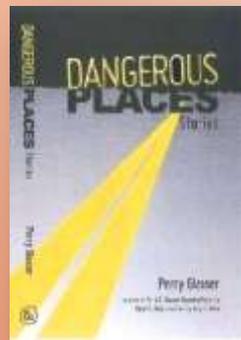


BERKOWITZ'S ANGEL

by
Perry Glasser



BERKOWITZ'S ANGEL

© Perry Glasser

"I'm a real angel," the angel explained to Berkowitz.

"That overcoat you're wearing. Pardon my asking, where are the holes for the wings?"

"What wings? We levitate, Bernie. The whole wing business is apocryphal, a show for the *goyim*. Sure, you've got your cherubim, you've got your seraphim, and you've got your archangels who wear wings, but only for formal occasions."

"Formal occasions?"

"The Final Trump. Galactic creation. Divine processions. The Messiah is comes, I'll war wings. But how often does that happen? Wings are for show. Impress the rubes. A nice idea for

Renaissance painters in Italy, but not at all practical For your average working-class angel, wings are nothing but a nuisance. Think of the maintenance.”

Rain snaked rivulets across the glass front of Berkowitz's drafty store, puddling inside beneath a spider web crack held together ten year already by masking tape. Who could afford new glass? The light of the buzzing neon sign, BERKOWITZ DRY CLEANING, shaped like a painter's palette, reflected off the wet, black street. When the painter went bankrupt before he could take delivery, the sign guy, may he rest in peace, made Berkowitz a deal. It was what, twenty years?

Friday and rain always drew the crazies. Like mutts dazed with hunger in search of a free meal, they strayed off the streets. They wanted money, and since they were not beggars but just crazy, they would offer to sell him their dreams. Such a deal! Tomorrow's lottery number. The name of a penny stock their brother-in-law just out of prison knew could not miss because his cellmate knew a guy who knew a guy who was a Wall Street felon. For a few dollars, Berkowitz could buy in on the ground floor. Bolder *goniffs* came with wallets, sweaters, knapsacks filled with untraceable cellphones, stereos, radios, watches, six, seven, eight of them encircling their arm to the elbows. They wanted to sell to Berkowitz because he was such a nice guy. To him, Bernie Berkowitz, an aging dry cleaner who needed a Rolex knock-off like he needed a hole in his head.

Normally, Berkowitz threw them out after a minute or two, but today was raining, business was slow, the presser, Jackie, was out to lunch, and so Berkowitz had time for this day's angel. Berkowitz braced his weight on his elbows and leaned on the counter. "So why am I so lucky to be visited by one of the heavenly host?"

The angel removed his hat, a battered gray fedora that could stand blocking if there was anyone left in the world who knew from haberdashery. He thumbed the brim and looked at the hat's sweatband. "Your name came out," the angel said, and he shrugged. The angel unbuttoned his black raincoat, epaulettes with fake brass trim, a pain in the neck to work on if you wanted to keep it water repellent, but a very good coat, a coat like a museum piece from an era when they made such coats. Berkowitz bet that in colder weather, a lining could be zippered in. The angel's full head of golden hair, Berkowitz had to admit, could be called ringlets.

"You're here to tell me I'm dead?"

"Not today."

Berkowitz rapped his knuckles on the wooden counter, stifled a yawn, and said, "So talk. I'm listening."

"A mission, Berkowitz. A mission." The angel gestured to the world outside the window. "What do you think? In general, what do you think?"

Philosophy. Wonderful, in his store was a philosopher-lunatic-angel. Maybe the lunatic played chess? Crazy people often played well, and with the changes in the neighborhood, it was difficult to find a chess partner. Neighborhood? Now it was a *community*. People who wore nothing but black and had holes in their nose and lips from which they hung cheap jewelry, drank bitter coffee, and sat on metal chairs at tiny tables along the sidewalk as if they were in Paris. They checked their cellphones for messages every few minutes and never put the damned things down, as if God forbid they should be out of touch. Everyone decent who had lived in the neighborhood was dead or gone to Florida, God's Waiting Room, where they waited die. But Berkowitz had no use for palm trees, sun, or easy living. He hung on grimly, and he had reasons. Rabinowitz, for example, Rabinowitz used to own the fruit store, sold out to Koreans. Nice people, the Koreans, hard workers, don't misunderstand—but Rabinowitz moved to Boca Raton and three months later he was sitting on a lounge chair next to the community pool when *Bang!* he had a stroke. He may as well have been brained by a coconut. Florida? Pfu. Berkowitz had no use for Florida.

The angel had delicate hands, long slender fingers, a pianist's hands. Robert, his son, the hotshot financial venture capitalist who lived in a beautiful suburban split-level ranch with his wife and two children who didn't talk to his father ever since his mother died—may Rose, too, rest in peace—because Bernie had the nerve three years after the woman was dead to take up

with another woman—what else should he do? he was *healthy*—Robert, his son, when he was a boy and took piano lessons from a widow lady, Robert had hands like this angel. The widow piano teacher was long gone, too, resting in Florida or maybe resting in a Queens cemetery. One or the other. What difference? Dead was dead.

What did he, Berkowitz think? Berkowitz said, “I think it’s raining.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know that’s not what you meant. I’m curious to know if you know what you meant.” The back of Berkowitz’s thumb touched his lower lip.

“What do you think of people?”

“People are people, what’s to think?”

“Come on, Bernie, we know more about you than that. You’ve got opinions. This is why your name came out.”

“So who doesn’t? Listen, Mr. Angel, I got a few questions.” It occurred to Berkowitz that the angel had called him by his first name, and he wondered for a moment how the angel had come across such information, but he went ahead. “How many of you and your playmates can dance. . . .”

“Bernie, please. Let’s not play games. I haven’t got all day.”

“You’re a very busy angel, I’m sure.”

The angel ignored the sarcasm. “Mr. Berkowitz, we know for a fact that you’re unhappy. We know why you’re unhappy. And we want nothing for you but to be happy.”

Berkowitz was disappointed. He thought this one might have been different. “You’re going to sell me whatever I need to make me happy, right?”

“Well, no. We’re going to give it to you....actually, you have it already.”

Berkowitz was suddenly hungry. With hunger, there is no patience. This angel was the worst kind, the very worst kind. When they told you it was free, grab your wallet. He moved from behind the counter.

“You got pamphlets? Give me the pamphlets and get out already. Whenever they tell me I already got what I already need, they give me pamphlets. Jehovah’s Witnesses. Mormons. Seventh Day Adventists. Billy Graham and Pat Robertson should hold meetings in my dry cleaning store. Any day, I expect His Holiness, the Pope. Why do you try this on a man named Berkowitz? Not smart, sonny. Not smart, Mr. Angel.” With one hand Berkowitz roughly grabbed the bottom of the angel’s raincoat, and with the other he grabbed the raincoat’s collar at the back of the neck. From necessity, over the years he’d developed talent for the bum’s rush. With his foot he could swing open the door.

In a second, the angel sat on the wet sidewalk. Berkowitz stood in the doorway, slapping his hands free of non-existent dust.

Berkowitz tossed the angel his fedora. "Mr. Angel, I got things to do." The sleighbells jangled as Berkowitz slammed the door. A funny thing, those bells, he'd put them up to know when someone came into the shop but he'd grown so used to the sound he rarely heard it. This was why he'd had no warning about this morning's angel.

Jackie was coming from up the street, the boy's hands in his jacket pockets, his head bent into the wind. Berkowitz quickly tallied the money in the register, as he always did before leaving Jackie in the store alone. He trusted Jackie completely. Jackie had been with him more than a year. The kid was Puerto Rican, a good boy, but old habits were hard to break.

The bells jangled and Jackie stood in the doorway smacking wet from his leather jacket. He stamped his feet. Why did these kids have to wear the pointy shoes with the blocky wooden heels? Or sneakers with the laces open? What did it prove?

"There's work in the back for you while I go for lunch. Did you see the guy in front of the store? He's an angel. Don't let him back in."

"I didn't see no one, Mr. B. You want I should go out and look?" Berkowitz shook his head. Jackie breathed deeply. "You

know, Mr. B., I love the smell of this store. I like this place.”

“Don’t ask me for a raise, Jackie. You just got one.”

“Nah. I wouldn’t think of it, Mr. B. There’s fifteen other guys waiting to take this job. It’s these shoes, man. I got to get me a new pair of shoes,” Jackie said. “These things are killing me. I don’t know why I wear them.”

Berkowitz grabbed his umbrella. Without another thought, he was out in the storm. The wind was calming down.

At Constantine’s Luncheonette were always the same faces. Different people, maybe, but the same faces. The food was lousy, but there was no place else on the street except the pizzeria, and pizza Berkowitz couldn’t touch, his stomach was so rotten. Nickie Constantine stayed behind the counter over the grill, and the girl he hired was out front. Berkowitz recalled Nickie’s father and mother. He was afraid to ask where they might be. Did Greek go to Florida or somewhere else? The girls who served out front came and went, as interchangeable as nuts and bolts. One might last a year or two, and then she’d be gone. Bernie never bothered to learn their names. They were young, they were tired, and they’d be gone as soon as something better came along.

But today, this one was the worst ever. What could she be? Nineteen? Dirty blonde, the roots already an inch long and dark, she’d had her hair what did they call it? permed? Like she’d put her toe in a hot socket. She painted herself with more crap

than a mortician painted on a stiff. Mean little eyes. A tattoo on her bare shoulder, what looked like a pot-bellied smiling bear. A nose you could slice an orange with.

Berkowitz ordered lettuce and tomato on toast and a glass of skim milk, then opened his newspaper.

Right there on the front page where anyone could see it, was the proof that the schmucks who ran the city were at it again. This time they were going to cave in to the bunch that wanted the schools to teach in any language except English. Schools used to be schools, no? Now they were a regular United Nations.

The girl practically dropped his plate on the table, didn't wait, and went for his milk.

Berkowitz almost took a bite. Bacon, lettuce and tomato. Enough mayonnaise you could grease your car. He put the thing down in disgust and waited. She was trying to kill him with cholesterol.

His glass of milk in her hand, she returned.

"Girly, may an old man ask a question?" She pursed her lips, waiting, and touched her finger to the small depression at the base of her neck. "This is not what I ordered. Did you hear me at all? Why not take pride in your work?"

Now what Berkowitz expected was a snotty remark, total denial, to be told it was the cook's fault — in short, that the girl would tell him to drop dead and maybe look at him with that

stare that shows a dead soul behind dead eyes. This type, that's what you expect.

But that was not what he got. Instead, the mean little eyes opened wide with personality and her mouth rounded in apology. Her palms pressed together like prayer, and she kissed her fingertips.

"Oh, Lord," she said. "You're absolutely right. I don't know what I was thinking." Her voice, this girl was not from around here.

Berkowitz grunted. He felt strangely dissatisfied. "Do you think someone who handles food should wear so much make-up? Look what you do to yourself."

"Oh, you're right. You're right. Thank you, thank you, thank you." She snatched the plate from the table, gave him his skim milk and rushed away.

What was happening here? The girl took longer than she should have, but she returned with the sandwich just as Berkowitz wanted. She'd gone to the Ladies Room, all right. Her face was pale, scrubbed, not a trace of make-up remained, and she'd tied her hair under a net. She stood nervously nearby, and then, like she had an invitation, as Berkowitz lifted his lunch she sat in the booth opposite him. Without the *schmutz*, a person could look on her face. Gorgeous? No, but pretty enough.

She leaned anxiously across the table. "Is the sandwich all

right?"

Berkowitz's teeth ripped a savage bite and he shrugged, unwilling to speak with his mouth full. The sandwich was perfect.

"I need advice," the waitress said, "And I just have a feeling you know what I should do." Then, in a few minutes, skipping really very little since there was so little to tell, she told him the entire story of her life, a tale of woe all too typical and all too horrible to repeat here.

Berkowitz, who had heard it all before, listened. What else could he do?

"The most important thing," he pronounced, "is to have pride in yourself. Self-respect. Don't let them take that from you. You have to be decent. Look at these people." He gestured at the patrons of Constantine's Luncheonette and deliberately raised his voice. "No pride!"

And this is when a funny thing happened. Even before his hand resettled on the table, the diners at the counter straightened up. Soupspoons were guided forward through soup, not backward. Left hands dropped into people's laps. Elbows left tables. There was a rush to the napkin dispensers. Sheepish coffee drinkers placed their donuts onto small plates and with napkins neatly wiped powdered sugar from their fingertips.

The girl didn't seem to notice. "You're so right. What should I do next?"

Berkowitz never had to think twice when asked such a question. Quick with unsolicited advice, here someone was asking. He reached across the table and patted the girl's wrist.

He solemnly said, "Go back to South Carolina. If he's half the man you say he is, he'll forgive you, and if he doesn't, to hell with him. You're better off without him. Besides, your family will forgive you."

She nodded, stood, untied the green apron she wore, and placed it in a rumpled ball on the seat she'd occupied. At the door, she paused to shout toward the kitchen, "Nick, I'm going home."

This one was *meshuggah*. There was no question. Now Nick would come roaring out from behind the grill. A girl should walk out in the middle of the lunch rush? Berkowitz suppressed a smile, sat back and anticipated the fireworks. Maybe he'd be waving a cleaver.

But no. Another funny thing. Nick with the hairy arms and burn scars on his shoulder who Berkowitz had seen with his own eyes once throw a drunk through the plate glass of the sandwich shop's front window, this same Nick shouted, "Good luck, Clarissa."

Good luck?

Berkowitz still had half a sandwich, but his appetite was gone. He finished his milk—good for his ulcer—and after sitting a

minute, wondering, left a few dollars on the table, took his umbrella, and went out. The rain had stopped. He paused to stare through the window back into the luncheonette. Without a waitress, Nick was hurrying, serving and cooking, but he was smiling. Sympathetic to Nick's dilemma, customers waited patiently. It looked like a tea party in the gardens of Buckingham Palace.

Berkowitz grew uneasy.

Back in his own store, as hours passed, the day grew stranger. Jackie, working shoeless, without instructions, swept out the back of the place because he had nothing to do after he'd straightened out the conveyor belt. Berkowitz checked the register. It was okay, of course. The little PR scurried about like a crazed cockroach, and when at three o'clock the kid asked if they had any metal polish, Berkowitz's stomach churned.

Berkowitz told Jackie to take the rest of the afternoon off.

"Thanks Mr. B. I need the time to get myself a decent pair of shoes," he said, and was gone before Berkowitz could tell him what kind, how much to spend, and where to buy them wholesale.

Later still, driving home to his apartment in a better part of the city, some *putz* tailgated him, a crazy stupid thing after such rain, but when Berkowitz glared into his rear-view mirror he saw a sheepish expression pass across the other driver's face and he slowed down. Then the driver behind him pulled onto the

shoulder, and though Berkowitz could not swear to it—he had only the briefest moment to see in his mirror—Berkowitz thought the man placed his face in his hands as if to weep with shame.

The stupid bastard.

Berkowitz stopped at the corner market, which he hated to do in the evening before he went home because that was when the market was most busy, but this day he got through quickly. As he approached the express aisle, the three people before him counted the articles in their carts and the elderly man with 14 items pardoned himself and shuffled away to the longer line where he belonged. Berkowitz didn't need to say a word.

Everything was going his way, but the cords of his neck grew taut, his scalp tight, his hands clenched. He had nothing, nothing at all to say to anyone.

That night, alone, he slowly ate cottage cheese and egg noodles before the small black-and-white television he propped on a corner of the bridge table he had in the kitchen. The television was so old, it had been made in the USA. You could not get such a set anywhere anymore. They were charging now for what had been free, the bastards, but once Berkowitz bought the digital converter, the television worked well enough to watch the evening news and the Sunday morning talk shows. Why replace it? Bad news was bad news in color or black and white.

Berkowitz muttered curses at the newscasters, the smug *goyische* sons-of-bitches who reported the evening litany of

disasters. Then he rinsed his plate, disgustedly turned off the television, and settled into the big living room chair with a Russian novel. Since Rose had passed, he'd read *War and Peace* twice, enjoyed Gogol, didn't care for Dostoevsky—too feverish—and at the moment was reading Turgenev. He would not live forever, he knew, and so Berkowitz saw no reason to spend any of it with second-raters; but those wonderful Russians, so thick with life—who was better?

He'd read a mere fifteen pages when the telephone rang. It was his son, Robert. Good. He had a few choice words for him.

"How are you doing, Pop?"

"I'm fine." There was a long silence. Berkowitz said, "It's your dime, sonny."

"Listen, Pop. Janey and I thought you might want to come out here and visit the boys tomorrow. They miss you. It's been too long."

"I don't know. I'm busy. The store." A lie, but Robert could use a needle. Tomorrow was Sunday. The store would be closed.

"Next week? You want us to drive to you? It's no problem. Whatever is best. Pick a time."

Where was the gimmick? Berkowitz thought frantically. "No. No. There's nothing here for the boys to do." Berkowitz was reeling. How long had it been since he'd seen his grandsons? Two hours away, and a solid year had passed. Ordinarily, Robert called

maybe every other week, they spoke five minutes, but that was it. "Wait a minute. What's this about? How much do you need?"

Berkowitz was ready to give it to him good; he built up a full head of steam, but Robert's laughter was like a pinhole in a balloon. Instead of a satisfying explosion, Berkowitz felt pressure hiss away.

"Janey and I were sitting at dinner, and all of a sudden we had the same idea. Come on, Pop. What do you say?"

Berkowitz knew a terrible thirst. "Sure," he said. "Sure. You don't have to pick me up. I know the way. I'll drive out. Soon."

They talked a bit more. His daughter-in-law took the phone, then each of the boys, their voices bright and happy to talk to Pop-pop.

When he hung up, Berkowitz was disoriented, as though he'd opened his eyes and discovered he was in a stranger's house.

All his life, Bernie Berkowitz had thrived on an adversarial relation with the universe. Day after day was the same battle, a battle that must be fought but could never be won. The bastards had all the advantages, but Berkowitz long ago had decided that when you see something wrong, you are obliged to open your mouth. Maybe it made your teeth loose from grinding, and maybe you developed an ulcer, but who could stand back and let the idiots win? You had to let them know where you stood.

Berkowitz turned in earlier than usual, but all that night, his sheets were alive. Only when he realized his apartment was silent and there was no noise from upstairs—he swore, those people wore roller skates and made love standing up on a bare wood floor—only when he realized that it was their noise he missed, only then sleepless Berkowitz could rest.

That week, things went from good to better.

A barber cut his hair perfectly. Three customers pointed out that their garments had already lost buttons, so Berkowitz shouldn't feel responsible. Jackie bought wingtips with good, rubber soles. "Please" and "thank you" swarmed about him like gnats on a summer night; an epidemic of civility and courtesy descended on the world. Robert called again, when was he planning the visit?

Like other men drank water and ate food, Berkowitz sipped Pepto-Bismol and chewed Tums. Unspent at-the-ready adrenaline coursed through his veins; the muscles of his shoulders and back were in constant spasm, prepared for the fight that never occurred. His arteries narrowed.

This was why on Thursday, after more than a week of flight-or-fight readiness but never a need to do either, at two o'clock, the iron crab got him.

He thought it could gas, but then he couldn't catch his breath and there was fire in his left arm. Jackie summoned an ambulance. Berkowitz lay on the shop's floor wondering if the last

thing he'd see in this life was the spider web crack in his store window's front plate glass. The next thing he knew he was in a hospital bed, wired to beeping machines he wasn't allowed to look at, and he felt like he was floating on a deep, gentle sea. Berkowitz smiled, finally understanding how the nut jobs could want their dope.

Robert and Janey visited—the boys were not allowed up to the room—and Robert brought him a leather-bound copy of Chekhov. Robert was a good boy, Berkowitz decided, a good boy, so you could pardon him being so dumb as to think that with all these tubes and wires taped to him that Berkowitz could lift a book.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, Berkowitz dreamed of Rose. They spoke. Awake, he could recall nothing of the substance of their conversations, only how pleasant it had been to hear his wife's voice.

Saturday night, the angel appeared beside his bed. The angel wore the same black coat, but since it was not raining he wore no hat. His golden curls were free. Berkowitz was unafraid. In fact, seeing the angel once more, he felt like his old self.

"This is your fault," Berkowitz said. "You people are supposed to know what you're doing."

The angel nodded. Berkowitz sat up in bed and pulled tubes from under his nose and from the needles in his wrist .

“You blew it,” Berkowitz said, pointing an accusing finger. “I don’t know what you people were after, but you blew it. You only wanted to make me happy, you said. Hah! Look at me. A heart attack. This is happy?”

The angel patted his closed fist at his chest in an act of contrition. “Bernie, Bernie, Bernie. You never gave me a chance to explain how it was supposed to work.”

“I should sue.”

“So sue me. What good will that do? You’re dead. Now.”

At that final word, Berkowitz was instantly transported somewhere else, a place whose complete nature must of necessity remain undescribed. Neither Heaven nor Hell, no one would call it Purgatory, either. The angel did not accompany him. For what seemed a very long time, or maybe was only an instant, Berkowitz was enveloped in milky whiteness. He was a pearl within an oyster. When he tried to touch himself, he felt nothing, not even the motion of his arm. It occurred to him he might be in this place forever, and the injustice of that rankled him. Whoever was in charge had screwed up. He’d been given an opportunity, but no one explained the rules. Some bastard was always screwing up, and as usual Bernie Berkowitz would pay for it.

But eventually the angel returned, and he was accompanied by two other angels, these the genuine articles, with wings, no less, sandals, and white robes so delicate that if they were put into a presser Berkowitz was sure the garments would

dissolve.

“We are here to discuss your case,” said the oldest of the angels, if angels can be said to have any sign of age.

“Good. I got some things to say. But first, tell me, how’s Rose?”

The angels exchanged a look. “Rose is fine. She’s in a good place.”

“If it is not too much trouble, maybe you could send her my regards?”

The youngest angel, Berkowitz’s angel, said, “Consider it done.” He sat backward on a wooden chair. “So, listen, Bernie, where did you get the right to tell other people how to live?”

“That’s a hot one, Mr. Angel. Aren’t you the one who did that?”

“Not us, Bernie. Did you notice that all we did was give you a little power?”

“What good is power without knowledge?”

The angel waved a disdainful hand, “What’s knowledge without compassion?”

And so the debate began. Never statements, questions only. They argued for millennia, Berkowitz believing at times he’d made a point, at other times becoming disgusted with his angels for being a pack of pure blockheads, and even a few times

Berkowitz being forced to admit the angels had a perspective he had never considered. The discussion ranged far afield, including not only anything that had some bearing on what the angels called “his case,” but the nature of justice, rights and responsibilities, the requirements of good behavior, the fabric of community, toleration for differences—all topics for which Bernie had long known the correct answers. From time to time, to break up the pace, an angel would challenge him to a game of chess and the debate continued over the board. They were not total wood-pushers, Berkowitz had to admit, though they lacked a certain necessary deviousness. Though no one required sustenance, the angels for atmosphere produced strong coffee, sugar, and smoked tiny cigars. Berkowitz argued skillfully, weaving intricate irrefutable chains of logic, citing the wisdom of the ages he’d gleaned from novelists, poets, seers, philosophers and prophets, all seasoned with his own observations.

But the angels, Berkowitz was secretly delighted to learn, had read a book or two themselves. He knew Spinoza; they countered with Maimonides. He talked of Plato; they offered Aristotle. He gave them Hegel; they parried with Kant.

So round and round the discussion continued—is still going on. Berkowitz argues with Heaven. Agile-minded, indignant Berkowitz, who understands everything and is quick to explain to anyone anything at any time, debates with angels. Mired in discussion, forever exasperated, he passes Eternity a happy man.

And as for us, rest assured, should the foursome arrive at any conclusions, we will be the first to know, for the sky will split, a trump will sound, and we instantly will be apprised of their determinations. Just do not expect Bernie to give you the good news. Frankly, Bernie thinks you should wise up. Go figure it out on your own.

*Perry Glasser is the author of three collections of short fiction, including 2009's [Dangerous Places](#), as well as numerous memoirs. "Berkowitz's Angel" was originally published in *The New Virginia Quarterly* and is now one of a new collection, **Based on True Events, A Course of Study for the Hideously Bored**. Publisher and agent queries may be sent to perry@perryglasser.com.*

Glasser resides in Massachusetts.