

*HAS THE WORLD ENDED YET?*

*By Peter Darbyshire*

Tank is the first person in the world to see the angels. He's drinking his morning coffee at the kitchen table and watching the house across the street when they start falling from the sky.

The house across the street looks just like his. Every house on the street looks just like his. He got lost the first few times he drove home after moving here. The only thing different is the woman who lives there. He's been watching her for months. He doesn't know her name, but he knows her. Sometimes she leaves the blinds open when she changes. Tank thinks maybe she does this on purpose. Tank thinks maybe this is some sort of sign language.

Michelle sits at the kitchen table with him, but she can't see him watching for the neighbor because she has some sort of mask over her face. It's one of those organic paste things, made of passion fruit and the essence of bees' dreams or something like that. Zucchini slices cover her eyes. He's married a vegetable.

Tank forgets all about Michelle and the neighbor when the first angel falls from the sky and bounces off the lawn and into the side of the house, right underneath the kitchen window. He puts down his coffee and looks up at the sky. More angels fall from the clouds, dropping down all over the city, leaving orange trails of sparks across the sky. The clouds are a dark red color he can't remember ever seeing before.

He looks at the angel in his yard as it stands up and brushes dirt and grass from its wings. It's naked and has the body of a man. A perfect man. Iron pecs, cut ab, arms like cannons, a dick that belongs in the porn files hidden on Tank's computer. Tank puts his hand on the window. The angel reminds him of his football days. Only its skin isn't sagging from too many hours in an office chair, and its knees look like they still work.

The angel stares at Tank for a moment, its skin smoking from the fall. Then it wanders around the side of the house, out of sight.

Michelle takes the zucchinis from her eyes and looks at the falling angels. "Are they shooting a movie?" she asks.

"It's the end of the world," Tank says. He drops his hand from the window. "Thank God."

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The sky darkens to a deep crimson while they fuck in the bedroom. They leave the blinds open so they don't miss anything. Tank looks at the neighbor's house every now and then, but he doesn't see her in any of the windows. That doesn't stop him from imagining her in Michelle's place. It's all over quickly.

After, they lie on top of the damp sheets and watch themselves in the mirror at the end of the bed.

“I thought it would be finished by now,” Michelle finally says.

“Me too,” Tank says.

After a time, they sleep.

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Tank wakes at dawn. He goes into the kitchen without getting dressed and toasts a bagel, eats it at the window. The angels keep falling. Tank takes a multivitamin with his orange juice.

He goes down into the basement. It's still unfinished, even though they've lived in the house for nearly five years now. When they first moved in, Tank had plans to put up solid walls and divide it into rooms. A home gym. A sauna. Another bedroom. But the only thing he ever put in was the golf simulator. He realizes he'll never finish the basement now. That makes him feel even better about the end of the world.

He turns on the simulator. The screen, which fills most of one wall, lights up and shows a course in Atlanta or Scotland or some other place he can't afford to visit. The guy who installed it said they were all real courses, but Tank doesn't care about that. What he cares about is the courses aren't his basement.

He stands on the scrap of fake turf in front of the simulator and drives a ball into the screen. The real ball falls onto the concrete floor and rolls up against the dryer. Tank watches the video ball arc away from him, over some trees and out of sight. He retrieves the ball and swings again.

He's never golfed naked before. He likes the feeling. He thinks if the world weren't ending, he'd golf naked from now on. He thinks maybe this is the way all sports should be played.

He plays until he loses the ball. It rolls out of sight while he's watching the simulated ball, and he can't find it. He doesn't know where it could have gone — there's nothing else down here but the washer and dryer. He looks all around them, even moves them to look underneath, but the ball is gone.

He goes back to the screen and swings at nothing, watching imaginary balls fly away from him until the power goes out.

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Michelle has lit the special aromatherapy candles they use for sex when he goes back upstairs. She's in the closet, holding a silk dress in one hand, combat pants and a sweatshirt in the other.

“What are you supposed to wear to the end of the world?” she asks.

Tank ignores her and dresses in one of his suits, just like he would any other morning. It takes him three attempts to get his tie right, just like any other morning. When he's done, he gives Michelle a kiss on her cheek, just like any other morning.

“Where are you going?” she asks, finally noticing his suit.

“Work,” Tank says.

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Tank is the last one to arrive at the office. His boss, Doughboy, is tacking up a new schedule on the bulletin board when he walks in. Doughboy isn't his real name. His real name is Hal. Tank calls him Doughboy because he reminds Tank of that little white guy on TV, the one who laughs when you poke him. No matter how many times Tank threatens to quit or to kill everyone in the office, Doughboy just laughs and keeps on scheduling Tank to come in.

Tank goes to the cubicle he shares with Butler. Butler is surfing porn on his computer. This is what Butler does every morning to start the day. Tank once asked Butler why the tech department didn't put some sort of porn filter on his computer. Butler said the tech guys wouldn't be able to find half their kink without him.

Tank logs on to the system and gets to work. He calls up his client list and, one by one, empties their accounts. He moves all their holdings into a dummy account he created a year ago for this exact purpose. The dummy account is in his name. When he's done, the balance is well over a million dollars. He transfers it to his personal savings account. Easier than the lottery, he thinks.

"There's no way you can hide that," Butler says over his shoulder. "Believe me, I've figured all the angles."

"What do I care about hiding things now?" Tank says.

Butler nods and turns back to his monitor. Tank sees a quick flash of a woman and a naked man wearing a gorilla mask.

"Hot," Butler says.

When Tank's done, he logs off and opens the bottom drawer of his desk. This is where he keeps all his sports trophies. He brought them in when he first started here. It was the only way he could motivate himself to come to work. He puts them in a stationery box.

He runs into Doughboy on the way out of the office. Doughboy is going through the desk drawers of people who aren't in. He stares at the box of statues, then holds his palms out to Tank.

"Whatever's bothering you, we can fix it," he says. "Let's schedule an appointment with the company therapist."

Tank pokes him in the stomach with his free hand.

Doughboy just stares, so Tank pokes him again.

Doughboy doesn't do anything. This isn't how Tank imagined it. He's not enjoying himself. He pushes past Doughboy and leaves.

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Tank stops at the exotic-car dealership on the way home. He's driven past it every day for the last two years, to and from work, in traffic jams each way. He's pictured himself in every car in the place. But now all the Lamborghinis and Ferraris and Porsches are gone. There's nothing but a few BMWs in the otherwise empty showroom.

"We had people lined up outside the door this morning," the salesman tells him. "It was like they'd just got their welfare money."

Tank settles for a BMW. The salesman charges him double the sticker price, but he doesn't care. He transfers his trophies to the BMW. The salesman asks him what he wants to do with the old car.

"Drive it into a telephone pole," Tank says.

\*

When he returns home, he finds Michelle in the silk dress and preparing for a party. Bowls of chips and pretzels sit on every table, and she's making sangria. She says she called everyone they know.

"Wouldn't it be nice if it happened with all of us here together?" she asks.

Tank goes across the street, to the other woman's house. She answers the door drinking wine from a bottle. She doesn't say anything, and for a moment the two of them just stand

there, looking at each other. Then Tank says, "I'm having an end of the world party. I thought you might like to come."

"Who are you again?" the woman asks.

Tank points at his house. Michelle is framed in the window, taking something out of the oven.

"Oh, right," the woman says.

"I've been watching you for months," he says.

"What about her?" the woman asks.

Tank looks up at the sky. An angel drifts slowly overhead.

"Just once, that's all I want," Tank says.

The woman hugs herself.

"I have a million dollars," Tank says.

"Do you have any drugs?" the woman asks.

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Tank drives them over to Buddha's place. He really wants to open up the BMW, but the other drivers are all over the road, so he keeps his distance, stays well under the speed limit. He doesn't speak, and neither does the woman.

Buddha lives on the top floor of a condo tower. He buzzes them right up when Tank calls him from the lobby. For as long as Tank has known him, Buddha has always been home.

Buddha is sitting at the kitchen table when they walk in. He's organizing little plastic bags of drugs into various piles. He's wearing black leather pants and a red silk shirt. He always wears black leather pants and a red silk shirt.

On a television mounted on one wall, CNN shows a live feed from one of the space shuttles. “Has the world ended yet?” an astronaut asks.

“We’re here for drugs,” Tank says.

“That’s what I figured,” Buddha says, popping a blue pill into his mouth.

“I’m having a party,” Tank says.

“What kind of party?” Buddha asks.

“An end of the world party,” Tank says.

“Are there a lot of people there?” Buddha asks.

“I have no idea,” Tank says.

Buddha looks around the condo. It’s all white walls and black leather furniture. “That sounds nice,” he says.

“So come back with us,” the woman says. “And bring your drugs.”

Buddha stares at the woman like he’s just noticed her for the first time. Then he shrugs.

“I could probably make good money on a night like this,” he says.

“It’s the end of the world and you’re concerned about making money?” Tank asks.

“This is no time to abandon my principles,” Buddha says.

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Outside, Buddha shakes his head at the BMW. “You should have gone for the Lexus,” he says.

They drive back to Tank’s place to find an angel standing in the yard. It’s looking in the front window. Its skin is streaked with mud, and several feathers in its wings stick out at odd angles.

“Do you think it’s come for us?” Tank asks. He honks the BMW’s horn, but the angel only glances at them before turning its attention back to the window.

“It’s like some sort of peeping tom,” Buddha says.

“Maybe God’s some kind of pervert,” the woman says.

“I wonder what kind of drugs God would do,” Buddha says.

Tank parks the BMW in the driveway and they go inside. The house is crowded with people. Tank knows most of their faces but can only remember a few of their names. He hasn’t talked to some of these people in months, if not years. He doesn’t care. He says hello and shakes hands and laughs and moves in the direction of the bedroom with the woman from across the street. When he finds Butler in the living room, though, he stops and asks him what he’s doing here.

“Doughboy’s worried you’re serious about this quitting thing,” Butler says. “I’m supposed to support you as a valued team member and provide friendship incentives for you to stay.” He smiles at the woman from across the street.

“I’m done with the company,” Tank says. “I’m done with everything.”

“All right,” Butler says.

Buddha sits down on the couch and spreads his bags of drugs on the coffee table. Tank and Butler have to move as the crowd pushes them out of the way. They end up standing beside the television. CNN switches back and forth between coverage of a riot in L.A. and a running gun battle in the streets of Jerusalem.

“I’ve never been to either of those places,” Tank says.

“I wouldn’t want to be in either place at this particular moment,” Butler says.

“Maybe not right now,” Tank agrees. “But maybe before all this.”

“How is it any different now?” Butler asks.

Tank just shakes his head. He turns to the woman from across the street, but she’s not there anymore. He looks for her in the crowd but can’t find her. He looks back at the television.

“It seems we were a little hasty with one of our earlier reports,” an anchor says. “It turns out Hawaii hasn’t sunk into the sea. But stay tuned — it still may.”

“If you don’t come back to work,” Butler says, “can I have your chair?”

Tank walks away from him without answering. He looks for the woman but can’t see her in the crowd. He heads into the kitchen, but she’s not there either. He goes outside, thinking maybe she’s gone home. Her house is dark, the street empty. His BMW is missing from the driveway.

Tank looks up at the sky. There are rifts in the clouds now, with lights shining through the holes. Angels rise up to them from all over the city and pass through, out of sight. The angel in the yard is still looking in the window. Tank goes back inside.

He pushes his way through the crowd and down the hallway to the bedrooms. He opens the door to the guestroom first, but it’s empty. Then he opens the door to the bedroom he shares with Michelle.

The woman from across the street is there, on the bed, her shirt and bra off. She’s wrapped in an embrace with Michelle, whose dress is pushed up over her hips. They both stop and look at Tank.

“I’ve been watching her for months,” Michelle says.

Tank doesn’t say anything.

“She undresses for me,” Michelle adds.

Tank doesn't say anything.

The woman from across the street smiles at Tank. "You can watch if you like," she says.

"Hot," Butler says from behind Tank.

Tank goes back into the living room. CNN shows an angel walking across the lawn of the White House. Secret Service agents in black suits step out from behind trees and bushes, guns in their hands. But they just watch as the angel walks past them and into the White House. One of the agents says something into his lapel. Another agent sits down on the lawn and cries.

Tank goes down into the basement. The golf simulator is back on. It shows a course by an ocean somewhere. Palm trees line the sides of the video screen. Tank picks up the golf club and goes back upstairs, then outside and onto the lawn.

The angel turns away from the window toward him, spreading its wings a little. Tank smashes it in the face with the golf club. It falls to the ground. He hits it again, on the chest, the legs, the wings. It writhes on the ground as he hits it, but it doesn't make a sound.

When Tank finally stops, out of breath, the angel looks up at him through the blood on its face. It's panting in rhythm with him. Tank leans on the club and looks around.

People stare from all the windows. Michelle and the woman from across the street stand in the doorway, wrapped together in a bedsheet. Michelle covers her mouth with her hands. The woman from across the street whispers something in Butler's ear. Butler just shakes his head.

Tank drops the club. The angel slowly gets to its feet and wipes some of the blood from its face. It never takes its eyes off Tank. It doesn't even blink.

Tank takes a step back, then stops.

“All right,” he says. “Come on then.”

For a moment there's no sound but their breathing. Then a distant siren begins somewhere.

“*Come on!*” Tank cries and lunges at the angel like it's a quarterback caught in the open field.

The angel's lips twist into something that could be a smile. Then it spreads its wings and rushes to meet him.

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