

Anne, Afterward[©]

R. Clifton Spargo

He walks out of night and street and into something horrible, which is not her vision because the whole time she was not seeing him, trying not to see him so he would not be so real. On her front steps she stops, attempts to balance the groceries against the door and knows, as she fumbles for the keys in her purse until she reaches again the first or second place where she looked but not carefully, that she is taking too long to find them. She does not name what is behind her because it is there still in that paradox of simultaneous past and future, a past which has been near and unknown and is moving violently toward a future only moments away when she will find the key, when he will be upon her even before the door closes.

“Can I help you with your groceries?” he might have said, but she is not sure in memory, just as she cannot reach back to locate the moment he was first there. It is a casual remark, permitting only slight reproach—perhaps a “no thank you”—and one wishes in retrospect to have shouted, “No! leave me and my groceries alone,” something silly or paranoid or prejudiced.

Perhaps the quickness of her terror, which is no more than the felt absence of breath as it leaves the body out of rhythm, perhaps that is what first saves her. Immediately the knife is upon her throat and something in her rises between breath and soul and is in her heart and above her temples. “It was like I came out of myself, hovering there, not very high above, but where I could watch myself at a height where I was weightless and my brain didn’t move my body or even notice how it moved. My feet floated and I did not move them. The knife moved them, pushed them forward, made the hands turn the key in the apartment door, made my lips move and plead and say, please don’t kill me.”

I remember her voice only, not the words except for the way she said my name. Mostly I remember the broken rhythm of her fast breaths, which were tears and the attempt at words. There was a wish not to communicate what had happened, but to be held, across a telephone line, with policemen in the background, with her voice failing, with the memory returning—how impossible. There followed a calm, a hypostasis of her being, the soul in terror and clarity.

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And then again the soft, quick Anne almost too tired to cry or to scream in terror (right then he had come up to her, held the knife to her throat, and she had seen it).

This is how it happened, she is remembering the story months later, rehearsing it for the court and jury. On November 26, 1990 when returning from the Safeway with two bags of groceries which I put down on the front doorstep of the building in order to get my key out and put it in the lock, a man said to me from behind, "Can I help you with your groceries?" I said no, wondering if my fear was prompted by this man, or if it was my own racism or sexism that made me frightened. I started to open the door and he came in on my right, pushing the door open for me as I entered. At first I assumed he lived in the building.

But as I walked toward the steps that lead up to the first floor, my floor, I realized he could not live in this building. I glanced back over my shoulder, he came upon me, put his left arm around me, gripped my shoulder, and with his right arm put the knife to my neck, the blade touching my skin. He said quietly but firmly, "Don't scream, bitch, or I'll kill you. If anyone walks into this hall, I'll kill you. Do you live alone? Which apartment is yours?" I told him that I did. He held on to me, keeping the knife there, guiding me and pushing me toward my door.

When I first saw her, she seemed so young and so tired. The nurse led me into a small room off the lobby of the emergency admittance area, and she was there. She sat alone on a hospital cot, wearing a sweatshirt and jeans and a face I had not seen before. I went up to hold her, and she held on to my neck very tightly and began to cry.

I said, "It's okay, my angel." If I had ever called her that before I cannot remember. But it seems to me in that moment she had become an angel, an amazing someone who had been saved for me and so close to death. ("He was going to kill me," she said over and over, "but I made him change his mind. I did it for you. I thought of you," she would say later, "and I talked him out of killing me.") In my car parked outside the emergency room, she is there to remind me of this strange providence. She breaks free of a hold unbelievably physical, constant almost from that first moment in which she appeared to me, and it is then that she screams, What is going on? Is this funny? Is my life funny? Is God laughing at me?

The making of angels is simple, it is a crossing of lines, a rendering of everything past in remade possibility, so that nothing has happened to you, but you happen alongside events both past and future because you are present always and evenly across time. The breath that gives life to angels is God's through night and chaos and the non-presence of time. The inspiration of the angels is the terror in themselves, from the not knowing of what one has been

until the moment that one is all knowledge and happening. As I say, the making of angels is simple, occurring in the most terrible of moments. In rape and violence and fear and inhumanity and hatred, the angel said, I am, and God breathed again. Looking upon a man and seeing in him so little remorse, not so much for what he had done (which was terrifying), not so much for his victims (now so terrible to behold), but for what he was and what he had become—looking into inhumanity, maleness, the feminine God gasped, lost breath, was without feeling, love or hate, but said yet I wish to live, and the angel said, let us say it together.

It was in the hall that she first felt a separation. She was looking down at her feet as if they belonged to a different person. Even the knife seemed somewhat distant, as she hovered over the marble floor, not quite sure of what each new step of those feet would bring. Would this person fall? Would her throat be cut because of a voice or a door opening? Would she ever make it all the way to the end of the hall?

Somewhere from up yet higher she was looking at this scene, trying to understand it objectively: this man is holding a knife to this girl's throat.

I unlocked my apartment door, he kept the knife on me and pushed the door open, and we walked in. Holding the knife to my neck, he said, "Don't scream, I'll kill you. Where's your wallet? Where's your money?" I didn't have my wallet on me. I had taken a twenty dollar bill to the store for groceries. Why did I have to go to the store for groceries? With him still gripping me, I struggled to find it, opening drawers, moving papers. When I found the wallet, which was I believe on the table, he had me open it, but I didn't have any cash (she hesitates here, falling back upon the sight of the empty wallet, which she must have been afraid to open and show to him. Memory is often a game of reproach. At that time she might have heard my voice telling her that it was dangerous to be always without cash: what if her car broke down or ran out of gas, what if she were stranded by a friend and needed a taxi, and—she cannot help but complete the list—what if enough money would buy off a man who accosts you and holds a knife to your throat, might make him run to the streets to buy some drugs or liquor, whatever it is he needs that has made the craziness and fury of his eyes and this pungent smell of a man too long on a thought requiring a substance to cure it).

Just two checks made out to me and some credit cards. He was disgusted by this (she knew he would be: she had, for the first time, anticipated him). "Don't you have anything else, bitch?" (She says it harshly, trying to make it point at him in a courtroom the way it pointed sharp at her and hurt and humiliated her.) I tried to explain the use of credit cards, I offered him my cash card, but this made him angrier than before. "Sit on the couch," he said, moving me in that direction. "Take off your clothes, bitch," he said. I didn't move.

Sometimes I remember her at that juncture. She is trying so hard to leave again. The angel is back within her, and she cannot separate her from the body. She has not allowed the idea of what will now happen to her to be fully present, but it does not surprise her, not really, when he says it. It is just that she is trying so hard not to believe in the rape. If she allows the rape to be a reality, her very being hangs in the balance. What is to stop him at that point? She is looking into his eyes to see if he means it—must she really undress?—and searching for something in the corner of his eye that will tell her she will live. She cannot find it.

An angel is a pure spirit, or so the students of God say. By this perhaps they mean only that it is without body, without vulnerability and without carnal intention. Our angel (whom we shall now say existed) was fascinated with the fate of Anne's person, hovering ever so close to the body and shuddering to the touch of her human wretchedness and hurt. The anne who was an angel saw a body that was not hers and wondered what a body felt. The angel who was anne imagined another moment in time. It placed the moment there between the body and the angelic, and the body saw a place where it lived yet and a time when it did not suffer. It was not simply a dream, a life unfulfilled, it was her life there before her and in a safe place. The angel grew fascinated with its own imagination and provided more of the moments. They raced before her now, some in which she was just alone and could sleep or cry: she was eating a vegetarian Thanksgiving dinner consisting of bean burritos and tacos with myself and some of our friends, as she had been only a few days before; or, she was home in Chicago for the Christmas holidays—how she loved Christmas!—and saw herself shopping for presents and giving them, and the smiles she made. She was lying in bed, pushing the buttons on her phone, calling me to say she was hungry, but too tired to go out for something to eat. Or, she locked a door, stood alone and raped, and felt no one in the room—after his sudden relenting, the hatred and fury having run their course toward exhaustion, after his announcing that he would not kill her because she had been nice to him, after his warning that if she called the police he would come back and he would kill her then, after the bravery and humanity she chooses by walking him through the corridor of the apartment building to prevent his damaging others as he has her, and after she wishes him well, a sudden gratitude having overcome her, her voice trailing him in the cool autumn air.

“I'm not kidding bitch,” he says, “take off your clothes.” She does. He tells her not to move or he will . . . and he waves the knife. Now he removes his pants. Now he tells her to cooperate. Now he tells her to put his penis in her mouth, holding the knife close so that she will try extra hard to cooperate. (Scrawled in blue ink above one of the lines of the testimony which she has written out so as not to forget, I read the words, “Have you ever had a dick like

this before?" It is a detail that she in her feminine pride must preserve. As she writes, I am sitting beside her, her pen moving furiously on the page, trying to remember the order of the details and all of the important ones. "Oh I can't believe I could forget this," she says, but then she does not speak the words, she writes them. To write them blunts the edge: belonging still to the abstraction of memory they are not so horrible as the spoken. Nevertheless her words are real because I am her audience. She knows I am watching her write this, that I need to read the words, that I somehow require all of these brutal details, many of which I have already heard. "This is important," she says.) He tells her to "do it like deep throat," although she confesses she was not sure what he meant. He forces his penis into her mouth, that incredibly small and delicate mouth, and I can only think of her eyes grown so big with the constant strain to see the knife. He forces her on her back, the knife still in his hand and set before her eyes, and tells her once and then tells her again, not to move, not to scream, and he rapes her.

An angel has no future that is different from the present. It is guaranteed existence and so lives within the breaths of the living. The angel anne now saw itself eternally and saw that there was no future different from the one in which a woman is raped and robbed and raped.

What else did the angel realize?

The angel realized its existence as a proportion of self and fate, will and mischance, desire and what is just experience, unavoidable, seemingly unalterable, save the self which takes exception.

Why does the self take exception?

Her self, our selves, take exception because we must. If she does not, if she accepts this as necessity, it will overwhelm her. So she begins already the painful retrospection, a looking over her shoulder to see if he is following, a look that begins now forever further back in her life and endures forever forward. No longer possible is any young girl who looks upon the world innocent and unsuspecting. She will think of a happier time when she did not notice, when she played with her brother and sister on a swing set in a park (but an obscene man watched even then, perhaps some neighborhood father secretly molesting his own daughters). No longer possible is the girl in her who walks lively, fragile, careless to the store for some groceries.

Why did she have to go to the store?

Because she was hungry.

Did she have to go to the store?

No.

Why did she have to go to the store?

She didn't.

Then this all might have been avoided.

No.

Where is the angel now, as he rapes her?

The angel is close, too close, feeling itself breaking with fear. It provides her with a further sense of her life, the awareness of her own breath, the knowledge of the body suffering and the structure of hope by which it endures. The angel is the clue to her survival.

With this knowledge, should not fear have been absent?

No. The angel, although it knows perfectly, has its essence in fear. Seated on the edge of fear, it enters into the breaths of the living when the fear of death and hurt make breathing hard, the lungs contracting irregularly and gasping for the angelic, for peace. As the angel held the image of the body raped before her eyes, Anne could not disengage the terror. It did however become less personal. She saw the words, which were underneath the body, like a caption in a foreign film: this girl is being raped. Over and over they flashed before her: this girl is being raped.

There are really only two things that I recall during that time that he was in me:

1) He held the knife in his hand at all times, except for a moment when he dropped it and, balancing himself on one arm but still in me, he picked it back up, and I remember wondering if in that one moment I should have struggled to escape, if I had missed my chance not to avoid the rape, but to live. (The reprimand comes from the agnostic and unangelic instinct in her, from the person who is in time only as at a point, to whom death is the absolute extinction of the person. "It was too brief a moment," she writes in the document.)

2) The other was just my ear recording the outside world so I could remember it a little longer. I could hear the music from my neighbor's stereo and once—in another brief moment—I heard a neighbor enter the hall. He said to me, "Don't make a sound, don't think that they can hear you or that they can make it in here before I use this" (she was no longer looking at the knife; its reality had become substantial in his language, as also his every threat, his every deprecation—"you're a good fucking bitch"—had become not just language, but violence itself). It seemed very sad to me that the rest of the world was going on, and that I might never hear anything but those sounds.

And of course there was his smell, which sometimes when I walk alone at night comes upon me.

What does a woman think when she is being raped?

I could not think of you.

What did you think?

I tried so hard not to think of him.

What does he smell like, she is trying to discern for herself even as he is about to enter her again. He has already raped her once, forced her to dress to go to the cash machine with him to use her bank card to withdraw her money,

has also made her in desperation offer to write him a check, if he will leave, if he will please please leave and not kill her, and even then when she thought finally he will leave now and I will shut the door, he tells her again to undress and she worries that now he will hurt her for real, now he has everything he needs. I cannot believe this, she cries to herself softly, until now I could. Suddenly it is very important to evaluate the smell of his person. It is perhaps a kind of poverty, but it is more than that, a deliberate abuse of one's own person, an odor not sweet and foul like the smell of a wino, although maybe there is also wine or beer or drugs within it, but stale from neglect and sweat and intimations of death.

Somewhere between the two rapes, probably during the trip to the cash machine at the Safeway, Anne received a call on her answering machine: "Hi beautiful, where are you? Pick up the phone." (Here: an objective silence, the drone of the tape recording the empty space of response.) "You should hurry up and call. I'm leaving for the law library in a while, and you won't be able to reach me later."

Two days after the rape, I went to the apartment with her sister to get some of Anne's things for her. The other part of my assignment was to check the machine, and I waited until Kit was in the bathroom to play the messages, which were only two—the first from myself in a voice deepened by the machine and unsympathetic. The voice might have held a hint of sadness, which I heard now as foreboding, but more likely it was self-pity (I'd been working hard at the library and my efforts to reach her had gone unrewarded). That recorded moment included all the irony of the distance between two people. How could I not have known? How could my voice be recorded dry and matter-of-fact, after she had been raped, before she would be raped again, as my angel floated between her life (behind the locked door of her apartment) and being found dead in an alley (she was even now on a street corner led by a man with a knife who hated her).

The other message was from a police officer: "I'm calling for Miss Ramsey. This is Detective Davis, and it's very important that I speak with you as soon as possible concerning last night's crime."

It began like this, he thinks, I was just sitting there drinking a beer with my girl and her friend Janice, and that was about 8:30, before I ever met that girl Anne and as she says raped her. He has begun to hear his own story in a voice that will tell it in a courtroom. It is believable, he reassures himself, because it could have been somebody else and I should say I knew her. Then I got up and said I had to be going because I had some crack to sell, but I didn't tell them that. And it was maybe nine-thirty and I was standing on the corner of seventeenth and P and a guy I knew from way back named Roy, but I can't remember his last name, came up with Anne and they wanted some cocaine . . .

And in his voice I can hear the cracks in the story and see the way it ought to fall down all about him, but it doesn't, not entirely. The cracks are there, but

somehow the story stands, outrageous and incredible, and if the jury doesn't quite believe it, they are at least surprised that they don't find it preposterous.

How does his story really begin, I wonder. Does he ever see himself doing what he has done?

I just wish sometimes I could be like everyone else and not always think about it. Some people are happy, they think of their futures and they are happy, they make plans for their futures as if nothing could happen and they are happy. Do you ever think really hard and try to imagine us together, anywhere, twenty-five years from now? I can't do it. It's not that I can think of us apart either, I could never do that. We are for always. But nothing comes to mind when I try to imagine our distant future, I just can't see us. It is as if it does not exist, not even in possibility. I want so much to have a picture of us then, to live fifty years with you, to know that I had fifty, even just fifteen years with you that no one could take away. Then maybe I could be happy for just a little while.

Once she thought to herself, this is the worst thing that has happened to me.

She says, This is the worst thing that happened to me. To know death so closely, for two hours to see yourself left behind, left for dead. I saw my body at the side of the road somewhere. I saw them looking in my apartment and I could not be found, like a little girl who has run away but she does not get very far. They were looking and looking, and then you found me in the bathtub. What would you think, I tried to imagine it—how you would find me with the blood dried all over my naked body, and you would bend down and kiss me anyway.

(Maybe, she thinks, he would be crying then as now, or maybe it would be worse because he could never stop, I could never hold him as I hold him now and tell him it's all right because I lived for you, and he'd always wonder what I was thinking when I died.)

I wonder what people think right before they are killed. To have to look at another person who is killing you, I always try to imagine what I would think. Sometimes I can't remember thinking anything the whole time it was happening, just looking and watching a girl being raped. I did think of you a few times, but—believe me, it was not a betrayal—I could not think about you. I did not have the strength or time for that. I had to watch every minute to see if he would kill me. And I had to keep the thought of you somewhere safe where you could not get hurt by what was happening. If I thought about you, I would see you hurting for me, even mourning for me, and before you know it, I would be dead.

I know now I could think of you while being killed.

You know he asked about my keys, but I said my car was still in Chicago. I was smart because I knew he could take me somewhere and I would never come back, and he was dumb and he believed me because he thought I was so scared I could not lie. But I lied, you dumb ass, and I was smart because I knew

what I had to do to live, and I begged him not to kill me and I talked to him. I asked him, Where are you from? I asked if he was out of work, if that was why he had to rob me. I said, my name's Anne, what's yours? I told him I had just moved here from Chicago—that was why later I could lie about the car—and he laughed a mean laugh, "This must be a nice welcome for you." I hate him. I do. I'm not sorry I hate him. You should hate him too.

Angel. You call me that sometimes now, your little angel. Do I not seem real or ordinary to you? I can understand that, I am not like other people. I don't think most people think about death all the time. They don't understand what it's really like. I always do, and so do you. We are not like them. Yes, I kind of like it that you call me your angel. I like all your names for me better and better, and it seems now that there are more of them, nicknames and names, I like that, the way you say my name, the way you say angel and when you say Anne, just like that, Anne.

Did I tell you that they took the clothes I was wearing as evidence? When do I get them back? I want them back, Carter, and the jewelry. The police asked me to look through some jewelry, watches and necklaces and things, but most of it wasn't mine. I suppose he attacked another woman, maybe even that same night, maybe after he left my apartment. Imagine that, he just goes somewhere else, doesn't even think about what he's done. I asked him why he had to do this, if he had lost his job recently, did he need the money. I tried to understand him and I asked him his name. I said, my name's Anne, what's yours?

They took the clothes because there was blood and sperm and who knows what else on them. I don't care about evidence. I want them back because they're mine. I had to put those clothes on twice after he raped me, once to go to the cash machine at the Safeway and once to walk him to the door of the apartment building. I watched him leave and then I ran back and put the chain lock on the door thinking now that he's gone, I will lock him out.

You need to go to the apartment to get me some clothes. Take Kit with you to pick out the clothes and check the mail and the answering machine. I don't want to go back there. I don't want to live there anymore. It's like a dead person's living there—the person that I was and the person that I am would have to meet again and again.

I entered my apartment, locked my door, put the chain on and checked the windows. I began to scream and cry and then I called Carter. He was not home. I called my mother. I straightened the pillows.

He told me I was a mess, oh but that comes earlier.

About the Author

Look for “Anne, Afterward” as the opening story in R. Clifton Spargo’s interrelated sequence of stories, **Anne, Afterward**. The final story in the sequence was the winner of Glimmer Train’s 7th Fiction Open Contest in 2004 and was published in *Glimmer Train* #52. Spargo’s stories have also appeared in *North Atlantic Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *SOMA*, *Fiction*, *Reflections*, and *Glimmer Train* (#41, #54), and he is a past the winner of *Glimmer Train*’s Short Story Award for New Writers. He is also the author of a literary critical study *The Ethics of Mourning* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).