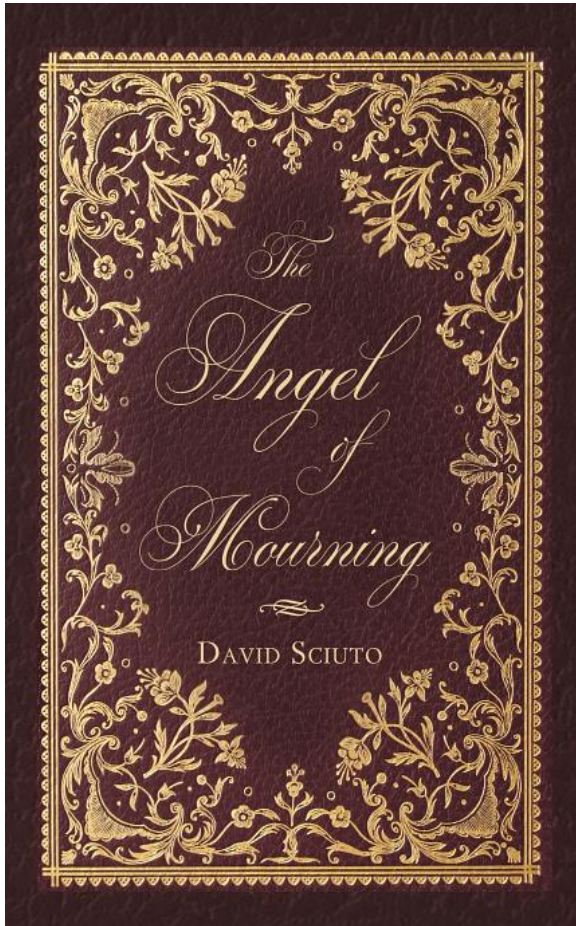




In the 1890s New England, an aging mill owner fights to keep a deathbed promise and protect the Angel of Mourning on his wife's grave from the sculptor's embittered son, as old curses and strange events blur memory and the supernatural.

The Angel of Mourning
By David Sciuto

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The book cover features a dark red, textured background. A wide, ornate border of gold-embossed floral and vine motifs frames the central text. The border includes various flowers, leaves, and scrolling vines, with a repeating scalloped pattern along the outer edges. The title is written in a large, elegant, gold-colored script font.

*The
Angel
of
Mourning*

—
DAVID SCIUTO

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Chapter 1



The Old Bench

Beneath the outstretched limbs of a venerable willow, the sole survivor of its variety in the nearly abandoned park, stood—or rather sat—a rusty wrought-iron bench. Generations of weary strollers, most of them aged, had rested their creaking bones upon its well-worn planks. Time pitted its iron frame and wooden seat, removing a plank here and rotting another there until the bench began to resemble the toothless grins of the elders who enjoyed its comfort. The hovering weeping willow, with gnarled and drooping limbs, bent down as if attempting to scoop up the old bench and hold it lovingly, perhaps worried that its final days were fast approaching. During the summer, Mother Willow shaded her bench from the sun, and now, in autumn’s chill, she wrapped it in a leafy cloak of color to protect it. Perhaps the old bench had outlived its purpose. In an epoch long past, when the park had thrived, resplendent in vibrant maintenance, visitors had sought refuge in its midst, contrasting its pastoral beauties with the encroaching city that was arising beyond the trees, a herald of the Second Industrial Revolution. Today, in the Gilded Age, newly invented forms of transportation lured many of the park’s former strollers to faraway places, well beyond the distance that their legs could reasonably carry them.

Off they went, leaving only “Old Charles”—an appellation that the angry townspeople used to mock the poor octogenarian—to frequent the park, despised and disregarded. A relic of a bygone era, he wobbled upon his cane, seeking the company of his old confidant, the bench, whenever he rested in the park. He would stop to sit, say hello to the old bench, and spend time reminiscing in its presence.

Having approached the upper limits of human longevity, Charles Adam Fulbright was tired of the trials and turmoil that all must endure at various points in life and to varying degrees. He merely wanted to rest. Thus, he sat in the deserted park—a quiet refuge amidst the changing world surrounding the tiny rural New England town of Blitheborough—and eased his aching frame onto the worn remnants of an old bench, intent on ruminating. Here, Old Charles attempted to find solace for his troubled soul and a pathway through his dilemma.

But when he closed his eyes to rest and meditate, a blustorous gale affronted the old man's body and fluttered across the park, bearing with it a spiraling confetti of rust-colored leaves. As it passed, it whispered something in his ears that startled the elder as though it were one of his nightmares. He gazed, as intently as age allowed, across the lawn to the hedgerow, where he thought he had caught a shadow skulking amid the bushes. "Aha! The rascal? Pish! 'Tis nothing but the wind," said he aloud as if to inform the bench. Yet he remained vigilant, tugging at his greatcoat and wrapping it tightly around his neck as he raised his head toward the heavens.

Under a gloomy autumnal sky blenished by newly erected brick edifices in the distance, his world, at best, appeared a dismal gray. With growing anticipation of more dreary days, the old man longed for eternal rest beside his loving wife, Veronica. He longed, indeed, for nothing more than peace again, a return to the happiness and love he had once known with his bride and longed to experience again with her in the afterlife when he would remove himself from the tiring complexities of life and from the dread that he feared was coming his way.

Since his beloved wife had succumbed to the disease that consumed her, the old man had lived in self-imposed seclusion. His once gregarious nature had withered and was now markedly guarded. He had fought a gallant but futile battle in the deepest trenches of loyalty to save Veronica. In the end, he lost not only his wife but nearly

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all his pride and possessions. Old Charles was now a solitary soul, hidden behind hardened outer walls that made him appear impenetrable; yet inwardly, he bore the scars of life's vicissitudes. Fate had transformed him into a hermit crab of sorts, scurrying here and there, always looking for a shell safe enough to hide within.

Nevertheless, amid his woe, Old Charles occasionally smiled. He embraced the fond memories of the halcyon times that had sculpted his life, shaping it from its malleable beginnings, refining it until the consequences of his choices hardened it into the rigid clay that sat now upon the bench. Rescued in infancy from the waters of a woodland pond by the couple who raised him as their own, Charles had known from childhood the loving warmth and security of family. And his happiness passed, like a flaming torch, into his early adult years, kindling his love for Veronica. Though death had taken her from him, the glowing embers of their love remained.

Having grown to manhood under the tutelage of his adoptive father, Charles was heir to the Fulbright family's business and eventually took its reins. Blitheborough's townsfolk benefited from the change, following him as their leader toward significant financial gain—for the textile business he had inherited, Fulbright's Mill, flourished under his stewardship. They honored the young Fulbright, believing in the promises of fortune and fidelity that the increased millwork seemed to bring to them. It seemed as if Providence itself had scooped Charles up from the clay at the pond's edge, molded him, chiseled away at his imperfections, and groomed him for this task of saving the town from the threat of the new, technological age by propelling its people into the riches and rewards of life.

The old man smiled at these fond remembrances, stretching the wrinkles that etched his aged visage into a more youthful appearance, if only for a moment. "I have been blessed," he thought, "with a good life. But now I am wont to resign from this world. Yet I cannot quit it

without fulfilling the promise I made to my Veronica. I must keep my word!"

Alas, Old Charles, withered in limb and wavering in gait, endured ever-deepening despair, vacillating between good and gloomy thoughts. The once successful and revered businessman had brought Blitheborough fortune and, for a time, brightened its future. Yet, when his wife fell ill, Charles gradually withdrew his attention from the town and his business as Veronica's failing health consumed more of his time, devotion, and wealth. Eventually, in a last bid to save Veronica, he sold the mill altogether to investors, trusting that they would continue to care for the people of Blitheborough.

Instead, they moved its looms to their mills in the South and shuttered its New England doors. Hard times followed in the town of Blitheborough. This place, where great pride and promise once abided, now harbored anger and resentment among its townspeople. Some jeeringly began to call Blitheborough "Blightboro." Soon, they referred to the man they had once loved as "that selfish deceiver, Old Charles." As neighboring towns embraced new tools and innovations, many of Blitheborough's residents felt compelled to move away. For those who stayed, though the wounds healed, deep scars remained.

Charles mourned the loss of trust and friendships among his townmates. His decision to sell the mill had torn at his soul like the fraying fabric from his textile mill, for the old man loved his neighbors. But he adored his wife above all else. He understood his responsibility to the workers and appreciated their intense loyalty, yet a deeper devotion to the woman he loved consumed him: now, his one aim was to honor her after her passing.

During her final days, Veronica had sought respite beneath the *Angel of Mourning*, a magnificent marble statue depicting a weeping angel with folded wings kneeling at an altar. The Angel, sculpted by the well-known local artist Arthur Churchgrim, had long knelt in the

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Fulbright Estate's beautiful garden, watching its many flowers flourish, some said, with tears in its stone eyes.

Veronica had taken refuge in the statue's shadow, sitting for hours in the garden and hoping that the Angel might restore her health just as it seemed to rejuvenate the flowers each spring. Beneath the Angel's wings, Veronica's soul flourished in inner peace and grew in faith, even as her body withered away.

Her dying wish was that the Angel should watch over her final resting place and shepherd her into the afterlife to find a place of peace. "If our wondrous Angel can bring my garden to new life each spring," said she, "I trust she will guide me in death to new life." Hearing his wife's words as he sat by her deathbed, Charles promised faithfully to place the Angel above her mortal remains in the graveyard. So, upon her death, with the little money he had left, he had the monument moved from the garden and placed over his beloved's grave.

Now, as Old Charles surveyed the park, he shook with a chill that penetrated his weary frame. Just yesterday, he had heard that Edward Churchgrim, the sculptor's son, who had long coveted his father's valuable masterpieces from the Fulbright Estate and who had more than once threatened to take the Angel by force, had emerged from a lengthy prison term and was again in Blitheborough.

The Angel's majestic beauty was lost on Edward. When he gazed at her, he saw only the exorbitant price that it could bring him in the art market. He had served several years in prison for breaking into his father's art studio, built on the Fulbright Estate, stealing several works of art and attempting to sell them. In his defense, the thief claimed he was—or ought to be—the rightful heir to all his father's works and that it was his right to reclaim them. Yet he failed to produce any documentation—no will, no letter, not even a note—to support his claim.

Thus Edward was convicted and handed a lengthy sentence, for the judge showed no leniency. As the scoundrel was being led away, he

turned to Old Charles and issued a threat that, upon his release, he would prove his right to his father's art and reclaim the Angel.

Edward's angry, haunting voice resounded now in Charles's head. Perhaps he had returned to Blitheborough in order to take the *Angel of Mourning* from atop Veronica's grave. All the scoundrel needed to do was produce a false note to the town's officials and carry the statue away. Truly, Charles surmised, a note might not even be needed, for the townspeople so despised the old man who had chosen to sell their livelihood out from beneath their feet that they might simply turn the other way while the Angel was stolen. Yes, there was no question: with Edward's return to Blitheborough, Charles feared a fatal confrontation, a dreadful prospect that brought to mind the troublesome stories of the lone wolf ambushing its weakened prey in the woods and seizing its chance to devour it.

Yet, despite his advanced age, Charles was determined to keep his promise to Veronica that the sculpted Angel would eternally guard her grave. "I mourn the loss of my business," he told himself, "a loss that sadly affected the poor people of Blitheborough, but I will not break a vow made to my wife as a sign of my love and loyalty to her!"

Reinvigorated by this declaration, the old man returned to more pleasant thoughts. He gazed with gratitude at the park, in spite of its bedraggled condition, for it was Nature herself that had filled him with the faith to bolster his resolution. This small Blitheborough park had been designed by the town's elders of distant days, men whose foresight had prompted them to create a peaceful retreat from a changing world. Along the periphery was a pine grove, and to those entering the park through an opening amid the trees, the passage would seem like a walk into a shadowy, deep forest, leading them to the idyllic setting of the park itself. For the less adventurous visitor, there was a public entrance under an arched gateway bearing a simple welcome: "For all who seek refuge and revival amid the gifts of nature." The road leading in from this gateway bisected the park, and at this moment, had a passerby

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ventured along this route, he would have strolled past the park's sole occupant, Old Charles, perched on the rotting bench like a cardinal trilling for its lost mate.

But no one walked along the path. Devoid of visitors, the park clung only to stationary vestiges of its glorious past. Many of the trees and shrubs had long been fixtures there—albeit overgrown for lack of pruning. Some were now barren and hollowed out, while others had been reduced to stumps, marking the sites where once they reached for the looming clouds floating overhead. Still others were in an insidious battle with other plants, bound and strangled by bittersweet ivy and slowly dying.

As he looked about, Charles pondered the fate of this shabby landscape; he concluded that nothing presently stirring his senses could remain forever. “What became of the world I knew, and what is to become of this world after I am no longer its resident?” There had been discussions in Blitheborough of a revitalization—or, more accurately, a reclamation—of the park, one that would create a new haven for a new generation of visitors. But Charles could not recall the design for this new haven, nor did he venture to guess its features. A troubled mind released into the realm of fantasy often drifts helplessly toward the worst scenario imaginable. The old man once again closed his eyes; he had seen enough.

There was only one remaining bastion of lasting beauty in the park: its fountain. During the decades of optimism in Blitheborough, the fountain had been the town's pride and was perhaps its greatest attraction. It consisted of an ornately carved pool, above which a spray of water even now gurgled with vitality amid the decaying foliage. At first, the fountain had brought both local and distant visitors to the park to admire its beauty and experience its message of hope. For many, its effervescence sparked enthusiasm for the town, which had, in that era, rediscovered its purpose under Charles's leadership. Indeed, the lasting effects of great art begin by inhabiting the heart through the

portals of the senses before finding a place at a bountiful table where the soul sups on higher inspiration. Graciously, the people of Blitheborough welcomed those guests who gathered for this splendid repast.

The fountain stood across from the bench where Old Charles now sat, wearily gazing upon it. It spouted upward with defiant cheer, gushing forth unceasingly throughout the spring, summer, and fall until the first frost signaled winter's coming. The fountain had made a lasting impression on Old Charles and, for that matter, on his wife. Its creator was the self-same artist Arthur Churchgrim, whose Angel had enchanted Veronica in her final hours.

Old Charles squinted from the old bench, bringing the fountain's magnificence, with its baroque reflecting pool, into focus. Churchgrim had called this work *The Compass to Guide Our Way*, for it bore four statues, each personifying one of the cardinal directions, around the pool's edge. At the West knelt the figure of a weeping woman, looking forlornly into the pool; at the East, a smiling woman retrieved a baby from the water; at the South, a wolf bent down to drink from the pool, its indolent pose reflected in the water and evoking Narcissus; at the North stood another of Churchgrim's signature angels, arms outstretched, one hand raised to the heavens in benediction while the other pointed downward as if offering a final chance of salvation. In the pool's center, a fount sprayed upward.

Charles arose from the old bench and steadied himself upon his cane. He had lingered long enough in the past. He turned and tipped his hat to the bench, tapping it with his cane as one might pat an old comrade on the shoulder to bid him adieu. "Good day, my friend," he said. "As always, I have enjoyed your company. You may not have much to say, but sitting with you arouses the most vivid recollections—and for that, I thank you!"

Then he doddered down the path, tapping his cane contrapuntally alongside the clicking of his heels upon the cobblestones.

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Rhythmically, these taps and clicks marked each step, each breath, and each fleeting thought. It occurred to him that the tapping of his cane resembled the ticking of his grandfather clock—a remnant of his past wealth—which stood now in his sitting room in the boardinghouse where he lived.

The grand house, occupied by the Fulbright family for generations, now sat abandoned, Nature slowly reclaiming it. The lavish home had been built by Charles's grandfather, who had opened the town's only textile mill on the River Charonsway. Charles's father, James, had done much to expand the property, adding an artist's studio cottage for Arthur Churchgrim and adorning the mansion's walls and grounds with plentiful examples of Churchgrim's work. Charles had come to manhood amid this splendor and lived on the estate with his wife for many years. After her death, he had found himself in dire need of money to repay the debts he had accumulated during her ordeal.

Yet he could not sell the family home. The Fulbright Mansion was the only great house in the small town, far exceeding any townspeople's aspirations or purse. The house had once stood as a symbol of success for those who worked diligently in the mill; now, in its decrepit state, it symbolized abandonment and despair. The old man had not been able to afford its upkeep. Having used nearly all the money he had gained from selling the mill in the vain pursuit of a miracle cure for Veronica, he now had to survive on the little that remained in his coffers. Those funds were perforce all the old man would have during his remaining time in this world, however long—or short—that might be. Thus, with neither the money to repair the mansion nor a buyer to untie this albatross from about his neck, Old Charles had carted away what he could, leaving the stately home—the only place he had ever truly called home—to rot.

Whither was Old Charles headed now? Every day, immersed in ritual and rumination, he walked from his boardinghouse along a wooded path toward the park and then into the town's main street.

Then he would often visit the general store and the church where Veronica's funeral had taken place. He always passed the adjoining graveyard where his bride had been laid to rest. While the order of his pilgrimage might vary from day to day, each of these haunts was an unvarying feature of his daily itinerary.

Today, Old Charles would complete his rounds by going to the general store before heading back to the boardinghouse by way of the churchyard and the wooded path. The Blitheborough General Store carried few goods—far fewer than the city stores beyond the valley. Though its offerings were modest, the store provided all the old man required. Its proximity to the boardinghouse allowed for frequent visits, but he owed his steadfast patronage to its proprietor, Stanley Hanks—a faithful friend through both the best and worst of times. Thus, Charles, like his father before him, traded only at the Blitheborough General Store.

Stanley had grown up with Charles, and for many years they had seemed to live parallel lives: both had carried on the businesses of their fathers, both had married their first loves and, as old men, both had lost their wives and then retired to the boardinghouse, where they roomed across the hall from each other. They looked after each other, checking in several times a week.

In recent months, however, Stanley had taken to his bed; he was gravely ill. Hence, Charles saw him only at the boardinghouse, where he called on his old friend daily, rather than in Stanley's usual spot behind the general store's counter. Now, whenever Charles needed to buy supplies, he found Stanley's son, George, in his place.

George was an erstwhile lawyer, though he had only ever had two substantial clients in the small town: his own father and, before the mill's demise, Old Charles. Since losing the more profitable half of his business and hence much of his income, the son had remained aloof whenever Charles visited the store, a sad contrast to his father's geniality. In temperament, father and son could not have been further

apart: behind the grocer's counter, Stanley had so often sported a smile; George sported a gun. Although Stanley had never envied Charles's opulence and fortune, his son resented Old Charles for squandering his wealth, and he blamed him for his own decline after he lost his place as legal counsel for Fulbright's Mill.

When Charles sold the mill, George had been forced to return to his father's store—a providential return in some ways since Stanley's mind had begun, by then, to dull with age. Though it seemed a curse to the young man to be relegated to the family business, it was a blessing to Stanley, who welcomed his son's help, for continuity can be calming in the face of change. Still, George, in the manner of young men, yearned for something exciting and different.

At a sauntering but steady pace, Old Charles made his way toward his friend's store. He recited in his mind a familiar list, memorized from a note he had once committed to paper and left with his friend Stanley for safekeeping, should he, in his dotage, forget his reason for visiting the store. The old man recited to himself items he needed: a loaf of day-old bread, a wedge of cheese, and three or four apples from a local orchard. Such items were the humble staples on which the elderly residents of Mrs. Harrison's boardinghouse relied between the two daily meals she served: breakfast and supper.

Charles's list was neither long nor varied, yet it so engrossed the old man's thoughts that he failed to observe two youthful fellows—boys, in truth—rushing toward him and poised to jostle him as they passed.

"Whoa, Old Charles," said one youth, violently nudging the aged man. "Why do you continue to show your miserly face in public? Have you not done enough damage to the citizens of this town?" He stood in Charles's path while his companion moved ahead.

"Who are you, boy? How have I offended you?" asked Charles.

"Do you not recognize me? Look upon my face and see its resemblance to a man who gave his very life for you. His name was Abram Bush. You wretched old man, you sold the mill and thought

nothing of your workers—among them my dear father, who lost not only his job but his dignity and eventually his life because of you!”

“How so? Your father drowned in the river—an unfortunate and sad event, certainly.”

“Yes, he was poor and devastated, thanks to you. When he could not provide for his family, he forfeited his own life in the river behind your mill!”

“No!” Old Charles cried. “’Twas an accident, I was told. Boy, do not disparage the name of your father. He was a good man.”

From farther along the street, the boy’s companion called, “Isaac, leave the old fool to wallow in his own mire. My family, too, suffered at his greedy hands! His punishment will be for us to shun him, to look past him as though he no longer exists. Let him rot along with his abandoned mansion!”

Isaac began to boil with rage, then spat upon the old man and shoved past him. The two boys laughed and cursed Old Charles as they disappeared down the street.

The old man removed a handkerchief from his greatcoat pocket and wiped the spittle from his face. He refolded the cloth with care, slid it back into his pocket, and resumed his way. Episodes like this occurred more often than Charles cared to admit, even to himself. In the first years after closing his business, he had been accosted with frequency by the very people he had once employed. Since then, although the torment occurred less often, Charles heard persistent rumors of a malevolent myth about his actions, one that was being kept alive and—as he now saw—passed down to the next generation.

When he reached the door of the general store, Old Charles found it locked. There was no notice to explain the unexpected closure, but all was dark inside. Charles peeked through the glass window. “Unusual for this time of day,” thought he. “Perhaps, with the sun setting early now and business slowing everywhere in town, George decided to close the shop early.”

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The wind began to toss misty drizzle here and there, and rain glistened on the pavement. Charles drew his greatcoat closer around himself and headed back for the wooded path.

This path was a narrow corridor carpeted with moss and pine needles, which struck through an expanse of woodland separating the old town on Main Street from the abandoned Fulbright mansion. Over the years, the woodland had seen the creation of several tributary paths that led to various locations: the churchyard, for one, as well as the other end of Main Street. The woodland itself, though deeded initially for future burials as Blitheborough grew and thrived, in the present time remained as it had always been: wild and untouched, dismal and uninviting. Old Charles was accustomed to taking the main path on his daily journey, and he now entered the dense tangle of trees without hesitation, though a spindly copse veiled the full moon's light. The old man knew the path's every twist and turn, and the gloom of the woods did not frighten him. Still, he always took the opportunity to say his prayers while on the path. This was a time for meditation, for mingling the wonders of Nature with his Christian faith.

As he tottered along, his cane in one hand and his pocket Bible in the other, he shuddered at the sound of a wolf howling deep in the trees. The baying was unusual, for the wolves once common in Blitheborough's woods had been expunged after a horrific incident, which Charles chose not to remember. Still, town legend had it that one lone wolf remained alive, having escaped the bullets that killed its brothers. Several townspeople had vowed to kill the devil, but it always eluded them. More recently, some people said they occasionally had caught a glimpse of the beast before it vanished again into the thick brush. Perhaps it was calling out to its lost brothers now.

Nervously, Charles endeavored to quicken his pace. Ahead, he saw a flickering light at the end of the dark, tree-lined tunnel. As he approached, the light seemed to move this way and that. Something glimmered and flitted, almost faerie-like, amid the thick cover of trees.

Charles rubbed his eyes, but through the mist of rain, with his unreliable vision, he could not detect the gleam's origin. He thought it might be a wayfarer's lantern, but no other soul appeared. Finally, with a sigh of success, Old Charles reached the graveyard lane. He kissed his Bible and placed it over his pounding heart. His journey was nearly finished!

But his errand was not yet complete. On that bleak and windy evening, Charles shuffled along the churchyard's perimeter, squinting through the wrought-iron fence that separated the living from the dead, its black spears guarding the resting citizens within. He scanned the monuments as he passed, searching amid the moonbeams for the Angel, now mossy and worn, on which the name **V**eronica was inscribed.

When he finally reached it, he heard the wind whisper, "When?"

Charles tipped his hat and replied, "Soon!" before scurrying onward to the boardinghouse.



Chapter 2



Heaven and Earth

Like the torches in a catacomb, streetlamps cast ghastly shadows along Charles's trek to his boardinghouse. Glistening rain sparkled in the night sky as it fell earthward, striking the sidewalk in a rhythm that harmonized with the old man's tapping cane as he hurried along. He battled not only the elements but his own weariness, struggling to breathe, to endure the freezing rain that numbed his wizened face, to push forward against the fierce wind that blew cold air into his nose and mouth as he strained to expel each breath. Gaining momentum uphill, Charles wrestled with his own lungs, huffing and puffing like an underpowered steam engine, sending clouds of steam billowing into the night air. Despite the illusion that the streetlamps created a silver nimbus around each frosty breath, Charles's slog to his quarters on this late autumn night was agonizing.

He wondered with increasing despair why the peacefulness in the park and his meditative walks through the woods now filled him with such great distress. What had he perceived or thought he had perceived? Was his aged mind faltering and mixing fantasy with fact? Or had his rising state of anxiety brought on the phantasmagorical vision of a light in the woods? Could it be that he had gained an unexpected spiritual gift to see what others could not? Were that the case, he hoped the ethereal power would help his quest to preserve his wife's memory despite Edward Churchgrim's release from prison.

"Nonsense!" he murmured to himself. "I am only a dismal old man with nothing special left to give."

Indeed, something *had* moved in those woods; of that, Charles was sure. Whatever it was, it had stirred something ancient in him: fear,

yes, but wonder, too. Loathsome or lovely, that image now lingered at the edge of his thoughts, refusing to fade.

Perchance, it was merely a firefly, flashing its brief signal in search of love. But no—he knew it had not been that. Perhaps it was an eternal beacon, calling him home... or, Heaven forbid, the taunting hand of that deceitful scoundrel, Edward.

Sadly, Old Charles told himself that the fight for the treasured *Angel of Mourning* could end only in his own heartbreaking and dishonorable defeat. He was too frail, too weary. Yet he suspected that the conflict would culminate in a battle of wit and temperament, not a physical altercation. Charles's opponent was a younger man, less likely to tire and more likely to persist in his goal of taking the statue. And what Charles lacked most, Edward likely possessed in abundance: time. Once the old man was laid to rest beneath it, the statue could be claimed, dislodged from its vigil, and carried off, its sacred duty abruptly abolished.

This all weighed heavily on Charles's mind. He felt a growing urgency to resolve the conflict—or, what would be far preferable, to avoid it altogether. However, having dealt with Edward earlier, in the altercation that had led to the younger man's incarceration, Charles was sure that the rogue would now make good on his promise to claim his late father's art. And this expectation of unfinished business agitated Old Charles even more than his strange sighting of a light in the woods that night.

Anticipation of reaching his rooms in the boardinghouse propelled him forward. "Yes," Charles decided, "'twas my fear that caused those unsettling sounds in the woods. That odd light dancing before my eyes, shining into them...perhaps it was—my God!—from a ghostly lantern. But pish! I cannot be sure of what I saw." Thus, he attempted to calm himself.

But the image of a lantern, recalled to his mind, now drove Charles into a state of terror. Terror has an uncanny way of slithering into a

vulnerable imagination and injecting its venom. Once infected, the mind dies a thousand deaths from frightful—though unlikely—possibilities. Fear now gripped Charles so that he shook and stumbled along the sidewalk, listing first to one side and then the other, like a rowboat in a storm at sea, before he righted himself.

Through his rain-blurred vision, he at length caught a glimpse of his boardinghouse, still some distance away. He lurched forward, stretching out an arm as if to grasp its distant doorknob. Had anyone along the street seen Old Charles in this bewildered state, the observer might have thought the old man's arm was pulled by some phantom, leading him against his will. Or perhaps the onlooker might conclude that he was simply demented. That, however, was far from the truth, for Charles retained a sharp mind despite the tricks it was playing on him now. He was simply wrestling—as he was wont to do—with the uncertainty that arises amid the shadows when dusk vanquishes daylight.

Finally, at the steps leading up to the massive wooden doors of his boardinghouse, Charles breathed more easily. "Thank God," he thought, "I have arrived!"

The boardinghouse had been built on lower Main Street, in the oldest part of town. Before it, the well-worn cobblestone street befuddled pedestrians and carriages alike with its pavers, some uneven, some loosened, some missing. Although the building retained some semblance of its once-imposing, stately façade, it was now decrepit, like the adjacent aged edifices, all fashioned in the antiquated, angular style of high-peaked gables. At dusk, with only streetlights to cast their dim light upon the thoroughfare, the houses gave the impression of hooded brethren gathering for prayer in a cloister. Yet, while this part of town seemed dismal and even foreboding to those who now lived further out, on the fringes of Blitheborough, it had become a kind of home to the old man.

"At last!" sighed he as he gazed upward at the great front doors. He breathed a sigh of comfort as he climbed the steps, and his thoughts returned to the welfare of his good friend Stanley, his neighbor in the boardinghouse. "I must check on him before retiring to my own rooms," Charles thought.

Standing on the stoop, he reached with a trembling hand for the doorknob. Yet the old door seemed to defy his admittance. Groaning upon its hinges, it announced the presence of a radiant young lady who appeared beyond it and attempted to step out onto the stoop. They nearly collided in the doorway. Coming face to face with this woman, the old man was taken aback. He gasped, stunned by her finely sculpted features, which seemed surrounded by an ethereal aura of bluish white, and by their strange, comforting familiarity.

Astounded, he could think of nothing to say other than, "Excuse me, miss." He attempted to pass by her and traverse the threshold.

"Most certainly, sir," she replied. Observant as she was, the young lady noticed that the old man was wavering in his step. "Here," she continued, extending a hand. "Let me help you."

She wrapped her arm around his frail frame and gently lifted Charles into the front hall.

"Well, thank 'ee, lass!" said Charles, slowly shedding his agitation.

The sweet smell of rose and lilac filled the usually dank and musty hall. He stared directly into her eyes in the dim light of the doorway, trying to rummage through his mind and recall where they might have met. "Grace be granted," said he at last, pointing a long, gnarled finger at her, "but your face—I know your face! I know not whence. Forgive me, but have we met before?" He felt at once awestruck and confused by the woman's glowing features. She was indescribably beautiful.

"I should think not," she said, "since I arrived here only tonight. I am the house's newest occupant."

Charles looked skeptical—as he often did. The boardinghouse typically housed old men like himself, not fair young ladies like the one

now standing before him. In truth, he could not recall a single woman—save Mrs. Harrison, who owned the house but lived elsewhere—ever taking a room there. His own tenure in the place had spanned nearly all the years since his wife’s death. Surely, he had misheard the young woman. Or perhaps he had misunderstood her use of the word *occupant*.

So he asked, for clarification, “Occupant? Ah, then I assume you are the new kitchen help for Mrs. Harrison, who runs this house. She has spoken of it several times. She is getting on in years, as we all are, and the kitchen—indeed, the entire house—has become too much for her. Are you the new help, young lady?”

“No, sir. I am not here to help Mrs. Harrison but rather to take up residence here. A room became available this very afternoon.”

“Oh? And which room might that be? I know every room in this old house, and certainly all are taken—by old men, like me, all of whom have been here for a good many years.”

The woman’s bright face grew dark and somber. “Sadly,” she said, “my good fortune in securing a room here comes at the loss of one of your neighbors, Mr. Stanley Hanks.”

Charles gasped. “Good God! Not Stanley? Has the poor man died this day? Why, I saw him only this morning!” His craggy visage grew more wrinkled as he tried to hide his sadness, yet his tired old eyes moistened despite his efforts.

The agony on Old Charles’s face prompted the mysterious woman to say, “Dear sir, I apologize. I thought you must know already of his passing.” She touched Charles’s shoulder. “I am sorry to be the bearer of such sad news. I am sorry for the loss of your friend.” She caught him as his knees buckled and steadied the old man.

Her gentle touch, accompanied by her soothing words, seemed heartfelt to the old man. Here was a woman who, despite her young age, seemed to offer him compassion as deep as a mother’s. Charles grasped her hands with a strength that harkened back to his past. Long

unmoved by anything outside his own thoughts, he felt unexpectedly calmed and at peace. He did not understand how the woman who now held him could have such an effect on him, softening his hardened shell. "There is something more here," thought Charles, and he ventured a direct inquiry. "Pray tell, what is your name?"

"Muriel," was her response. "And you are?"

"Charles Fulbright," he replied.

"I am honored to meet you, Mr. Fulbright." She curtsied in reverence to the old man. Then she asked, "Did you know Mr. Hanks well?"

"Yes!" Charles said sadly. "Quite well, and for nearly a lifetime. My dear friend took ill some months back. I knew he was gravely ill, but I clung to the hope that he might recover. And now he is gone, poor soul!" Again, Old Charles's eyes welled with tears. Finally, he regained his composure and inquired, "Your arrival on the heels of his demise is curious. Did you know Stanley personally?"

"Unfortunately not. But I knew Mr. Hanks was ill." Muriel smiled and released the old man's hands. "He suffered greatly, I'm told. But now his ordeal has ended—and I believe the gates of Heaven opened to receive a most deserving soul."

"Yes, Stanley was indeed a good-natured fellow and long-time friend. May he rest in peace." Charles thought for a moment. "My dear young lady, you offer such comfort, and you seem wise beyond your years. Are you a nurse by vocation?"

"You might consider me one who offers assistance when needed," said Muriel. "As for my wisdom, so-called, perhaps it is only my experience of consoling many in grief by providing them with an understanding of our deeper natures."

"I would dare call it a God-sent gift to see another's agony and offer refuge. 'Tis a blessing for anyone in your care. Muriel, I am glad we met." Charles paused but then found himself—in a way that seemed odd to him—opening his thoughts to her. "Since you offer assistance

when needed, as you say, dear girl, perhaps you could assist me in climbing the stairs? I had a bit of an ordeal on my walk here tonight and have become quite winded. And, truth to tell, with the shock of Stanley's death, it feels nearly too much to bear." He shook his head. "I must retire to my room."

As the words left his mouth, he wondered why he had uttered them.

But Muriel's response, once again, alleviated any apprehension. "You are shaken. Allow me, good sir, for I would be honored to accompany you."

She entwined the old man's arm in hers, and together, they ascended to their rooms, climbing the well-worn wooden stairs that groaned and snapped with each step. They were a picture of life's contrasts: old and young, bright and gray, hopeful and despairing.

Muriel looked fondly at Old Charles and said, "You look forlorn, Mr. Fulbright. What troubles you? Pray tell me, sir, for I believe I can help you." She steadied him up the staircase with the enveloping care of a mother dove guiding a fledgling beneath her wing.

Arm in arm with this new companion, the old man began to feel that he might disclose thoughts to her that he had, in the past several years, shared only with his silent friend, the old park bench.

"There is much on my mind," he said, "if you can believe that an old man retains thoughts beyond the moment of their passing! Yes, I am sorely troubled, with a grief and worry that weigh heavily upon me. But my tale is long and ponderous, out-measuring the treads on this winding staircase, and its full account would take more time to tell than our ascent up these stairs."

"We shall talk as long as you want, Mr. Fulbright. We are neighbors now. If you will allow me to do so, I hope to spend much time in your company." Muriel smiled and pressed the old man's hand against her side.

“Well,” said Charles, “if you have taken Stanley’s room, you are my closest neighbor now, across the hall.”

He did not quite know the full extent of this young woman’s kindness, and his hardened outer shell was still present, but his crust had begun to crack in Muriel’s company. Her soothing voice, gentle touch, and caring nature caused him to speak freely, for her calming character continued to seem familiar to him.

For much of his life, Charles had known the warmth of love and care from his nurturing parents, from his loyal mill employees, and from his adoring and devoted wife. But the recent years had deprived him of all human warmth. He had long ceased to show any of his emotions, instead keeping them deep within, even though, before his wife took ill, Charles had worn his heart, as they say, on his tailored sleeve. Now, as the troubled old man looked at the airy beauty of youth accompanying him up the stairs, he felt that he wanted to open his heart to her.

And so Charles said, “I’d like to tell you my story over a pot of tea. For most of my years, I have led a blessed life accompanied by love and fortune. But now, in my later years, I find myself wandering, immersed in my own thoughts, alone in a new world that I hardly know. I feel purposeless without my dear wife, Veronica. I live now only to honor her memory, and, in truth, I long to sleep beside her, for she was my love and my life. I will show you photographs and share my memories of our time together. Through them, you will come to know my late, beautiful wife. Will you sit and listen to my tale?”

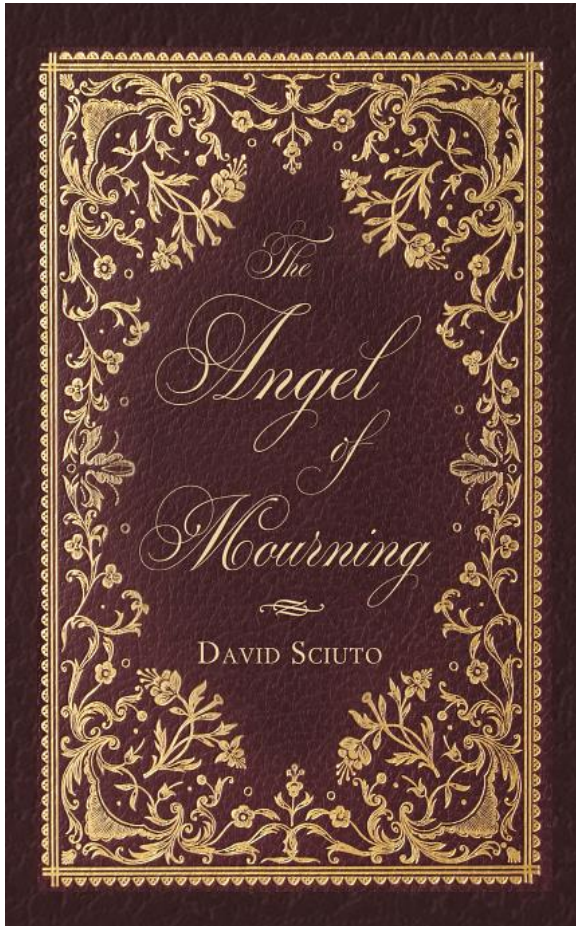
“Of course!” Muriel said, and they continued their ascent in silence.

The hallway at the top of the stairs was ancient and long-neglected. It smelled damp and musty, and dust covered the woodwork in those places where the stain had faded away. Yet, uninviting as it seemed, the two sojourners, who had met just moments ago, found solace in its dim quiet. A single ray of celestial light shone through the dank space,

The Angel of Mourning

illuminating the path before them. Looking up at the foxed and blemished ceiling, Muriel pointed to the beam's source: an ornate skylight through which the radiant moon peered down. The grand lunar visage was using a private window, as it were, to observe this newly created friendship in an earthly Paradise!





In the 1890s New England, an aging mill owner fights to keep a deathbed promise and protect the Angel of Mourning on his wife's grave from the sculptor's embittered son, as old curses and strange events blur memory and the supernatural.

The Angel of Mourning
By David Sciuto

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