

Angel of Death

by Emilie Anding

“Whoever sheds human blood,
by humans shall their blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made mankind.”
-Genesis 9:6 (NIV)

My grandmother is devout. It trickled down—my name, Gabriel, means “devoted to God.” My mama said there used to be buildings called churches. She said she can’t really remember what they did there, but Grandma took her to one sometimes. Back when they lived in the city. It had high ceilings with paintings—Mama said you could hardly make out the characters, they were so high up. But one winged character always stuck out to her. He was an “angel,” she said.

There aren’t churches anymore. Not like that, at least. But people still worship. Grandma says it’s the most meaningful thing we can do.

Today is a baptism day. Mama spent all morning fussing over my baby sister, Gloria. She’s not supposed to cry or poop or eat or do any of the things that babies do. Mama dressed her up in what she called a “beautiful, white lace dress,” but it’s a stained yellow, crispy mess that barely stays on Gloria. When I pointed this out yesterday, my grandmother sniffed and said, “I wore it at my baptism,” as if that made it good enough, holy. Gloria cries when it scratches against her skin.

My job is to hold Gloria while Mama and Grandma talk to everyone. I don’t really understand why there’s so much to talk about—or why this is so important. Mama said I was too young to remember my baptism otherwise I would understand.

Gloria does not want to be still as I try to shift her weight from side to side. I try humming to her softly as I do sometimes when we can’t sleep. Her face scrunches up like she’s about to cry so I try bouncing her instead. She hiccups, a wet sound that leaves a bubble on her lips. Gross. My heart races for a moment—what if she throws up on her dress? My eyes dart around, looking for anything I could use as a barrier between her unpredictable mouth and her baptism dress. My eyes land on a handkerchief that pokes out of our grandmother’s pocket. I hastily grab it, trying not to disrupt the conversation Grandma’s having. I’m sure she’ll understand. As long as Gloria doesn’t cry, or ruin the dress, we won’t be punished.

I tug on Mama’s sleeve—not a good idea mid-conversation, but it’s hard to stand still with Gloria. Mama looks down at me. Grandma is in the middle of a story so Mama won’t verbally respond to me.

“Can we go walk around?” I whisper. Mama looks at Grandma and then back at me and shakes her head. I sigh and reposition Gloria. It was the answer I expected but I’m still frustrated. I settle for turning in a slow circle so she can take in the room. Mama is on our left; her white dress goes down to her ankles. Unlike most of her dresses, this one isn’t discolored around the bottom—there aren’t any frayed pieces. It’s pristine. All around us, people from our community

stand talking to one another in hushed tones. Everyone seems to be waiting to talk to Grandma. Everyone seems to like her more than I do. They don't really know her. Mama tells me that Grandma is a pillar of our faith community, and that she's being generous in taking care of us when we should have a dad around to do it. I guess since she feeds us and lets us live in her house, we aren't allowed to say anything bad about her.

"She's doing all God asks of her," Mama says during these times. I don't think God asks her to be mean, but I can't say that.

Gloria and Mama aren't the only ones wearing white. The children who haven't been baptized yet, and everyone who has already gone through confirmation—all the adults, and some teenagers—wear white too. Some garments are yellowed like Gloria's dress. Mama's dress is the brightest one in the room. I'm wearing the cleanest version of my every-day clothes: a rust-colored shirt and matching pants. Grandma pinned my sleeves and cuffs up this morning so they wouldn't get in the way and get dirty. She says I'm still growing into my clothes. Since this is my cleanest outfit, it's also stiff and scratchy. But probably not as scratchy as Gloria's dress.

I don't like being in this building. It smells funny, like wet dirt but bad. Sweet, somehow. I try not to breathe deeply whenever we're here. The building itself doesn't look much different from our houses, but it's definitely older. The walls of our houses are wood too but they don't let the air through. I always try to sit in the middle so the people sitting on either side of me for worship block the wind that sneaks in through the walls. There used to be more windows, but some broke and were boarded up. With less natural light, there are candles that flicker in their holders along the walls. I like when they're blown out at the end of services—when all you can smell is the smoke.

When I step to complete our circle, a pin that came loose in my pants leg sticks me just above my ankle. I wince. I can't pull it out without putting Gloria down, and I'm not allowed to put Gloria down. I try to shake the cuff loose and Gloria starts to cry.

"No, no, no," I whisper. I let her wrap her small fingers around one of mine, moving her arm as if we're dancing. Sometimes this works. This time it doesn't. This time we're making a scene. My ankle stings.

"I'll take her," Mama says, pulling Gloria out of my arms. My body feels like it's floating after the weight of her is gone. Gloria stops crying as soon as Mama holds her to her chest. I pull at my pant leg, dislodging the pin from my skin. When I look up, Grandma is smiling down at me, but her eyes are hard. No one else seems to see the threat in her expression.

"Ruth!" a man of Grandma's age clasps one Grandma's hands in both of his, and she turns from me. "What a magnificent day for your family."

"We are so grateful to be here, Charles," Grandma says.

"The Lord has blessed us with another day. Little Gloria's baptism! May God cleanse her soul." Charles's voice booms.

"May God cleanse her soul," Grandma repeats with a genuine smile and teary eyes. Her whole demeanor changes when she's talking to him. It's kinda gross.

"Are they taking Gloria away?" I whisper to Mama, tugging on her dress. Gloria seems clean enough to me. Mama shakes her head at me, a silent warning to be quiet, but it's too late.

"Your time will come, Gabriel. God is still at work." Charles addresses me. I shrink under his gaze. He towers over all of us, and veins protrude from his tanned, muscular forearms.

I can feel a droplet of blood dripping down my ankle, but I try to be still since everyone is looking at me now.

"And how hard He must work on our Gabriel!" Grandma exclaims and then purses her lips as she looks down at me.

"Ah, but our lives are but a day in the Kingdom of Heaven," Charles says, turning back to her. He's still clasping her hand. "Patience."

"Of course," Grandma says, teary-eyed again. "We are ever faithful."

"And that is all He asks of us." Charles smiles down at her. I watch a fleck of spit fly from his mouth and try to swallow to suppress a gag. Instead, I choke, and start to cough. Everyone's eyes turn to me again.

"Well. You're a lucky mother to have the souls of both your children in the good Lord's hands." Charles says to Mama.

"Indeed, it is a blessing," Mama responds and bows her head slightly toward Charles.

"Ruth, what boundless favor you will gain in the eyes of our Lord with the purification of your family," Charles beams as he turns back to Grandma. Grandma still looks like she's about to cry. I don't think she can. At least, I've never seen it. I've only seen Mama cry. Charles finally lets go of her hand as he turns from us to address the room.

"Brothers and Sisters." His strong voice silences everyone. "Let us begin."

#

An older boy, Aaron, is in charge of rounding up all of us who wear our rusty uniforms. Without the adults present, the older children are in charge of the younger. I hold Rebecca's hand. Her family lives next to us. Sometimes I watch her and Gloria when her parents and Mom and Grandma are busy. Rebecca is old enough to walk but still trips a lot. She can't say my name yet, so she calls me Able. The first time Grandma heard it, she turned to Rebecca's mom and said, "Able! More like his brother, don't you think?" and Rebecca's mom laughed. I asked Mom what Grandma meant, but she just shook her head. She looked so sad.

"I thought you'd stop the ceremony, Gabriel," a voice calls to me. It makes a shiver run up my spine. The voice belongs to a boy named Simeon who constantly gets me in trouble during school. Sometimes he talks to whoever is sitting with us, and when the teacher looks to reprimand someone for speaking out of turn, Simeon says it's me that was talking. I get punished for a lot of things Simeon does, and he just smiles. Now he continues to address me from across the room, so everyone can hear.

"There's no hope of getting Gloria's soul back once they take it. You'll always be unclean, just like your mom." He smirks and rocks forward on the balls of his feet, puffing out his chest. Some of the children stare at me, confused. The older girls look at me with pity and the gazes of the older boys harden. I might be dressed like them, but I'm not like them.

I'm not like them because of something Mom did. I just don't understand why it was bad.

"My mama isn't unclean," I say, and I hate that my voice sounds so small.

"What was that?" Levi steps towards me. He's Simeon's best friend. "Are you denying the work of God? God made your mother unclean, and you and your dirty little sister are the offspring of her sins." I know these words have been said to him by adults, and an anger ignites in me.

"My mama is not unclean!" I nearly shout. "She went through the ceremony like everybody else."

"Right, it just didn't take," Simeon chimes in, taking a step closer to me as Levi does the same. They both tower over me. I haven't hit a growth spurt yet. It seems like girls get taller gradually, but boys do it all at once. "She's just faking."

"She's not faking!" Tears threaten to spill from my eyes. Rebecca's hand slips from mine as she plops down and grabs onto my leg instead. "She got her soul back at confirmation."

"I hear they didn't do it right, back then," an older girl chimes in. "Some of the adults weren't purified yet." I'm not entirely sure what happens at confirmation. I know at baptism our souls are taken away to be purified, and at confirmation we get them back. Only a handful of the children here have older siblings, and none of them will talk about the ceremony.

"She's just another burden for your grandmother," Levi says. "You shouldn't be here."

"You better say your goodbyes soon." Simeon's smile turns into a sneer. "You'll be leaving after your confirmation."

This, of course, is my worst fear. If we get our souls back and God hasn't purified them, we're forced to leave the community forever. I've never been outside the walls. Mom said my dad came from out there, he wasn't born here. An outsider. He's not around anymore. They didn't burn his body like they do with the rest of our dead.

Gloria's dad was born here, and he died a couple years ago. He was older. The elders say cancer made him sick. No one Mama's age had seen anything like it before. He looked hollowed out when he died. Mama hasn't talked much since.

For as long as I can remember, adults have treated me like I'm a bad child. And while all of us kids are waiting for God to purify our souls, I've always been the worst among them. When the adults can't find a child to punish, the blows always land on me. No matter how hard I try I can't seem to act good enough. Maybe I am cursed. But I don't think it's because of Mama.

"It's okay," Dinah says. She's a little older than Levi and Simeon and has recently turned tall and scrawny herself. She should be getting confirmed soon. "It's not her fault."

"Right, she just got pregnant without getting married first on accident." Simeon rolls his eyes.

Dinah's gaze turns to the floor.

"It wasn't her fault," I echo Dinah. My cheeks heat.

"I don't think you had a soul to begin with," Simeon taunts me. "Your mama's sin tainted you before you were ever born."

"Just leave him alone," another voice chimes in. Benjamin. Benjamin is a few years younger than me, but so much braver. He's one of the few that regularly comes to my defense. Sometimes he's punished for it too.

"Careful, Benjamin. Maybe you won't get yours back either. 'Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take,' Simeon quotes the Psalms. He scoffs but turns away, pulling at Levi's arm to get him to follow him.

"Or sit in the company of mockers," I hear Dinah finish the verse in a mutter, low enough that the boys can't hear. I expect her to be looking at me when she says it, but when I look up, she's staring at Simeon's retreating back.

"Come on," Dinah says, picking up Rebecca and placing her on her hip before reaching out her hand for mine. "Let's go sit down."

#

Dinah, Benjamin, Rebecca, and I find a patch of sunshine to sit in that comes in through one of the leaky windows. With a grin, Benjamin reaches into his pocket.

"Look what I have," he whispers, leaning in close to us. When he pulls his hand out of his pocket, he's holding a ball. "Found it in the bean patch," he says.

Even Dinah's face lights up. We sit close together so we can roll the ball back and forth, keeping Rebecca busy. The ball rolls from Benjamin's hands to Dinah's, then to mine, and finally to Rebecca. Rebecca turns it to me and it comes back damp and sticky. I roll it back to Dinah. We continue for a while, and the ball gets dusty and discolored.

The more I look at it spinning between us, the more strange it looks. When it comes back to me, I find out what's wrong: it's streaked with blood. My blood. Rebecca must've touched my ankle when she sat down next to me earlier. Sure enough, I look and her hands are stained. I point and Dinah and Benjamin follow my gaze, then turn to their own discolored hands.

Then I remember Grandma's handkerchief in my pocket. I hastily wipe my hands on my clothes. It'll dry the same color anyway. Then I take out the handkerchief and offer it to Dinah. She gently wipes at Rebecca's hands, then scrubs at her own. Benjamin goes next. I can't get all the blood off my hands—it seeps into the cracks in my dry skin, no matter how hard I scrub against my scratchy shirt. I start to panic but Dinah rests her hands on mine, stilling them.

"It's okay," she says softly. She silently holds out her hand to Benjamin and he places the cloth in her hand. "Where are you hurt?"

Tears well in my eyes and I extend my leg. The cuff of my pants rides up as I do so, exposing the smear of blood on my skin. Dinah wipes gently at it until nothing but the scab remains.

"Thank you," I say.

"We all bleed," she says, folding the handkerchief before handing it back to me.

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Soon I have to go to the bathroom. Rather than tell one of the older boys, who might force me to stay in the room until I wet myself, I quietly sneak out of the room. The bathroom is on the main floor, just down the stairs from us. I walk downstairs, expecting to hear the muttered sounds of prayer from the sanctuary, but it's eerily silent. Where is everyone?

I look out the door and see Mama leading one of the goats towards another building behind the church. This building is strictly forbidden for all of us. Not that I want to approach it anyway—it feels wrong, even from a distance. But Mama is walking up the steps and the door opens to admit her. I see Charles's face as he closes the door behind her. I stay rooted to the spot, unable to believe what I just saw. Then fear strikes deep within me. Is Mama in trouble? Are they going to punish her for going in the building? Who is going to keep her safe?

I run towards the building and when I get half-way there a blood-curdling scream comes from inside. Once again, I freeze. I take a deep breath and ball my fists. Whoever is in there, they're hurting Mama, I'm sure of it. I proceed on shaky legs. I try the door but it's locked. Almost all the windows on this building are boarded up, but there's a crack in one. I look around for something to stand on so I can see inside. There's a woodpile nearby, and it takes all my

strength to roll a log over and tip it up to stand on. It wobbles beneath my unsteady legs and I clutch at the wall for support.

I can't see much. Everyone is crowded around in a circle. I look around desperately for Mama's head but cannot see her. Panic rises in my chest. People begin to shift, widening the circle. There's something moving on the ground. It's thrashing around. Someone stumbles back and falls, allowing me a split second to see.

Whatever is writhing on the floor is person-shaped, but wrong. It looks like Gloria's dad when he died, but worse. It's chained to the floor. I can't tell if it's a man or woman. For a moment, I worry that it's Mama, but there's no way, I just saw her. Before I can process more, it throws itself at a crumpled thing in front of it. Another scream splits the air as it rips at what I can now make out as the goat. It's the goat that's screaming. The thing digs its hands into the goat's stomach and rips, entrails spilling across the floor. With greedy hands, the creature dives into it like a starved animal, eating the goat as it dies.

I turn from the window. I feel like there's something crawling in my stomach. I assume that Mama is safe somewhere since it wasn't her screaming. I know I can't be caught here, so I rush back to the church. I'd forgotten to go to the bathroom, but I don't have to go anymore. I don't speak when I return to where Dinah, Benjamin, and Gloria are waiting for me. Dinah can tell that something is wrong. When the adults return, she takes my hand and pulls me out of the building into the sun.

"Dinah, do you know what happens during baptism?" I ask, my stomach turning as I look towards the building. Dinah has a younger brother who was baptized last year.

"We're not supposed to talk about it," she says, but it sounds like she's going to tell me anyway. "Do you remember the Old Testament, where they used to put all their sins on an animal and then give it to God?"

I nod as I dig the toe of my shoe into the dirt, making a small hole in a patch of dead grass. That story didn't make sense to me. Why punish the animal for things you've done wrong? It's not their fault. Grandma always says we get what's coming to us, one way or another. She says you can't hide your sin from God.

"It's kind of like that. Except instead of your sin, the animal takes your soul." Dinah grimaces at the patch of dirt I'm creating.

"But it isn't gone forever, not like the sin that goes away with the sacrifice. Grandma and Mama and everyone got theirs back." I think of the goat's screams.

"Right, God cleanses it and then we get it back."

But when God takes the sin with the animal, the animal dies. They don't come back to life.

"How do we get it back?" I ask.

"I don't know." She looks away. I follow her gaze back to the church where a group of teenagers, new to their white clothes, are talking.

"But everyone gets their soul cleansed," I say. "Everyone gets to wear white."

"Sometimes," Dinah says, eyes unfocused. She begins to kick dirt back into the hole I created. She tamps the grass back into place with her shoe.

"What do you mean?" I shift from foot to foot. My body has too much energy, and I wish Dinah would walk with me, but this seems like a conversation other people shouldn't hear. It's better if we stay here where no one is paying attention to us.

"Well, if someone's soul isn't cleansed, they can't stay here. We're meant to be preparing for the Kingdom of Heaven." I remember Dinah had an older sister, Miriam. She was really nice. I think she ran away when her friend Nora did.

"So where do they go?"

"We give their soul back to God." Dinah looks sad. She looks down at the ruined pile of grass and hugs her arms across her chest. I don't want to make her sad, but I want to know what happens.

"With another animal sacrifice?"

She's quiet for so long that I think maybe she didn't hear me. I'm about to repeat it when she responds.

"No."

"What then?" I ask, prodding her.

"They can't stay with us," she whispers. "They have to go back."

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I walk slowly back to our house. I pass the big barn where the sunflowers grow. There are some rabbits grazing around it. Nora used to take care of the rabbits before she and Miriam went away. I think about what Dinah said and I wonder for the first time if they ran away. They must have. There wasn't anything wrong with them.

"Gabriel," Grandma's sharp voice cuts through my thoughts as I walk through the door of our house. She's sitting at the kitchen table with her back to me. I can see that the table is empty.

"I'm missing my handkerchief." All my muscles tense. I still feel like running, but now I feel like I can't.

"I-I'm sorry, I thought Gloria was going to spit up on her dress."

"And you think that excuses your sin of stealing?"

"No, you just said Gloria couldn't ruin her—"

"Do not argue with me." She finally turns and her lips are pursed in a thin line. I know this means she's angry. "Where is it now?"

I dig in my pocket for the handkerchief. My hands are shaking. I thought I could wash it before she realized it was gone. It's stained and wrinkled and it soaks up some of the sweat from my palm as I hold it out to her.

She stares at it in my hand and then looks at me. Her eyes narrow.

"Not only did you steal, but you damaged it. That's two sins." My body is screaming to run but I know that will only make it worse. I flinch as she reaches to take the handkerchief from my hand. She smooths it out against the table, folding it once, twice, into a smaller square. The outside of her hand runs against it, flattening some wrinkles. I watch, helpless to move.

"Sit." I do as I'm told and sit on my stool at the table. I also do what I know will be asked of me, which is sit with the backs of my hands pressed against the hard surface, palms up. Grandma gets up from the table. Her chair screeches against the floor and I flinch again. When she returns, it's with a switch in her hand.

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My hands burn. I know if I'm lucky enough to sleep, I'll dream about the pain. Mama's not supposed to, but when we go to our room for the night, she helps me. She tells me to be quiet before she sloshes some burning liquid on my cuts. I wonder if it burns like that when she drinks it. She tries to hide it but I know she does that sometimes. I bite my cheek until it bleeds.

The next part isn't as bad. She puts some herbs on my palms and wraps them in strips of cloth. She tells me I have to take it off in the morning before Grandma can see that she bandaged it.

I didn't cry during my punishment, but I cry now when Mama is holding my hands in hers.

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That night, when we're tucked in bed next to each other, I whisper to Mama in the dark. She drank some of that burning liquid. Sometimes that means she'll talk more to me.

"What happens if God doesn't cleanse us?" I ask, my heart beating so loud in my ears that I almost can't hear my own voice.

"You don't need to think about that," Mama says. I turn to look at her. The moonlight that comes in through our window reflects against the tears on her cheeks. When did she start crying?

"But what happens?"

Mama doesn't answer.