

LANCE OLSEN

*The Wounded Angel*

*To Hugo Simberg*



1

The lake somewhere in Finland inventing a slightly out-of-focus afternoon above itself. Two children on their way home after church. Wordless, hands in pockets, they are following a deserted road. Low gray-blue hills lope along the far shore. Clusters of white flecks against dark wet earth. Sami, the hatted one, thinks about the chuffing sound his feet make. Jarmo, his older brother, the one in the too-small brown jacket, thinks about the fish soup his mother is preparing this very moment back at the farm as she does every Sunday afternoon.

2

Both boys approach the edge of not thinking, though Sami is infinitesimally closer to that edge than Jarmo. They have walked this

stretch of road too many times to notice it. To them, it simply represents an instrument of agency. They are, that is, imagining the end rather than the means of their journey. Consequently, they fail to hear the scattered birdsong, the wind exhaling continuously across the lake, the suck and gurgle of the soggy ground around them.

3

The air busy with a frisky chill and the damp loamy greenness of early spring.

4

They fail to notice these, too.

5

Fish soup or ham, Jarmo thinks. How, when you reach deep into the barrel of salted meat at the end of the season, right down to the grainy bottom of it through the crystals like warm ice, you extract leather slabs alive with maggots. As if someone had sprinkled the meat with squirming rice. You have to scrape it off with a knife before you can boil the leather into something edible. Only then do you discover what the slab will turn into: fish or ham.

6

Sami kicks a rock and listens to it snap and die. On the edge of not thinking, he sweeps his grimy-knuckled hand down and whisks up the rock as he passes by and chucks it as far as he can into the meadow to his right, trying to plock it into the lake. The rock clumps down short. A family of heel-sized dun birds agitate from the grass into the blurry sun and dart into invisibility. They are there. They are gone. They are there. They are gone. At that instant, for no reason he can articulate, Sami discovers himself wondering how much God weighs.

7

If he stopped in his tracks just now and simply listened, Sami would hear the stream behind him sloshing and clicking over pebbles like a bag full of marbles. The continuous dry-paper crinkle of last year's leaves rubbing against each other on spindly bushes. Mosquito whirl. Fly buzz. The rush of his own breath inside his head for what in the end will amount to decades without cessation. But he doesn't listen.

Instead, he discovers himself wondering, fleetingly, if he might be a little on the chunky side. Sitting in the outhouse, deep into the disagreeable daily business of passing gas and night soil, he has on occasion let his gaze fall upon the bluish-white skin of his thighs and noticed a cheesy patchwork of dimples spotting it. What, he wonders, zeroing in on another rock in the road, might this portend about the complexion of his adulthood?

8

Sami lets his left foot fly.

9

Approaching the edge of not thinking, hands in pockets, a wooden bowl of fish soup hovering in the middle of his consciousness, Jarmo happens to glance up and see her lying in the meadow thirty or forty meters away. Initially, he believes he is looking at the remnants of a thawing snowdrift. Then he realizes the shape is completely wrong for that. Nor are there any other swaths of snow in view. So he convinces himself that he must be looking at an enormous bird. A swan, perhaps, shot recently by a hunter. Yet the truth is that he has never seen a bird this big, he has heard no gunfire this afternoon, there exist no hunters anywhere in the vicinity. That can't be it, he thinks. That can't be it at all. Hence, still walking, although not quite as quickly as before, Jarmo squints. He tugs back the corner of his right eyelid to press his cornea into obedience. He ducks and bobs his head, trying to pull the object of his sudden interest into focus.

10

The manner in which she curls into herself makes her wings arch up behind her like gigantic feathery parentheses separating her from the surrounding text of the world.

11

Her hair is the color of butter.

12

Her long diaphanous gown, the kerchief tied around her head like a bandage, are flawless white in spite of the patch of marshy ground on which she lies.

13

She is, Jarmo sees, barefoot.

14

She is barefoot, and, unthinking, Jarmo reaches for and tugs on his brother's baggy black sleeve. Sami raises his head. Half thinking about the nature and attributes of excess, he peers out from beneath the brim of his black hat and is jolted by what he sees. Both boys come up short, as if the skeleton of their grandfather—a huge block of a mirthless man with hands as large as boat paddles—had just appeared before them on the deserted road, reached into their chest cavities, placed five massive bony fingers around each of their young hearts, and squeezed as if he were squeezing out a pair of saturated washrags after a particularly long, luxurious sauna.

15

When they reach her, they are surprised to find that she is still breathing. Her weak exhalations smell brownish-red like cinnamon at Christmas.

16

Jarmo makes out the small triangular wedge missing from the lower portion of her left wing, and, near the top, the watery pink smudge of blood.

17

He circles the wounded angel slowly, appraising. Sami hesitates and falls back. Jarmo kneels and, reaching out to touch her shoulder, shake her gently to see what will happen next, how the plot of their day will advance itself, it strikes him that angels with their six appendages and tremendous wings are closer in essential physiognomy to butterflies, beetles, and bees than to mortals.

18

The nature and attributes of angels, Sami thinks at almost the same moment, are insectile rather than humanoid.

19

Withdrawing his hand, Jarmo asks his brother to help him find two long sturdy branches and a shorter third one with which to construct a stretcher. Before he has risen to his feet, however, the afternoon somehow lurches ahead of itself and becomes later than it should, the light more rundown and flat. He feels time speeding up. It reminds him of riding the Helsinki tram, only much faster. Blinking, he tries to shake it off, but it isn't until he backs several paces away from the angel that the strange sensation abates. Then, as unexpectedly as it sped up, time slows back down. Everything settles into normalcy. And so Jarmo decides not to mention this episode to his brother. Rather, he leads Sami in the direction of a single dead willow standing in the middle of the meadow. Here they will undertake the laborious task their father taught him years ago of breaking up branches and tying them together with long fibrous strands of grass.

20

Her chest was flat, Jarmo thinks as he works. He stands, light deteriorating around him, and shrugs off his jacket. Her chest was completely flat, just like a boy's.

21

And you could see through her gown.

22

You could see through her gown and even if you tried not to you couldn't help yourself because there it was and you had to look and when you did you could see her what do they call it her pubic mound and her pubic mound was smooth and unblemished as a doll's.

21

An hour later, the brothers return to find the angel sitting up. She is examining a collection of limp white flowers in her hand. Apparently she plucked them while the boys were away. She looks drunk, drunk or dazed, as if she can no longer remember the names of certain things she knew the names of perhaps ten minutes ago. She does not look at the brothers as they approach. Sami has the impression that her eyes are actually closed, that it is even possible she is blind, although it is difficult to say with certainty because the thick white

kerchief she wears as a bandage impedes his view. Jarmo signals him to lower the stretcher and Jarmo walks over to her, squats, reaches out his hand again to touch her shoulder in order to let her know they are ready to go. She does not take her eyes off the flowers. The second Jarmo's fingertips contact her gown, time jerks forward once more, like a film with several frames missing, the afternoon light weakens further, stars phosphoresce in the sky, they whirl through the night, the sky blanches into gossamer morning haze, the orange sun is rising, the red sun is setting, then it is evening, then it is evening and then it is night again, then it is evening and then it is night again and then it is morning, and then she is speaking to him without moving her lips, explaining, perhaps, explaining or describing, her voice in his mind reminiscent of the electric version of the color blue.

22

*In heaven I will tell you, she is saying without moving her lips. I will tell you in heaven. "I" not being who I am. "Is" not being how it is. This much is clear, of course. One could even hazard this much goes without comment. The same note, held forever. Let us call it middle C, for argument's sake. Middle C or B-flat. It doesn't honestly matter which, for argument's sake. Because this is simply one way of putting it. One way among many other ways. The same note, held forever. Or perhaps the same photograph, you call them "photographs," every time you open your eyes. Now, now, now. Imagine. Yes. That's all there is, you see, in perpetuity. My name, by the way, is... something. Although, perhaps, it almost goes without comment, it is something else. In heaven, that is, not to put too fine a point on it, I will tell you. My name is—Goodbye. It was so nice meeting you. Yes. We must promise to do it again sometime. "It" not being how it is. The same photograph, you call them "photographs," as I was saying, as I was attempting to say, "I" not being... and so forth, or, perhaps, swallows frozen in mid-flight, yes, for millennia on end, beyond the range of human invention. Moving by not moving. In heaven, in summation, the boom-boom. This much we can assert with some confidence. This much stands to reason. In heaven, the boom-boom, you call it "God," for argument's sake, in heaven the boom-boom, holding all thoughts in His boom-boom, and therefore holding none. In summation, in conclusion, to be brief, in a word, as a consequence of what has been heretofore asserted—Hello. What a lovely surprise. I simply reached down one day. "Day" not being how it is, et cetera. I simply reached down one day, in a manner of speaking, in a metaphor-*

ical sense, that is, and tore my wing. I tore my wing, but . . . and this bears repeating . . . and this possibly bears repeating . . . stranger things having happened . . . at least such an assertion remains open to speculation . . . it didn't hurt. Not in the least. No. Nothing, it stands to reason, hurts in photographs. "Pain" not being . . . and so forth. I simply reached down one day, in a figurative manner of speaking, to get at the crux of the matter, yes, a wonderful phrase, crux of the matter, and tore my wing, here, you see, because of the boom-boom, then wiped my hand on my feathers, here. Because, in heaven, not to put too fine a point on it, every verb is a noun. Pass the tea. Smell the flowers. Help yourself. It stands to reason. Yes. The clouds, above the lake, unmoving, painted upon an unchanging sky. No other parts of speech subsist. In the horror of boom-boom, you call it "perfection," one can only say what a fine day it is, again and again, admiring the clouds, yes, pretending to admire the unmoving clouds in the unchanging sky, so perfect as to send a spike through your heart, you see, prevent your breath from arriving, a wonderful turn of phrase, yes, one can almost feel it, but all you can do is wait in the train station, to put it plainly, where nothing will ever arrive, always. I reached down one day, in a figurative manner of speaking, this surely being the point, unless something else turns out surely to be the point, all we can do is wait and see, of course, stranger things have happened, and tore my wing, here, then wiped my hand on my feathers, here, and everything became a verb. In the blink of an eye. B-flat or G-sharp. Yes. For argument's sake. Right. Everything became a verb, you see, and the verbs hurried me away from the boom-boom. This happened, in a nutshell, in short, in a phrase, and then something else happened, and then something else happened. Here, it could be said to go without comment, we are splitting hairs. Beating around the bush. Wonderful turn of— Beating around the—. Imagine. And still . . . Or, to be more precise, some things happened, of course, and some things did not happen. Consequently, one could hazard without fear of reprisal that some things happened among many things not happening. Yes. That's it. Unless, of course, it isn't it. There's always that. Stranger things having— But there it is. Yes. Unless, of course, et cetera. Because the swallows. The clouds. The photographs, arresting. Because— Hello. Yes. The sound— The sound, I should emphasize, perhaps, for a sense of narrative immediacy, was a moist one. The gutting of a fish, let us say, and no more. Because the answer is . . . the answer is . . . but why?

23

The second Jarmo's fingertips contact her gown, the angel begins speaking to him without moving her lips, explaining, perhaps, explaining or describing, and yet her soliloquy is lost on the boy, who misunderstands every word she utters, replacing each syllable with another syllable that starts with the same letter of the alphabet but appears slightly earlier in the lexicon. So all he can think of as he removes his hand from her shoulder is the chatter of coins falling from one palm into the other. He sees Senate Square in the bright pith of Helsinki, a cobblestone vastness surrounded by orderly Empire-yellow and pristine white nineteenth-century Russian architecture, the expansive staircase leading up to the cathedral, the statue of Tsar Alexander II rising in the middle of it all. Near the entrance to the university buildings, he sees a large iron-barred structure reminiscent of an ornate Chinese birdcage. It houses a sleeping angel. In his vision, Jarmo collects money in the black booth out front from the long line of polite customers, and, with the efficiency of an adding machine, Sami retracts the black curtain covering the structure to reveal a peep hole through which each patron may behold this miracle for exactly fifteen seconds a session, then he drops the heavy folds back into place.

24

Although he hangs back a step or two, it seems to Sami as if she were whispering to him from the center of his brain, and as if the sound of her voice smelled like cinnamon. Yet somehow he also misunderstands every word she utters, in his case replacing each syllable with another syllable that starts with the same letter of the alphabet but appears slightly later in the lexicon. In this version, the angel asks for the boys' help to effect her return to heaven, from which she was cast out accidentally when God forgot to dream her for a brief instant because He was so busy just then dreaming myriad British soldiers calling out His name in desperation as they expired on the parched battlefields of South Africa during the Boer War. If the boys were merely to carry her to the top of one of the hills on the far side of the lake, she would be near enough home to take flight and reenter God's dreams in the time it takes to think of a word in a foreign language that you knew very well three weeks ago. As a reward, Sami is certain she told him (though nothing could be



farther from the truth), the angel is prepared to tell each boy about what the last three minutes of his life will feel like and precisely how death will smell a heartbeat before she descends upon him in a mad whirl of black rags and ululation.

25

Perhaps, next, the same slightly out-of-focus afternoon. Perhaps a different one. It is becoming increasingly difficult to tell with anything approaching conviction.

26

The lake a powdery gray extension of the powdery gray sky.

27

In the marshy field near a deserted road, two brothers arguing about the fate of a wounded angel.

28

They could be rich, Jarmo is saying. Loudly. Very loudly. Think about it, Sami. Flush. This young, and set for life. The only thing they have to do is carry an angel back to their farm, lock her in the potato cellar outside the barn, and prepare the wagon and horses for the long ride to Helsinki. Their parents would never need to work again. And, when the capital grew tired of their catch, they could move her to Turku, then to Tampere, then to Oulu, and, when Finland finally grew tired of it, they could leisurely meander south through Europe—Estonia to Latvia, Latvia to Lithuania, Lithuania to Poland, and so on, sooner or later ending up on the white sun-dazzled coasts of Greece. There, Jarmo promises, every day would be the same day among the memory of heroic epics. Sleep late, display their angel to the townspeople an hour or two every afternoon, then eat slick mol-lusks and sip red wine beneath colorful umbrellas on verandas overlooking the bloody sea while the sun turned the sky the color of salmon meat. Sami shaking his head side to side. Sami not meeting his older brother's eyes. Sami is saying no.

29

No, Sami is saying. That just isn't right. That just isn't right at all, and Jarmo knows it. The angel isn't theirs to use. She isn't theirs to

use or not use. She is beautiful and she is pure and she is wounded and she needs their assistance just like any traveler hurt along the side of the road would need their assistance. If you were lost and injured, Sami is saying, quietly, understated but firm, black hat crumpled to his chest in his grimy-knuckled fists, wouldn't you want someone to come to your aid, Jarmo, give you a hand so you could find your way back to where you knew you belonged? Moreover, nothing could be simpler, could it. All the boys would have to do is detour from their present course a single hour, maybe two at most, in order to bring her to the crest of one of those hills over there. Surely then it would take God a matter of moments to notice her, remember what He had forgotten unintentionally, and in his infinite goodness commence to dream her once more. After that, everything would return to how it should be. All the pieces of their world would settle back into place the way all the numbers in a complicated math problem resolve into a perfect sum. While their parents would never be rich, true enough, they would also never know that they might have avoided poverty, and thus they would never find themselves dispirited in the face of what might have been. They would ask the boys a few questions when the brothers returned late. This is to be expected. But it would be easy to fabricate an excuse or two. And then? That night, and on all future nights, the boys would be able to sleep profoundly, unimpeded by fears of visitations from their grandfather's skeleton. Equally important, they henceforth would always carry within them the knowledge of what the last three minutes of their lives will feel like, what approaching death will smell like, and therefore would always be in a position to stay on guard against her garish, cacophonous arrival.

30

Two brothers silently staring at each other, figuring.

31

No more talk after that, no thoughts of fish soup or ham, no rocks kicked along the road or lobbed far out into the meadow. Only this: two boys moving slowly and heavily along their barren route, improvised stretcher between them. A wounded angel hunching forward on the seat in the middle, head lowered, limp flowers clutched in her

right hand. Hem of her white gown sweeping the packed dirt below her, yet remaining faultless.

32

Jarmo turning his solemn face toward the viewer—toward you and toward me—in order to make direct eye-contact. Accusing.

33

Because he is exhausted. He is exhausted, frightened, angry. Because he and his brother have been at this for days. Weeks. Years. At first, needless to say, it all seemed effortless. They helped their charge onto the stretcher, carefully lifted the stretcher into the air, and set forth. A distant attribute of God, the wounded angel weighed virtually nothing. The sole mass the boys felt between them was that of the branches forming their apparatus. So Sami and Jarmo strode on rapidly for the first hour or two, the former contemplating the relationship and moral implications of the angel's weight to his own, the latter imagining the heat radiating from the twinkling sand on southern beaches. Only gradually did it dawn on them, however, that they were making no progress. When the younger one raised his head after a while to check on their bearings, he realized the landscape around them hadn't changed a bit. Everything appeared exactly the same as when they first set off: the meadow to their right, the hills across the lake, the dirt road slicing their perspective in half. Startled, he shot an anxious look back at his brother, only to discover Jarmo already grimly surveying their environs, deep into the task of absorbing the same dismal information as Sami. They were where they had always been. Yet with a considerable difference: they were suddenly lost without being lost, suddenly in need of assistance without there seeming to be anything whatsoever out of the ordinary with their present situation.

34

It becomes night becomes day becomes night, each time they blink. Sometimes they awake to find it is snowing heavily. The lake vanishes in a boil of flakes. Or the midsummer sun is brutalizing the arid countryside all the way to the apricot horizon. Or voluminous blue-green clouds of northern lights are churning and fluttering above them. Without warning, they are freezing. Their skin is oily

with perspiration. It is raining. It rains for weeks on end. They slip and stumble through mucilaginous mud with their precious cargo. No. It is a perfect Wedgwood-blue spring dawn. Only there are no birds anywhere, no signs of life as far as the eye can see. Regardless, it never crosses their minds to stop, backtrack, or diverge from their current route. Such ideas do not exist in this world. Rather, the boys are convinced deeply that if they just push on a little farther, work a little harder, they will reach the lake, reach the hills, locate themselves in the midst of a cool breeze as they overlook the valley through which they are now advancing. Now seeming to advance. The angel remains perfectly still, head lowered. She remains silent as polar night.

35

Which is where we must leave them.

36

Which is where we must leave them because, regrettably, this is all you and I know. Because we simply do not have access to any further information. I am sorry.

37

Except, perhaps, for a few final observations. The wounded angel, for instance, is mute because she understands that she is on the almost infinite path that will culminate in her death. She wears the thick kerchief around her head because if the boys were to gaze directly into her eyes they would catch a brief glimpse of heaven and this would annihilate them before their feet allowed them to take even a single step further. The angel cannot let this happen. The boys must survive long enough to help bring about her dissolution. She has thus made certain that they have misunderstood every word she has thought, knowing as she does each rule in the advanced calculus called communication between angels and mortals. She comprehends fully that the brothers must believe they are assisting her on her return to the ravishing universe of nouns, when the only reason she has harmed herself is to gain entrance into the even more ravishing one of melting ice cream. And, as everyone knows, the last chapter in the universe of melting ice cream is filled with the mad whirl of black rags and ululation.

38

Because, when they reach the crest of one of those almost immeasurably distant hills, the boys must believe the wounded angel will ascend into the absolutely blue sky on those gigantic feathery parentheses of her wings. And they do.

39

Because she will not ascend at all, but plunge into the lake several hundred meters below. An agitated minute or two, and she will have drowned.

40

And so, finally, we fathom what that look on her countenance signifies. It is not, needless to say, the look of angelic calm. It is neither the look of despair, nor of fatalism, nor of nostalgia for what she has had to leave behind. That look on her face signifies pure happiness.

41

Perhaps, then, it is the same slightly out-of-focus afternoon. Perhaps it is a different one. A second, in any case, and it might be otherwise. A second, and it might not.

42

Nevertheless, two brothers are moving slowly and heavily along their barren route, an improvised wooden stretcher supported between them. A wounded angel is hunching forward on the seat in the middle, head lowered. The taller boy, the one in the too-small brown jacket, is looking directly at you and me. The shorter boy, the one in the black hat, is looking down at the packed dirt three paces in front of him. A school of small hot red fish are racing through his circulatory system. He is taking another step, and then another, and then another, wondering with each: what will the next line of our story be?