

ANGELS

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Uncorrected proof

When Tarquin Lamort, aged fifty-two, moved to Los Angeles the intention was to change his life completely. But seeing as he shipped all his carpets, New Age crystals, wind chimes, mandalas and paranoia into another apartment, generically indistinguishable from the one he'd just left behind nearly three thousand miles away in New York City, his plan seemed destined to fail. He had always lived cocooned by his genius. His implausibly high IQ made social interaction elusive. He couldn't catch the subtitles of society's dance, nor understand his starring role within it.

As an only child he had been devastated to find himself orphaned aged nine when his father, an uncompromising industry baron, and his mother, untarnished in Tarquin's memory as forever beautiful, young, loving and kind, were both killed in a car wreck. The vehicle had veered off the road for no apparent reason, according to eye witnesses, turned over three times, before bursting into flames and burning fiercely for a full twenty minutes before any rescue vehicle arrived. The coroner returned an open verdict in his report. Tarquin's father had been driving and the accident had occurred at three a.m. after his parents had been seen jiving at Truman Capote's Black-and-White Ball. The question of his father's sobriety had haunted Tarquin ever since.

The next seven and a half years were spent as a full-time boarder at Amply School, near Newhaven. Because of his misfortune and the fact that his father was an alumnus, Amply allowed Tarquin to enrol a year early. They bent the rules and squeezed him into a class composed of children eighteen months older than himself.

This worked well academically, as he was exceptionally bright. Socially it was a disaster. Tarquin was always the first with his hand up for the teacher, earning him the name, among his peers, of the 'Oily Fucker'. He made no friends and his lessons bored him. Science was the only exception; he found the subject mesmerizing from the moment he learned about the existence of the quantum theory.

Whenever possible Tarquin stayed on at the school, through the holidays. Everyone else went home to their families or to exotic climes, apart from an apparently unwanted Arab princeling and a skeleton staff that had been retained especially to oversee the two boys. Tarquin didn't mind; he liked the freedom it gave him. He was allowed to use the school laboratories to conduct physics experiments on his own. As he had no relations to visit, he felt that this was just fine. His only other option was a visit to one of his trustees, in his view more boring than death itself – something Tarquin now measured everything against.

Graduating from Amply meant leaving the one constant in his life. He was about to turn eighteen years of age and inherit everything that was coming to him, which was a great deal. Thrown alone into the deep end at such a tender age was hard; he was an introverted boy, and the dollars, of which there were millions, made him even more so. He became defensive and suspicious of people who tried to befriend him and lived his life alone for the next thirtyfour years with surprising success, absorbed by his own health and the projects he'd devised for himself. These tasks ranged from posting conspiracy theories on the Web, to writing a book on his soul, and painting self-portraits in oils. Apart from his intricate rambling on the Internet none of his other efforts saw the light of day, as he would squirrel them away in his storage unit the moment they were finished. Unencumbered by other people's opinions he did as he pleased, and remained alone, marooned by his wealth and intellect.

The act of unpacking his possessions in the spartan apartment he'd taken by the sea on Ocean Boulevard was like reading a diary of his loneliness. There were hardly any sentimental keepsakes given by loved ones or relations. He was an orphan and a loner and always would be. He'd been trained that way. Unwrapping an ornate glass bong that he'd acquired in Morocco, he remembered the toothless old man who'd sold it to him. 'It is the very healthiest way to smoke hashish, sir,' the vendor screamed. 'You see, the hashish and tobacco passes through the water, yes?' He filled his lungs on a demonstration model. 'All impurities are removed,' he croaked, exhaling a stream of pungent white smoke. 'And that, my friend,' the old merchant shouted, sounding extremely volatile, 'keeps you sane.'

Tarquin started to fix himself a hit of the finest Humboldt mixed with the contents of a Lucky Strike and packed the bowl to light the pipe. Inhaling deeply, he lifted an oval Fabergé mirror out of a box of polystyrene pellets. It was his most treasured possession. Faithful replicas of morning glory flowers fashioned in exquisite silverwork grew around the mirrored glass as a frame. Wherever he moved, it was always the first object to be unpacked and hung in pride of place. He carried it carefully through into his bedroom to hook on to the nail he'd drilled and rawl-plugged earlier, then stood back to check the positioning. This mirror was a tangible memory of his mother. He could see her now, sitting in front of it at her dressing table smelling delicious. Still thinking of her, he was caught unawares by his own reflection. A sorry sight, his face peeking out from beneath a bird's nest of hair, cheeks puffed up, half visible above an unkempt beard and his lips, mid-toke, pursed unattractively with the effort of holding the smoke inside his lungs. Exhaling, he ruminated on where life had taken him and was saddened by the obvious lack of change or growth in his persona.

The sea, only three blocks from his new home, was the one changing element in the middle of this ocean of self-imposed sameness. Deciding to take a walk, he donned his sunglasses, even though it was the middle of the night, and stepped out to stroll down to the surf. Maybe the wind would blow the desolation from his psyche.

She, meanwhile, was running to meet him as fast as her legs would carry her, which wasn't very fast at all, as the legs she had were faulty in a way she couldn't quite put her tongue on. Whether the trouble was a lack of mental co-ordination or a genuine physical disability hardly mattered; the fact remained that if she couldn't get them to move a little faster, she was going to miss the appointed hour, and heaven only knew when the next chance would be. She smelt a rat. The very whiff of it swamped her with loathing and indignation. Rats weren't allowed in the same vicinity as Hands, and they knew it. 'Where rats run disease spreads,' she remembered by rote.

Locating the revolting creature wasn't difficult. Even on the move, she just had to follow the odour-band to its source and find the glittering red eyes she knew would be there.

And sure enough, scanning the darkness from where the smell originated, there they were. Two little red pinpricks following her progress, chock-a-block with malevolence, daring her to deviate. Pathetic creature. Did it think she was born yesterday ... literally?

Summoning the wisdom of ages, she prioritized, ignored the rat and hurried on with little or no regret; after all, she was enjoying herself. It was a grand Boulevard to be running down after so long, even if she was, by necessity, blinkered against looking around at all the exhilarating changes she passed. Unread news hung everywhere, tantalizing her. It was on the lampposts and the hydrants, lying in gutters, floating in the breeze, but she didn't have time to stop. If she missed him she'd be stuck – unable to move up, down, east or west. The concept renewed her resolve, propelling her around a corner and down a side street, where she spotted Tarquin at the far side of the next avenue. He was already at the traffic lights and had passed the interception point; to make matters worse, he was walking on at a healthy pace and the road between them was in the process of being resurfaced. A new layer of tar had just been laid, and huge men stood poised in the shadowy streetlight, ready to rake out the gravel–pitch mix that was being spewed out of the back of a truck. They might have researched my route better, she thought, looking up at the dark sky reproachfully.

She cried out for him to wait. He didn't hear. Then with the spectacular courage that's born of desperation, she launched herself in front of an oncoming roller that was bringing up the rear to flatten the newly laid uneven surface. She somersaulted, with the consummate ease of a gymnast, across the new sticky-sharp stuff, ending up on the pavement on the other side of the street. Springing up, she staggered. What was wrong? Her legs seemed to be functioning worse than ever, if such a thing was possible, and her coat was covered in noxious goo. It was burning through to her skin. She fought the pain and persevered, each step a more monumental effort than the last.

'Wait,' she called out again and again. A shortness of breath seized her oesophagus, shrinking the air passage. She crashed on to the sidewalk. She was gulping. She needed oxygen.

He stopped, turned to see what the commotion was, saw her fall, heard her gasps, and ran back.

'Thanks be to the Powerful One,' she wheezed. Now, even if it cost her this life, the mission would count as a qualified success. They wouldn't strand her. Evolution was once again possible. She accepted her fate, and let go.

When she regained consciousness, she was insulted to find herself lying on a cold metal trolley, being forcibly restrained by a Hand (male) while another, female in gender, stuck a twig up her backside. Such a wholly insufferable assault on her dignity called for desperate measures, and she lashed out with her mouth, the only body part left under her control. She screamed and screamed, trying with all her might to bite the Hands. Until she remembered – what? Nothing. She couldn't remember a thing, who or what she was, her parents, her childhood or why indeed she was here in such an uncomfortable and demeaning position. How long had it been? she wondered. How long was a yard of sausages, come to that? No, sausages had nothing to do with it. With what? She was puzzled. She couldn't recognize her thoughts.

Tarquin spoke: 'You all right, boy?' When she heard his voice it activated her brain, which scanned straight to a memory cell where she found: 'T. Lamort intersection Venice and Ocean 11.45 p.m. May 15th 1999'. That's right, she thought. He's it. The reason for her being. Of course she had no memories of this life – there weren't any. But she did now know exactly who and what she was.

A Korean Jindo of royal stock, and a direct descendant of the first, great immortal Jindo Quint, whose exploits had been recorded by Hands in a twelfth-century manuscript ostensibly concerning the fabled isle of Jindo and its inhabitants but which, in fact, was a simple, elegant tract paying homage to Quint, to his mythic powers and heroic feats, to his qualities as handsome, valiant and brave. Hangwen Kang had summed up his oeuvre by stating that Quint was the embodiment of all wise Jindos, for they were well known to be dogs of a rare and honorable breed. Kang's brush strokes, recognized as the most delicate of his age, produced

faultless calligraphy, which meant this important artefact had been preserved up to the present day, and now lay guarded behind glass in a private house in Seoul.

Now she knew what she was, she then remembered who. And, since she had come down through the western hemisphere her name would be the Poppulina, as always. Much easier for the occidental to pronounce than Princess Ulteoug Hau-Pai.

Feeling better now that she'd regained her identity, she understood everything; the twig must be a thermometer, and the Hand (female) had to be a vet-doctor. She'd been briefed that this would happen if the first phase was successfully completed.

The vet-girl and Tarquin were only acting with the best of intentions. She forgave them. It wasn't their fault. They'd been born on a lower rung of the evolutionary ladder and were too dense to realize that any species other than their own could suffer humiliation. This was precisely why she'd come, to show him that each and every living organism possessed feelings, humour and a soul, as well as the inalienable right to use all three. She stopped her plaintive cries and lay limp.

Tarquin relaxed his grip. 'That's right. Good boy. No more barking, the nasty part's over,' he whispered.

The vet-girl corrected him. 'He's a she, and we can't risk more solvent on the poor little thing. Her skin's raw enough as it is. At least she can breathe.' She scraped very gently at a patch of the black sticky macadam seared on to the skin of the Poppulina's back. 'Just feather out any more of the tar you might find with a penknife or something. Like this.'

'I'm sorry,' he declared. 'I think there's been a misunderstanding. I can't keep it. I'm not equipped for a dog.'

The vet-girl deflated. 'Oh,' she said, despondent, 'she'll never make it through the pound. No one will take her looking like this.'

The Poppulina was indeed a pitiful sight. She appeared to be suffering from mange, lumps of her coat were missing, her back right thigh muscle was wasted, and the leg looked

atrophied. 'Maybe she was hit by a car,' the vet-girl ventured. To top it all off the Poppulina had been afflicted with a nervous tic that made her head bob up and down like those toy dogs in the back of cars. The vet-girl confidently diagnosed this as a symptom of distemper tremors. 'Never goes away, but don't worry. It won't get any get worse either,' she assured Tarquin.

He stroked the velvety little head ruefully.

The Poppulina was exhausted yet compos mentis enough to spot an opportunity when she saw one. She craned her neck, licked his hand weakly, then gazed up at Tarquin from beneath her eyelids, in what she hoped against hope was a beguiling manner. In any case it was the best she could muster under the circumstances, as the physical exhaustion brought on by the perpetual twitch, coupled with the effort it had required to achieve this preliminary stage, was making her shake uncontrollably.

'I suppose I could take her for a week or two,' Tarquin ventured tentatively.

'Fantastic,' vet-girl replied, brightening up beyond all recognition, instantly transformed into proficient-vet-in-charge-of-happy-dog-with-contented-owner. 'Her second set of shots are due March sixteenth. Avoid letting her mix with other dogs until then. She's prone to infections right now.'

Tarquin was alarmed. The vet was still talking to him as if he was master of the mutt. 'Whoa there, I said a week or so. March sixteenth is seven weeks away.'

'Don't worry,' she countered. 'I'll put her on the Web. Look at that face. Someone will fall for her.'

The Poppulina looked at the vet-girl and she looked back. Was there complicity in the look between them, Tarquin wondered? No. Was he mad? Collusion between a human and a dog? What in God's name had he been thinking?

The Poppulina lay in the back of Tarquin's SUV, happy to be leaving initial obstacles behind her. All is good now. Rendezvous completed, she thought, reporting up. But for how long, she wondered privately, would it stay that way?

'You all right, boy?' the T-voice said.

She saw his eyes looking at her in the rear-view mirror. The whites were yellowing and traversed by tiny red spider veins.

'Liver,' she diagnosed, perfectly sanguine. 'Healthy body ... promote healthy spirit,' she recited to herself in staccato Korean. She had to get Tarquin on a regime a.s.a.p.; only then would she be able to gauge the amount of work that lay ahead. Armed with a plan, she relaxed, allowing herself to revert to the common or garden dog that she used to be in the carefree youth of her first life on earth many, many moons before. She promptly fell into a deep sleep for the rest of the journey.

'Here we are,' Tarquin announced, closing the door of his apartment and bending down to release her from the ignominious blue nylon string he'd used to lead her up the stairs.

So this is where she was going to live ... what a horrid place. Nice things though, good smells to read. Her body tensed autonomously and her hackles rose. She saw danger in a smell and, baring her rotten teeth, turned the corner of the flimsy wall separating the bedroom from the living space and saw the Siberian wolf that she already knew was there. It was lying on Tarquin's bed bold as brass and she attacked it before realizing it was long dead. Tarquin was using the pelt as insulation for his body. 'There is more to protégé than meets eye,' she thought, looking back at Tarquin, who was laughing at her. Impressed with his courage she covered her embarrassment with solemnity and continued her investigations with great dignity, acquainting herself with the origins of each and every object in Tarquin's apartment. She sniffed, then lay down on her favourite, an oriental carpet, whose smell readings transported her back through the souks of ancient Persia, even on to the time of its creation, when it was woven on a loom constructed of rosewood so pliant it could safely stretch the finest gossamer threads with no fear of their breaking.

Then a strikingly peculiar thing on the other side of the small room took her attention. An eye on a table trapped in translucent casing with no smell attached. It stood next to the

transparent wall that cut them off from the ionized sea air. Not possible. She inched her nose further forward, trying to inhale some small clue. Nothing. She limped nearer – not a whiff.

‘How have they done it?’ she asked herself. ‘Smell can sneak through anything.’ She stood there, head bobbing up and down, completely stumped by the lack of any odour. Never once, in the hundreds of years visiting life-on-earth, had she come across such a thing. It appeared to be the eye of a Hand. Not Tarquin’s, but some Hand-person nevertheless. It was certainly Hand-sized, and the iridology confirmed her guesswork. She pressed her nose to the Pekinese-sized mystery. No smell. She sniffed it from the front, then the back, from under the table and then from above. In short, she scrutinized it minutely from every conceivable angle, with every form of sensory perception available to her. Nothing. She could make neither head nor tail of it and sat down defeated. Her bad back leg stuck out at a peculiar angle making balance on her one good haunch appear precarious. Oblivious of her handicap and the comical aspect it lent her, she sat there, proud, lopsided and perplexed, looking from the smellless eye to Tarquin, and back again.

‘It’s a hologram,’ he said. ‘Do you like it?’

Hologram? The Poppulina knew about telegrams – they had been all the rage on one of her previous visits – but holograms?

She had to hand it to these Hand-people; they really were fiendishly clever. No one in her Jindo homeland had succeeded in transporting the metaphysical imprint of smell-reading. The finest brains had tried and failed. To this day you still had to pick up a smell image from source. Yet here were these creatures succeeding where far greater minds had failed. Completely missing the point. I mean what’s the use of a transposed snippet-of-a-smell, without the actual reading to digest? A concept the Hand-people, of course, couldn’t conceive of. Once they’d evolved and grown hands they’d stopped listening. Armed with eight fingers and two thumbs they’d become arrogant, puffed up with their superior dexterity. If they’d only remember to interact with the universe they’d be invaluable. Instead they remained gluttons and greedily sucked the very planet on which they depended dry, regardless of natural lore or limits.

'Oh dear, the folly of the Hand-people,' she thought, struggling up to buckle down to the task of enlightenment. Tarquin needed to be reacquainted with the elements. Hopping on her three good legs to the front door, she began to whine.

'Want to go out, boy?' he said.

She turned, fixing him with a look. 'I am not a boy,' she communed, 'I am the Princess Poppulina, Miss Popular for short.'

'Come on then, boy,' he said, bending down to reattach the grimy blue string to her collar.

Emanating discreet authority, she made a show of lifting her bad leg pathetically and willed physical contact.

'Oh look, what's wrong?' he said, taking the little damaged limb in his hand and examining the paw. 'Got something in it?'

She wagged her tail.

'There's a good girl,' he said. 'Now let's see, what shall we call you? We're in California, you've got orange hair ... What about Poppy?'

Close enough, she thought, leaning all her weight against him, weak with relief to discover she hadn't lost her power to communicate.

'Poppy it is then,' he said, ruffling her head and throwing the blue string aside. 'Let's go, shall we?'

She trotted out, a spring of satisfaction in her step. The work of rehabilitation had begun.

After the first twenty-four hours the Poppulina knew she was safe and that Tarquin would keep her. She became known as the bouncing puppy and she transformed his life. They were well suited and became highly attuned to each other's individual needs. Take the incident with the neighbourhood cats. Vicious rumour-mongers, slinking around, forever stirring up unrest and scavenging from all the local boardwalk bins, which drove The Poppulina to distraction. Their latest piece of venom reported back to her by the chocolate Labrador that lived next door was to brand all canines the ultimate Hand Parasites. Incensed, Poppulina

challenged them, demanding an explanation of their disgusting habits, such as the use of litter trays.

'We are independent, self-sufficient,' three of them caterwauled in unison. 'We shit where we please, when we please, and catch mice, lizards and moths. While you are merely an inferior inconsequential creature like the feathered life force to be found hitchhiking on the back of hippopotami, except you choose to leech off the Hand beings.'

'What gives you the right to scorn Hands?' the Poppulina growled, prowling forward into their rubbish-strewn alley. 'Hands are good, they're just in need of a little guidance.'

The insolent felines stretched detestably, purring. 'In need of guidance? Really? We don't think so,' they sneered. 'Hands worship us. Have done since time immemorial. The Egyptians ...'

Enough was enough. To get them out of her sight and squash her base instinct to practise genocide, the Poppulina sprang at them snarling. She realized, clever as she was, that if she had to hear once more about their bloody feline immortalization on the walls of the flipping pyramids, she'd go rabid. The cats scattered, and in their wake the Poppulina peed a declaration of war across the entrance to their alley. From that day on, whenever he had time, Tarquin had the sensitivity to drive the twenty minutes it took to reach Topanga or the Palisades, where he walked the wild, uninhabited stretches of canyon and let the Poppulina hunt, keeping her free from a life fraught with old urban enmities and territorial wars.

She in turn enabled him to come out of his shell. He loved the white-rabbit-like qualities of the Poppulina, discovering that he could hear 'I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date ...' in the rhythm of her step, as she ran from one bush or burrow to another checking for any changes or signs of life, reading the smells, moving on, rushing back officiously to double-check. She'd always enticed him to walk further than he intended, cunningly entertaining him at the precise moment he was about to turn for home.

Gradually, Tarquin's monastic car-home-car regime began to be replaced by *life*. He noticed the subtle changes of seasons in the Los Angeles basin, and became interested in identifying the different herbs and wild fuchsias that grew on the hills. With each new name

some small part of him healed. His feelings of wellbeing grew in tandem with the sage. He stopped taking his vitamin pills and started to prepare food for himself from which the same were derived. Unbeknownst to him he was re-establishing fundamental connections. A process that, once assimilated, would begin the slow restoration of his soul.

For the Poppulina, the training of Hands was easy. Still, she always found herself amazed by their capacity for learning. She'd noticed they possessed a love of the ridiculous, yet they liked consistency, and long ago she devised simple regimes that incorporated enough fun to keep them amused while they studied.

The Poppulina watched proudly as Tarquin blossomed. She knew that in addition to many other things, having her by his side as a companion at parties – nightmares he called them – gave Tarquin the courage to attend and engage in healthy interaction with other Hands. If she sensed him conjuring up his imagined inadequacies she would limp over or pant furiously demanding attention and break his downward spiral by making him turn his attention to her. He'd have to check she had enough water or some other invented need, giving him the time to recover his equilibrium and return to socializing, as a good Hand should. He began to smile; this restored his physiognomy to what it always had the potential to be. To reward him the Poppulina stopped bouncing.

Tarquin noticed a change but couldn't work out what it was. He took her to the vet-girl, who was thrilled. 'Look, she's still. The tremors are gone,' she exclaimed. 'It's incredible, a medical impossibility. It has to be due entirely to your love,' she said, impressed.

Tarquin shrugged, apparently unmoved, but secretly he could see no other possible explanation and was so proud that he went to a barber and had his hair cut off ... beard, moustache, the lot. His naked face proved engaging and he began to acquire a moderate popularity, a first in his lonely life. The years passed and the bond between man and dog grew. Now that Tarquin had been socialized and grasped the elemental basis of being, he had a girlfriend.

The Poppulina knew this signalled that it was her time to move on. She hated this bit, and never got used to it. She'd been warned ad infinitum not to become emotionally involved, and she always tried hard. Avoiding too much nuzzling and patting, rationing it to a paltry

twenty minutes morning and evening despite Tarquin's pleas for more. Even so, he'd managed to worm his way into her heart with his funny little quirks and simple enjoyments. And here she was, yet again, unable to say goodbye.

It had to be done, she resolved. She'd taught him all she could. To stay would put him in another rut. Furthermore, she was needed elsewhere by some other lost soul.

The form of farewell was left up to her but, as usual, not being able to decide on which was the least painful for Tarquin, she couldn't face making the choice. And so the Powers that Be did it for her by starting the decay of her body.

Tarquin tended to her for the next six months, buying a little red waggon to take her on walks when her legs began to give out.

The end was agonizing for the Poppulina. She clung on until Tarquin was ready to let go, even though, impatient for her return, the Powers had started accelerating her decomposition, initiating growths that protruded through her coat. Then they made her lose control of her own bodily functions, and without one iota of joy, they doggedly proceeded to reduce her life to misery.

One evening, Tarquin was lying next to her on the floor, caressing her and trying without success to tempt her into eating chicken, her favourite, when he suddenly got it. 'It's humiliating for you, isn't it? D'you want to go, my baby girl?' he asked, feeling sadder than he ever remembered being. Unwillingly the Poppulina let him know that it was indeed the time. Tarquin never left her side that night.

The following morning they went together to visit the vet-girl one last time. The Poppulina tried to eat all the usual treats on offer so as to comfort Tarquin, but she was too weak and nauseous to keep them down. Finally, he held her in his arms, and with the aid of the vet-girl's injection let her spirit go. The Poppulina watched over Tarquin for seven days and seven nights, allowing him time to regroup. Then she was ordered up. Never to see him again officially.

But no one could blame a Jindo dog from taking a sneak peek once in a while.