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He Drew Stained Glass on My Skin

By Charlotte Willis

The angel stood in the center of the Dollar Store, seeming to have an intense internal debate over which brand of barbecue chips to buy. Herrs was clutched in one clawed hand, Lays in the other. The only visible difference between the two brands was that the Herrs ones were ruffled. Everyone knew that ruffled chips held flavor better.

But maybe angels didn't have ruffled chips in Heaven. I wouldn't know, I had never met one before, much less seen one struggling to purchase chips. I had only seen them in my history books, but the illustrations clearly hadn't done them justice. Curls, high cheekbones, a smoky halo that seemed to shift in the light.

I placed a jar of queso in my basket, staring at the angel out of the corner of my eye. His coppery wings twitched, fluttering the packaging along the shelves behind him. The feathers glittered metallically, sending small beams of fluorescent light bouncing through the aisle. My queso glowed bright orange.

The chip bags crinkled angrily in the angel's hands. What was he so stressed about? It wasn't like one was more expensive than the other. It was a dollar store. Everything was a dollar. Why not get both?

Unless....did the angel even *have* a dollar?

A breeze swept through the aisle, sending a few chip bags tumbling to the floor. Salt and vinegar mixed with original and sour cream and onion on the stained linoleum.

I took a half a step closer, intrigued, but still frightened by the being in front of me. Those rippling feathers taking up half the aisle seemed like they could flatten me in a moment. Still, something compelled me forwards, into the personal space of the angel. Too bad I hadn't paid better attention to that history textbook, then maybe I would have known that it was a bad idea.

The air buzzed, vibrating around me with each tentative step that I took. My scuffed, green tennis shoes scraped begrudgingly across the sticky floors, caked with years' worth of bubblegum and spilled soda. But the overwhelming urge to inform this angel of the correct chips to buy urged me forward, into the danger zone of the wings.

Another push of the copper feathers sent the queso tumbling out of my basket, yet another stain marring the floor. Bright orange cheese goop coated my shoes as I trudged forward, heedless of the glass shards crunching underfoot.

I inched as close as my legs dared, not wanting to startle the angel. It seemed like too much work to make sure they purchased the right chips, but I was in too deep to turn back now. If an angel was going to experience barbecue chips, he should at least experience the most flavorful ones.

I took one step closer, the last step that my legs allowed myself to take, and stopped short, my body bouncing against an invisible force between myself and the angel.

The air thrummed. The chip bags crinkled. And the angel's eyes snapped to mine.

Blazing red eyes bored into my brown ones, holding me in place. The smoky black halo, wispy from the slight breeze created by the wings, seemed to wrap around me, forming a bubble around the two of us.

In a few breaths, the Dollar Store faded. Chips turned into leafy bushes, the sticky linoleum into packed dirt, fluorescent lighting into sunlight filtering through branches. I was still trapped in black smoke, transfixed, frozen in time. And there, in the middle of it all, the angel stood, holding a gnarled branch in a clawed hand. The barbecue chips were nowhere to be seen.

I couldn't have blinked if I wanted to.

I tried to open my mouth, but the smoke wove between my lips and pulled them shut, trapping all my questions in my throat. But before I could panic, the angel flapped his wings, sending stray copper feathers spiraling towards me.

They were soft, softer than I had expected, and they hit my cheeks and rippled down my arms, dissolving the smoke barrier. What had I even been panicking about?

The angel seemed to float over the ground, even though his wings weren't moving. The closer it got, the calmer I became. Nothing existed except me and the angel. There was nothing to be afraid of.

A gust of wind blew through, sweeping the angel's bronze curls off of his face. But the gnarled branch stayed strong and true in his hand, reaching towards me.

My eyes followed the branch and its gnarled limbs as it reached and reached closer to me. I shivered with anticipation.

A very small voice shouted in the back of my mind that it was wrong, demanding to be heard as it jumped up and down. But the calm of the angel drowned it out. I was transfixed.

I bared my arm involuntarily, holding it out as the branch reached closer. Would the wood feel rough? Would it cut me? Would it scrape my skin?

In the end, I didn't find out. There was a blast of cold air as the branch grazed my skin, shooting goosebumps up and down my body. And then a flash of light. Fluorescent light.

“Hey man, are you okay?”

I blinked, surprised to find that I could do so, and snapped my head up. Chip bags, sticky linoleum floors and fluorescent lighting surrounded me. In my right hand was a bag of Lay's barbecue chips, in my right a bag of Herr's barbecue chips. One was ruffled, one was not.

“Y-yeah,” I stammered, blinking at the bags in my hand. I could have sworn-

Fuck.

The sleeve of my gray sweatshirt shifted. My arm was awash with color. Stained glass, shining in the fluorescent light, laced up and down my arm, swirling the same way my goosebumps had.

“Alright. Just be careful. Someone smashed a jar of queso on the floor.”

Footsteps trudged away, squelching on the sticky floor. I was too transfixed by the stained glass drawn on my arm to notice that the queso splattering my tennis shoes was black and white.