura was apparently fascinated with the grain patterning in the wooden floor. Having spotted her, and in this posture, I patiently observed to await her readiness to engage. What I thought would take a few minutes, at most, surpassed my expectation and grew into 10...15...now, could it be, 20 minutes? Time continued to accumulate. At times I thought to go to her, invite her to my desk, engage in a discussion from afar, something. But instead I waited. At some point, Laura's head tilted upward. Longingly receptive, I celebrated and nurtured her non-trivial effort. Our mutual engagement naturally followed.

Laura had a lot on her mind. So much that it was all I could do to assuage her concerns. In fact, I found myself eternally battling her erratically shifting and multiplying concerns. But each apprehensive dragon I slayed later re-appeared, and with multiple heads. It was as if she were a grease fire and all I had was water for treatment. Many varied and genuine chapters later, I wondered if it were *better* to disengage, send her home, and reach out to the parents. Or some other, yet to be determined, alternative. For this clearly was not working. But her father was away, at war, anyhow. And Laura's mother was struggling, just as the rest of us. But war hung on *her* with surrealistic drama; more than most.

So, instead, and against my better judgment, I tried again and ended our erratic entanglement with Laura's concerns, if only temporarily. I gently wiped Laura's tears and offered her a snack. A diversion of sorts, anything.

We first re-established Laura's long held interest in books – *The Secret Garden* being her all-time favorite. I found that she had a rather large *extended* family, though at current it was only she and her mother at her residence. Home life, hers and the entire extended family, had been consumed by the war, but more so than most, with three uncles overseas providing service, in addition to her own dad. Apparently, her mom and the others formed a close-knit group in these times, and it was in this context that Laura had become enthralled by news of the war, avidly seeking out the latest from the most unreachable areas at the front. She described her scrapbook as bulging. Surely this would someday provide a valuable, if sentimental, resource, I told her, in so many words.

Before her father had went overseas, her family, the three of them, had occasionally enjoyed performances at The Fulcrum, the local theatre. Laura spoke as if such outings were infrequent – a special treat – and probably enjoyed them all the more to the fullest for this reason. Laura went on to tell me that although she didn't really miss her dad all that much, her mom had insisted that she and Laura try to continue this family custom in his absence. It had been only their second return to The Fulcrum since resuming the now unusually somber outings, but Laura and her mom had taken in a production just the weekend prior. *Percipience*. I had seen the theatrical advertisement in recent weeks myself.

I prompted Laura to share more about the play, not sure whether it was a comedy, or a tragedy, or a genre altogether different. She said it wasn't funny; mostly just people talking. But the one thing that stood out, to her, had been the inexplicable presence of a man – one resembling her dad, she said – throughout. Having been corrected by her mother more than a few times when claiming to have seen her dad – at the park, in the front yard, at the grocer – Laura had grown accustomed to questioning such ostensible encounters. At the play, opening scene, her mother had quietly leaned over to her daughter and, citing the resemblance, addressed the situation forthrightly. But the man had long over-stayed his welcome and remained on-stage long after the initial scene, continuing to perplex mom and daughter alike. Not only that, but Laura said that

her mom had found the man “peculiar – whatever that meant.” Apparently, the man didn’t say anything, and was not spoken to, during the entire evening, seemingly ignored or rebuffed by all onstage. In fact, she couldn’t tell me the character’s name, even. And this despite the fact that he clearly had been the most intriguing presence on the stage to her. Baffled, I sensed Laura’s attention waning and so changed course. I hadn’t accomplished much, but at least I could send her home now in peace.

The following day was well-behaved and passed without incident. But I asked Laura to stay after class with me all the same. She had brought in her morning’s newspaper clippings. We looked up the words that she didn’t understand, our discussion being more educationally enriching, as opposed to emotionally stabilizing, this go around. I asked Laura if she knew where her dad was located overseas, but she only replied that her mother didn’t like to talk about it. Our meeting that day was short-lived; she needed to get home, she said, as her mom needed her help with dinner. They had company. The *next* day Laura again brought in more clippings. And the next.

On Thursday, I thought I noticed a hint of buoyancy in her demeanor. And indeed, the leading gazette story relayed Allied progress on both fronts in recent days, accompanied by a heavy dose of optimism in its signaling of the imminence of the war’s end. I knew that even Laura had seen similar reports in the papers before, but we celebrated the news nonetheless, and without reservation. Sending Laura on her way, I allowed the cloak of reality to resettle, reuniting caution with optimism during my short walk home. In acknowledgment of Laura’s now established pattern, I obtained a copy of Friday’s gazette for myself before coming to school. Appalled at the news, I put it in my lowermost drawer, locked, my concern now turning to Laura. What would she think? Would she *be able* to think? Should I *expect her* to be able to think? Academically, that is. For Friday’s gazette ran a lead article that was as good as a retraction of their previously sunny, highly editorialized reporting just 24 hours prior. But, unexpectedly, Laura seemed in good spirits when she entered the classroom later that morning. Once the students had settled into the morning’s work, I checked in with Laura. I just could not wait until after school. Laura, in all likelihood, needed me. But apparently Laura’s paper had not arrived in time that morning. Laura said that she hadn’t missed a morning gazette arrival since she had begun her scrapbooking, but her mom had reassured her that late deliveries are not uncommon. Deferring to the mother’s wishes, I decided to allow Laura to return to her work and told her that, it being Friday, we would not be meeting after school today but that we could look forward to meeting again next week. Hiding her disappointment, but not well, Laura just nodded acceptingly and headed home in silence.

Mildly intrigued and in need of release, I took in *Percipience* for myself that weekend. Afterward, I didn’t sleep much. Rather, I sat on my davenport, quietly in contemplation. Staring at the program before me, I hovered over its final passage: “When God is silent, you can make

Him say whatever you please<sup>1</sup>.” True, the man hadn’t a line in the entire production. And this despite the fact that he was in every last scene: opening scene to curtain call. He hadn’t even been the focal point, necessarily, of *any* given scene. Simply present, he was. In fact, he had been only of intermittent and passing interest to the play’s named characters. I couldn’t help but note that the casting director must have expended extraordinary effort to meet the demands made by the playwright’s design, for there were so many significant roles to be played, each requiring different individual actors. Still, there were several enduring characters that had appeared recurrently to provide some measure of continuity.

For some reason though, I couldn’t stop mulling over the café scenes, although nothing of consequence had really happened therein. During an unaccompanied café visit, one of the primary characters – Florence was her name, I believe – had beckoned her server’s ear for clandestine questioning. Who was the regular over there in the corner? And why did he frequent the café so often? Did she know his name? Or anything of interest about him? Caught somewhat off-guard, the young server, named Danielle, admitted that she didn’t know but offered to ask. Before Danielle could finish her reply Florence had already declined with feigned indifference. Danielle went on about her tasks while otherwise unique characters entered and created a putatively consequential scene. In due time, Danielle made her way to the corner where the man had seated himself. Just as she was addressing the man, presumably to offer more coffee, the curtains swept in, seemingly out of nowhere, and the scene ended abruptly, ushering in the intermission.

Just the week prior, in Scene 3, Florence’s lunchtime book club had taken particular notice of the once-again presence of “the man.” The man hadn’t seemed interested or disinterested in their meeting; but since on that day he had been seated several tables removed, the ensuing conversation among those present seemed to capitalize on the circumstances unaided. Gretta had thought she had seen him down at the butcher’s on occasion. Regina knew she had thanked him for opening the café door while she entered but hadn’t received the further courtesy of a response; and this had happened on more than one occasion. And Geraldine couldn’t be sure but she thought that this was the man that had once worked at the floral shop just two blocks south. During none of their café meetings had they witnessed the man meeting with a colleague or friend, anyone. And, all too often, the man didn’t seem to be doing much of anything while there; bookless and companionless, no thing or one seemed to demand his attention on most occasions. And lastly, a detail that seemed to resonate *most* strongly: this man was always present when their meetings disbanded. That is, no one ever saw him leave the café. Though the relevance of any one of these postulates would be unlikely fodder for intrigue, combined they did the trick. On this day, the man uncharacteristically carried a copy of the local gazette with him.

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Devil and the Good Lord*

Regina had taken it upon herself to note that he had spent at least five minutes on just the front side of one of the pages. An unsettling long period, it seemed.

In the lonely comfort provided by my home I asked myself why I had been drawn to this scene, as the dynamics of the Shea family unit – clearly the playwright’s own modern-day, abbreviated representation of the dysfunctionality of Zeus, Hera, and Hephaestus – I had certainly found captivating. I found my superficial answer in anomaly. For the café scenes had been the only setting in which the man had been brought into deliberate focus for the audience using traditional theatrical tools: lighting, character positioning, and the like. And, for the most part, dialogue circumvented the man altogether, with the exception of these scenes. Though, strangely, this had not at all detracted focus from the man throughout, for his presence had seemed the only common thread in the opening scenes: the only anchor available by which the viewer could attempt dramatic comprehension. That initial hook proved to be an unorthodox, but effective, tool by which to maintain the viewer’s preoccupation with the man thereafter, despite the application of theatrical materials to opposite ends, in most scenes. But I later convinced myself that the uniqueness of the café may not have been the draw after all. Rather, it was the seeding of a consuming sense of unease that one felt, nurtured in the viewer’s mind during intermission as a result of the strikingly anomalous closing scene, that was of greatly magnified mass by play’s end. Without the café scene, the man would, most likely, have remained a mere neutrality: an unknown, an oddity without necessary meaning. The man could have just as easily been any given audience member, almost. But one occupying a vacant seat that happened to reside onstage. Simply present, observing the specter before him, as the viewers’ representatives carried out the business of purposiveness and identity creation and discovery through social definition.

I couldn’t decide whether I appreciated the play, or not. Whether I was glad to have experienced a momentary respite from the distress, and often sorrow, of a world knowing no escape from war. I had merely replaced real-world unpleasantness with didactic unpleasantness. Unease nagged at me. I knew of no other word for the feeling. But I knew not why the unrelinquishing unease. No overt tragedy had befallen the man. Nor had he turned out to be unsavory in some way. But the resolution; it was nowhere to be found. I wondered how the playwright felt during its conception. For, although incorporated maximally as a prop and conversation piece, his protagonist had been excluded maximally in action. And worse, no hint was provided that the man’s apparently objectionable presence would ever dissipate. It might as well have been a lifeless animal, a duck maybe, carved from driftwood that occupied that café seat. A recognizable, if trivial, superficial representation comprised of substance and detail of character.

I now realized that I had left the theatre with the feeling that I needed to have done something; someone needed to have done something. The diversion of focus onto the man had somehow nullified, nearly, the emotiveness that also had permeated the play. We watched as relationships were made, broken, faked, and allowed to decay. But somehow all seemed ceremonious, as if they were wholly inconsequential, sagging under the thick layer of unease.

I wanted to speak with Laura. I *had* to speak with Laura. This was weighty material; her mother surely would not have chosen *Percipience* if she had known its themes and tone. But then again, Laura had experienced much in her short life; her years spanned the depression, and now, the second great war, accompanied at great family expense. Here was a girl that, though she was told her dad and uncles would be returning at war's end, knew that her best friend's dad would not be returning. She didn't visit that household much anymore.

My remaining weekend hours stagnated. As if there was no other option. Just as the play had ended: with unease hanging in the air as if from a noose. Just as the man had existed: forever stuck, existence defined, nearly asphyxiated, by others. At least insofar as we would see. But *my* stagnant weekend, it lifted. And I eventually returned to meet Laura's eyes, when I then wished it had not.