

1st place, fiction

Angel

by Edie Bakker

Tammy took another drag on her cigarette and stretched out on the dirty old rug in her living room floor. She liked to look at the bare white ceiling where she could see exactly what was before her and what was running across it. It helped her sort out the voices in her head.

A knock on the door startled Tammy and she stood up wide awake and alert. It could be John. Or it could be the greater prophet of God. She wasn't sure. Cautiously she approached the door. "Watch out!" she heard from the empty room. "It's Panshe. She's come to get your cigarettes." Tammy peered through the keyhole. It was John! She sighed with relief and opened the door wide laughing. John scooped her up in his arms and carried her onto the couch where he put her down ever so gently.

"How are you feeling?" He ran his hand over her neck and up her shoulder into her hair.

"Fine," Tammy replied. She was so happy with John. Tammy loved John. "John will be here forever," squealed tiny Katy from under a chair. If only John would marry her, but it was hard for her to act like a wife and bother with mundane things like the house when there were so many figures milling about, all carrying on conversations of their own and walking in and out of her life. "You are his wife," Dalia interrupted from the ceiling. They didn't bother her too much, however, because they were her figures, -- her people. Tammy was in charge of the creatures and the people. God had made it so. It was her job to keep track of the good ones and scare away the bad ones, the dark ones; the children of Satan. She was happiest when the room was full of children.

John stepped out to bring two paper bags bulging with groceries into the kitchen. "He's moving in! He's moving in!" Several voices cheered.

"How much do I owe you?" Tammy asked. She counted out the \$69.85. She was good with money. "Sixty-nine million gazillion kasmillion," she muttered to herself aloud, translating the figure for her friends to understand. The only reason she didn't buy groceries herself is that she never knew what or who she would run into outside. Plus she had to worry about those who would follow her from the inside. In addition to the voices, there were people and creatures, large and small, following her around. What would she do with them in the store? Consequently she preferred to stay in, or at least in her own yard. Neighbors got used to her always talking to herself, but became alarmed when she yelled. If only they could see what she saw.

John was good to Tammy. He gave her all the benefits of marriage, without the responsibilities. They had been together three months when he first felt his way around her on the couch and left her feeling some kind of heaven. After that he came twice a week.

One day Tammy woke up feeling nauseated. Soon she couldn't keep anything down. "It's the plague," someone cried. John brought her some Campbell's chicken soup and told her to eat it slowly with crackers. He felt her brow. She wasn't hot. Maybe she ate something wrong.

The next day, Tammy got sick again. This time she cried. But it went away after a while. When John came back a couple of days later Tammy had been sick again and, neither of them felt like lying on the couch. In fact John started backing away from her rather than being more concerned. Pretty soon he didn't come at all.

Tammy wasn't lonely. She had her friends. She liked being alone in the house with them. "You're beautiful!" "You're the best." They would say. And most of them did what she told them to do.

As the nausea subsided Tammy began to get hungrier and hungrier; probably making up for all those days she was sick. "Strength! Get your strength up," cried two or three voices. When most of the cans in the cupboard were gone and she longed for some fresh fruit and ice-cream, she crept out to the ATM machine at the bank on the corner where her check went, being careful to hold hands with her flock of followers. She bought some groceries. It was a scary adventure, but the food made it worth the effort.

Tammy had been to MHMR. She had been to the hospital. They always made her take medicine that took away her friends. As soon as she got home, she put away the Respiradol pills and gradually they would return. The medicine made her a sick girl in a world of people who stared and judged. In the real world, the one that she saw off the medicine, she was confident, magnificent, and in control. She was God's first angel.

Although Tammy wondered what happened to John, she couldn't find the number he gave her. When she finally found and called it she became confused. A woman answered the phone and said curtly that John did not live there. Tammy smoked five cigarettes in a row, dropping the butts on the bare linoleum and then stared at the ceiling for a long time.

Tammy was eating so much she was getting fat. The people in her house didn't care if she was fat or skinny. They still listened and respected her. But her jeans didn't zip any more. Gradually she scavenged up a few old pairs of sweatpants and wondered why her belly showed all the time below her T shirts.

One day Tammy felt a sharp pain and then another go down her leg. From the corner of the room a man said "Rebuke the swords of Satan!" This time she chose the couch instead of the floor to lie on. She seemed to have a lot of problems with gas too. At least something kept rumbling around in her tummy.

Tammy thought about going to a doctor, but she knew that doctors were part of the conspiracy that tried to take her world away by giving her the medicine, so she couldn't go there. Was there anyone she could trust? She didn't need anyone. After all there were so many people all around her.

But suddenly the cramps got so bad that she lay curled on the couch and screamed. For hours and hours she screamed, tossing and writhing for a moment's relief, but the pain came in waves no matter how she lay, and it never really let up. Satan's people were finally coming to get her. Their screams echoed

hers and their dark bodies lurked all around her.

In horror, she found that she had to relieve herself. They could clean it up when they found her dead, she decided. She could not make it to the bathroom, so she took off her pants and did it. Something spurted everywhere from inside her, and she realized she was almost dead, but there was no relief. The more she focused, the more the voices supporting her disappeared. Soon her whole body began to turn inside out and she felt herself dying by extreme pain and contortions. Even her world of people disappeared as she squeezed whatever was between her legs. That was a glimmer of hope. She found a goal in all this.

Suddenly there was a tiny little cry. It was one of the people in the shadows, no doubt. But the pain stopped, and she looked at the mess she made on the floor. A baby was lying there! It was all covered with slime but it wiggled and kicked and squinted its eyes. Out of its belly was a twisted slimy rope

tied to her. She reached down with her fingers and softly touched the squirmy baby. Amazingly, it coiled towards her. It must be hers. She reached down and pulled the baby towards her by a leg. It began to wail and wail, and the deep pains inside her began again. Nevertheless she had to cuddle it in her arms. "It's a little Angel," she exclaimed.

There she lay in a gory mess with the most precious thing in anybody's world in her arms cooing softly.

There was a loud knock at the door but she wasn't well enough to hide. She cowered in fear as police burst in and surrounded her. They cut the cord and took the baby, then covered her with thin cotton robes and tied her on to a stretcher, so she could not move. In the hospital a doctor gave her a shot, and when she woke up all the people that no one else could see were gone. Only the baby dressed in pink lay in a crib next to her. She was absolutely beautiful.

Tammy stared hard and long at the face and fingers of her tiny Angel. A doctor was called in. He asked if she could see anyone besides him and the in the room. He asked if she heard anyone. When she said no, he asked if she would like to hold the baby.

After three days a social worker came and had a serious talk with Tammy. No one could take Angel away from her, she said, if Tammy would let a nurse give her a shot every month. Tammy had to think long and hard. There were a lot of people in her life to give up in exchange for this one tiny person. Angel reached up and softly touched her cheek. "I'll do whatever I can," she replied solemnly.

"We will help you, and so will the baby's father." The case worker tried to contain a grin.

John stepped into the room. "I'm so sorry that I let you down" he said with tears in his eyes. "I love you, and from now on I love only you!" He touched her shoulder and then grabbed her head in both hands messing up her hair and kissing her on her forehead. "When your neighbors heard you screaming they called the police," John explained. The next day it was in the paper, and I realized that was my baby... our baby!"

The social worker gave them a moment and then told Tammy about a home they had found for her and the baby.

"But if you ever stop getting your Respiradol shots, you'll lose her," she warned again.

Tammy didn't lose her, to the case worker and the doctor's surprise. Tammy chose little Angel over being the head angel herself and let her people go.

But they were never far away, and she would always believe in them.