

Angel Guts

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Angel Guts

a novel



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Heidi (but you can call me Bunny)

For my angel, who probly doesn't exist

Seriously, Sumerians?

What did the fucking Sumerians ever do for me, is what Antoinette is thinking, as Ms Bartolomei erases the dusty gray blackboard, which effort causes her butt to swing gloriously east and west, like an indecisive folk migration that took place long before the invention of writing. Surely her hip swing antedates the domestication of wheat, and may even be older than those two rivers she's been going on about. But somebody oughta tell her about that tiny cracker-crumb that seems to have affixed itself to her twilight-colored cotton skirt, at the very summit of her left bum cheek. Looks like a Ritz remnant. Poor lady. Not even she can wiggle mightily enough to shake it loose. Do the others also have their eyes attached to that crumb? Antoinette lifts her head off the palm of her hand long enough to turn to lovely Peggy Squash, whose similarly semiconscious eyes swing onto hers, eyes that say like when will this fucking hell be over, then flutter upward to the acoustic tiled ceiling. Peg has the tip of her ballpoint pen in her mouth, as if she's about to take a sip from it.

There's a fly in the classroom, and he doesn't wanna be here either.

"Who can tell me why the Sumerians used cuneiform writing?" Ms Bartolomei asks. "Mr Perillo?"

"Cuz they didn't have pen and paper yet," says Russell Perillo, who really needs to have a shower soon, or quit raising his hand.

"Yes, but for what purpose did they use it?"

"Uh. Something about a Gilgamesh?"

"I mean before that."

The mad fly buzzes and bonks against the window, too stupid to figure out what glass is. *Dude, just float down a few inches, the window is open!* Out in the parking lot somebody's car horn plays La Cucaracha.

"Anybody?" Ms Bartolomei is losing patience.

"Um ... Beer?" little Paula Noriega says, just above a whisper. Three boys snicker.

"Miss Noriega's correct. Beer, barley and other rations. The food supply was controlled by a priestly bureaucracy, who kept their accounting on clay tablets. Now you might ask, what do we mean by a priestly bureaucracy?"

Or not. The teacher blathers on for a stretch about ancient municipal organization and spooky religion and cosmogenic myths and how tall is your ziggurat and why is

grass green anyway and it's fun to get naked and eat cheese fondue on Sundays and did you know Gilgamesh is the true author of Shakespeare's plays and well it's all getting a bit blurry to be honest. Antoinette feels the sweat on her forehead and in her armpits. Even her desk is slippery with sweat under her elbows. It's only the first of June. Another three weeks of this shit, really? Can we even take it? She puts her hand over her eyes and loves the darkness but can't afford to fall asleep right now. She has to squeeze at least a B+ out of this Early Civilizations fart. Because Cornell. Because Dad. And why are we even going back over all this Sumerian crap when we've already got up to the Ionians? Refresher, she told us, this might be on the final. But this is not refreshing. Is it.

"Miss Sjangri?"

"Yah." Antoinette jerks her hand away from her eyes.

"Sorry to disturb you."

She and Ms Bartolomei look at each other.

"The question was, during which period did the Sumerians pioneer irrigation agriculture?"

"Ubaid," Antoinette shrugs. Like duh.

Did her eyes just flare a little too scornfully?

"Very good," Ms Bartolomei nods.

She hates me, Antoinette thinks.

"Come here for a sec," Antoinette says.

She beckons to Ms Bartolomei, who frowns and steps toward her with distrust in her eyes.

“What for?”

“Closer, please. Turn around. Please.”

The woman turns and faces the flag in the corner. Antoinette carefully picks the tiny cracker crumb from Ms Bartolomei’s bum. Then she lifts up the dark blue skirt, drags down the panties, grabs the nearest felt-tip pen and scrawls *TIGRIS* and *EUPHRATES* on the left and right hemispheres of Ms Bartolomei’s ass.

No, that doesn’t happen.

“What’s this about?” the teacher whirls round to glare at her.

Antoinette pinches the cracker crumb between her thumb and forefinger. “Sorry, there was this tiny speck on your backside, it’s been bugging me all period,” she explains, and pops the crumb into her mouth.

Nothing too subtle, she’s thinking.

“I thought she was gonna way-hack you in the head,” Peggy tells her, trying not to laugh, gripping the wheel with both hands and squinting out at the hazy road before them. She just got her license last month, and is still watching for the proverbial ball rolling out between parked cars.

“I thought she’d roast me with a blast of Godzilla breath. What *does* that woman eat for lunch?”

Antoinette leans her head out the passenger window, lets the wind take her hair for a ride, breathes in the suburbanites’ lawnmown lawns. Sweet. Fresh even. She can see her angel out there beyond the treetops, tiptoeing along to keep pace with Peggy’s avocado-cream colored car. She unwraps a stick of gum.

“Hey you wanna go skinny-dipping over at Noonan’s Pond? I know a place. This is a good day for it. I’ll treat you to Dairy Queen after.”

“What’s that mean, skinny-dipping?” Peggy asks.

“What is skinny-dipping? Seriously?”

After a few seconds, Peggy risks glancing at her.

“Peggy Squash, did you literally just ask me what skinny-dipping is?”

“Well, how’m I ever gonna know if I don’t ask?”

Good point.

“It’s like swimming, only more so,” Antoinette says. She folds the gum into her mouth. “Take a right on Torrey Avenue.”

There’s a little-known spot near the southern tip of Noonan’s Pond, where you can park and take a short walk down a scruffy scraggly footpath to the water’s edge, where nobody ever goes, and where the bottom isn’t too mucky.

Dad used to take her there fishing when she was little. Back then there was a beautiful crowd of old white birch trees across the water, where now the three-story windowless concrete back of the data center squats, having been dropped there by aliens two years ago. The roar of unseen air conditioners whirring on its roof reverberates across the pond and through the forest. There's something starkly post-romantic-romantic about it. And the sunshine has a strange color today.

"You're just like I imagined you," she tells Peggy.

"Really?"

They're standing waist deep in the water, in the sandy rocky spot, and the sunlight glints off Peggy Squash's hair and shoulders and nipples and the ten million water drops on her skin. She's hardly an arm's length away. There's a drippy gloppy sound as Antoinette's hands rise out of the water's surface, the fingers involuntarily splaying out.

"You *imagined* me?" Peggy says softly.

"I'm dreaming you right now," says Antoinette, as her helpless hands reach their destination. "I'm sure this can't be happening." Carefully she cups Peggy's breasts and feels their weight, squeezes just a little, then sweeps her thumbs real slow across her nipples. She's watching Peggy's chin. They're both shivering. The tip of Peggy's tongue touches her upper lip, and stays there.

“You’re right, it can’t be,” Peg smiles, and falls backward into a splash.

Antoinette watches her friend backstroke three strokes across the pond before rolling over and slashing straight away toward the opposite shore, from whose high ridge two security guards from the data center are now watching. One of them is smoking a cigarette.

“Steal away, steal away,” she sings to herself slowly, *“steal away to Jesus.”*

A cloud crosses the sun. She looks at her hands holding onto the air, then folds them back to touch her own breasts for three seconds. Then she dives in after Peggy.

Then they’re both sitting on the hood of Peggy’s car, nibbling at the crispy candy shells of their ice creams. Chocolate with chocolate dip. Vanilla with strawberry dip.

“Don’t be mad at me okay,” Peggy says.

“I’m not mad.”

“It’s not like I’m put off by it, or like I’m turning you down.”

“You’re not?” A hunk of chocolate shell comes loose and she holds it in her hand, looks at it, then munches it.

“I mean, I do plan to have sex with you,” Peg says, then launches into a prolonged slurp of her vanilla.

“You —” Antoinette’s eyes widen. “What?”

“Mm. Just not yet. Be patient, Antoinette.”

Antoinette is staring at her.

“Someday you’re gonna feel my eyelashes fluttering down your belly. It’ll be nice. Once we’re seniors. Maybe September?”

“Uh ... Squash, you’re *scheduling* this?”

“Watch out, you’re dripping.”

“Damn straight I am. Fucking lunatic.”

She licks to catch up, and falls silent for a moment. She looks at the license plates on the cars. The clouds have thickened, and she may have just felt a drop on her forearm. She sings to herself real low and soft: “*Steal away, steal away home, I hain't got long to stay here.*”

“What’s that song you keep singing?”

“Old negro spiritual.”

“Where’d you pick that up?”

“From an old negro. Why do they call you Squash, anyway? You never told me.”

“I used to be good at playing it. Squash. The game.”

“Wow,” Antoinette says, “that is like the boringest possible answer one could ever have expected.”

“In my family, not much worldly fun is tolerated. I dunno why squash gets a pass. You wanna play sometime? I’ll take you.”

Antoinette shakes her head. “I don’t do games.”

“Right, I forgot. They call you No Scrabble Sjangri.”

“No they don’t.”

“You *are* mad at me.”

“No I’m not. Fucking lunatic.”

“It’s raining.”

Out the corner of her eye Antoinette senses movement, and turns to look up to her right. Her angel is standing there, naked, maybe a quarter mile away past the power lines, so posed that the Dairy Queen sign perfectly occludes her repro zone. Her head is disappearing into the clouds, and she appears to be bathing in the mist, smearing it over her skin. It’s hard to guess how tall the angel is, but Antoinette knows that each of her feet is about as big as a firetruck. She got that close once. And it doesn’t hurt if she steps on you, because she’s insubstantial and weightless. There’s actually something motherish about her, though she has a lustworthy shape as well. Is she the sex you will have, or are you the sex she has had? Both polarities are superposed in one being. Just now the angel notices Antoinette thinking of her, and peeks below the cloud to give her a soft, benevolent smile.

Did she just wink, or was that lightning?

“What are you thinking about?” Peggy asks, finishing off her cone. Antoinette turns and looks into her eyes, but has no good answer.

“Sumerians I guess.”

Loving Peggy Squash

You'd have to be a special kind of dead not to be smitten with her. But a lot of people at school think Peggy's just weird.

Peggy Squash is not just adorable, she's admirable. The agility with which Peggy slaloms between the emotional traffic cones of teenagehood in a family of insane fundamentalists is, in Antoinette's opinion, purely Olympic. But the kid makes it look easy. She doesn't even look damaged around the edges.

What's the trick? Theater. Measured deceit. Knowing when it's safe to break character. Peggy wears no makeup, except for her secret lipstick that she puts on at school.

The only reason she's in public school at all is because, as she once explained to her jailers, she can never grow into a true warrior for Christ without first exposing and immunizing herself to the base temptations of the world. Something like that. Antoinette wasn't there, but wishes she had a transcript: it must have been a masterful oration.

And heaven only knows how she conned them into letting her go on that trip to Paris last November.

Antoinette first notices this girl they call Squash back in sophomore year. Art School Chick, is her first glancing assessment. But then she keeps watching.

Her first actual words to Peggy Squash, in late May, when Peggy sees her looking and she has to say something, are: “You’re not quite as innocent as you look.”

“Almost,” Peggy answers, and kinda smiles.

Then Antoinette picks her up and drinks her like the last glass of water in the shifting sands of Namibia.

No, that doesn’t happen. But she keeps watching.

One day Peggy starts doing her hair up in little pointy antenna buns. Then some girls call her Miley Cyrus, referring to a singer famous at the time. And Peggy’s like, what the fuck is a Miley Cyrus? Turns out she never watches television, and is genuinely allergic to pop culture. She grew up without those things and doesn’t miss them. But she is into a lot of underground metal, and certain obscure punk bands from Eastern Europe. And Maurice Ravel. And Dmitri Shostakovich. And some medieval lady called Hildegard von Bingen.

Peggy Squash just lives outside of time, and that’s what makes her irresistible. Oh and that fit body of hers,

that too, yes. For now Antoinette's burgeoning lust for the girl goes unspoken, but Peggy must surely suspect it.

That summer they start sneaking out together, smoking cigs and sharing music files. Soon they both have crazy mongrel playlists. When her mom catches Peggy listening to *that devil music* — being a fairly mainstream old Tool song called 'Prison Sex' — she gets grounded for two weeks and forced to erase all the music on her phone. Her mom doesn't know about file backups in the cloud.

One afternoon they both get high with Ted Mousia in his van, but nothing bad happens. Ted's weed is shit anyway.

Something that transpires exactly once: Antoinette at the dinner table with Peggy and her parents. Carl and Melissa Henning, technically known as Mr and Mrs. And Peggy's name is Margaret at home. And home is a modest white house in the shade of the maple trees on Latimer Avenue. "Antoinette, would you and Margaret like to wash your hands before supper?" And supper is overcooked pot roast with mashed potatoes and limp broccoli. And salt substitute on the table. Right, not a fuckload of *joie de vivre* for these poor souls temporarily stranded in the flesh. Their bodies are just an airport lounge where they wait to change planes. Make us truly grateful, in Jesus' name, amen. Antoinette is praying for help just chewing this stuff.

Mr Henning asks about Antoinette's plans for after high school, but seems to glaze out for the answer. Mrs Henning says she guesses Cornell is probably a good place to find a solid husband. When the father announces that Margaret will be going to Gordon College, Antoinette opens her mouth to ask what happened to Mass Art, but doesn't get that far cuz Peggy coughs and pins her with a death ray.

"I don't think your parents approve of me," Antoinette tells Peggy in the car.

Peggy sighs. "They don't approve of mortals. Don't take it personally."

But it will be Paris that drives them together into forever girlship. By late September of junior year, it appears the French Club doesn't have quite enough takers for their annual trip in November. So Antoinette signs up as ballast, and gets her dad to pay for it. She and Peggy go for their photos together and send in their passport applications with signatures of parent-or-guardian. They assure their parents that Ms Beaudreau will be watching them like a hawk, and really nothing can go wrong.

"World traveller," Dad calls Antoinette, and kisses her on the head as he drops them both off at the airport. He kisses Peggy on the head too, having meanwhile grown fond of his daughter's only actual friend. Antoinette feels a little weird giving him Peggy's phone number, but he says

he needs a way to reach them in case Antoinette's phone gets lost or stolen over there in the city of light. Okay then.

Most of the kids on the tour — eleven girls and two boys — speak such excruciating French that the Parisians have zero patience for it, and talk to them only in English. But at least the French Club kids can kinda read the signs. Antoinette on the other hand — despite her royally decapitated name — only knows two words of French, of which one is *oui* and the other isn't. So she sticks to Peggy like frosting on a cupcake. She even swaps with Martha Grullion so she and Peggy can share a hotel room. Together with their group, they stare past people's heads at the Mona Lisa, and gaze up at the Tour Eiffel, and listen to their local guide trying to explain what happened at the Bastille. But on the day of the bus trip out to Versailles, the two of them feign terrible stomach aches, and get left deliciously behind.

They casually walk out of the hotel for lunch, and sit under the heat lamp of an outdoor café on the Boulevard Saint-Michel. They each drink three glasses of red wine and smoke a lot of Gauloises. Then they stand swaying together arm in arm looking up at the big arched fountain, where a bronze angel stands triumphally with a wiggly sword in one hand over his head, and one foot on the back of a grumpy demon with little bat wings.