

ANGELS IN LOVE

Kathe Koja

One of the most exciting new writers to hit the scene in some time, Kathe Koja is a frequent contributor to *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and has also sold stories to *Pulphouse*, *SF Eye*, *The Ultimate Werewolf*, *A Whisper of Blood*, and elsewhere. Her first novel, *The Cipher*, was released last year to enthusiastic critical response, and her new novel, *Bad Brains*, is just out. Her story "Distances" was in our Sixth Annual Collection, and her story "Skin Deep" was in our Seventh Annual Collection.

In the powerful and unrelenting piece that follows, she shows us that you'd better be careful what you wish for—you just might *get* it.

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Like wings. Rapturous as the muted screams, lush the beating of air through chipboard walls, luscious like sex and, oh my, far more forbidden: whatever it was, Lurleen *knew* it was wrong.

Knew it from the shrieks, gagged and that was no pillow, no sir, no way— she herself was familiar with the gasp of muffled sex, and this was definitely not it. And not—really—kinky, or not in any way *she* knew of, and with a half-shy swagger, Lurleen could admit she had acquaintance of a few. Kiss me here. Let's see some teeth. Harder.

The sounds, arpeggio of groans, that basso almost-unheard thump, thump, rhythmic as a headboard or a set of baritone springs, but that wasn't it, either. Subsonic; felt by the bones. Lying there listening, her own bones tingled, skin rippled light with goose bumps, speculation: who made those strange, strange sounds? Someone with a taste for the rough stuff, maybe, someone who liked the doughy strop of flesh. Someone strong. An old boyfriend had used to say she fucked like an angel; she never understood the phrase till now. Her hands, deliberate stroll southward, shimmy of familiar fingers on as-familiar flesh; her own groans in counterpoint to the ones through the walls.

Waking heavy in the morning, green toothpaste spit and trying to brush her hair at the same time, late again. "You're late," Roger would say when she walked in, and she would flip fast through her catalog of excuses—which hadn't he heard lately?—and try to give him something to get her by, thinking all the while of last night's tingle, puzzling again its ultimate source. It was

kind of a sexy game to Lurleen, that puzzling; it gave her something to do at work.

Music store. No kind of music she liked, but sometimes it wasn't too bad, and the store itself had a kind of smell that she enjoyed, like a library smell, like something educational was going on. Sheet music, music stands, Roger fussy with customers, turning the stereo on loud and saying stuff like, "But have you heard Spivakov's Bach? Really quite good." Like he had probably heard Bach's Bach and could have suggested a few improvements. Right.

Today she felt dopey and sluggish, simple transactions done twice and twice wrong; Roger was pissed, glowered as she slumped through the day. At quitting time he made a point of pointedly disappearing, not saying good night; sighing, she had to find him, hide-and-seek through the racks. He was a stickler for what he called the pleasantries: Good night, Lurleen. Good night, Roger. Every day.

Finally: hunched behind the order counter, flipping through the day's mail like he hadn't read it nine times already. Lurleen leaned tippy-toe over, flat-handed on the cracking gray laminate: "Good night, Roger."

Chilly nod, like he'd just caught her trying to palm something: "Good night, Lurleen." Waited till she was almost out the door to say, "Lurleen?"

Stopped, impatient keys in hand. "What?"

"We open at ten o'clock. Every day."

Asshole. "See you tomorrow." Not banging the door, giving herself points for it. Outside, her skin warmed, like butter, spread velvet all over. He always kept the fucking store too cold. Like the music'd melt or something if he turned it up past freezing. Rolling all her windows down, singing to the Top 40 station. Stopped at the party store for cigarettes and to flirt with the clerk, old guy just about as ugly as Roger, but round where Roger was slack, furry where Roger was not.

"You headin' out tonight?" Sliding the cigarettes across the counter, grinning at her tits. "Have some fun?"

"Oh, I always manage to have fun." Over-shoulder smile as she headed for the door. Roger liked to stare at her tits, too, she was positive; she just hadn't caught him at it yet. Asshole probably went home and jerked off, dreaming about her bouncing around to Bach. And she laughed, a little: who'd been flying solo last night, huh?

But that was different.

In the dark, blind witness to the nightly ravishment, Lurleen, closed eyes, busy hands filling in the blanks, timing herself to the thump and stutter of the rapture beyond the walls. Longer tonight, ecstatic harmony of gulping cries, and after the crescendo wail, sound track to her own orgasm, she slept: to dream of flesh like iron, of rising whole, and drenched, and shiny-bright; shock-heavy with a pleasure poisonously rare. Woke just in time to see that she'd slept through the clock. Again.

In the hallway, pausing—already late, so what if she was later?—before the door next door. Identical in nondescription to every other down the grimy

hall, there was no way to tell by looking just what kind of fun went on there every night. Lurleen, tapping ignition key to lips, thoughtful sideways stare. Imagining, all the reluctant way to work, what sort of exotica, what moist brutalities were practiced there, what kinds of kinks indulged. Wriggling a little, skirt riding up and the cracked vinyl edges of the too-hot seat pressing voluptuously sharp into the damp flesh of her thighs.

It came to her that she had never really seen that next-door neighbor of hers. Maybe they'd bumped into each other, exchanged laundry-room hellos, but for the life of her, Lurleen could not recall. She wasn't even sure if it was just one person or a couple. They sure were a couple at night, though, weren't they just?

The day spent avoiding Roger's gaze, colder than the store and just as constant, more than one smart remark about time clocks. Stopping for cigarettes, she picked up a six-pack, too, clandestine sips at red lights, rehearsing queenly answers she would never give. It was so hot it felt good, brought a warm, slow trickle of sweat down the plane of her temple, the hotter spot between her breasts.

She was going out tonight, that was for sure; she owed herself something for the just-past bitch of a day. Walking up the hot two flights, a thought nudged her, firm and brisk to get past the beer. She leaned to sight up the stairwell, heart a trifle nervous, quick and jangly in her chest. Well. No time like the present, was there, to scratch a little itch? I'll just say hi, she thought, walking quicker now. I'll say, Hi, I'm your next-door neighbor. I just stopped by to say hello.

Fourth can in hand, smart tattoo on the door before she could change her mind. Wondering who would open, what they would look like. What they would smell like—Lurleen was a great believer in smells. If they would ask her in, and what she might say, knowing she would say yes, and a smile past the thick spot in her throat, and she smiled at that, too; it wasn't that big a deal, was it?

Maybe it was.

Nothing. Silence inside, so she knocked again, louder, humming to herself and, oh boy, here we go: winded swing of the door and "Hi," before it was all the way open. "Hi, I'm Lurleen, your neighbor?"

Tall, her first thought. And skinny. Not model-skinny, just chicken bones, short blonde hair, Giants T-shirt over a flat chest. Anne, she said her name was, and past her curved shoulders, Lurleen could see a flat as cramped and dingy as her own, a little emptier, maybe, a little less ripe, but nothing special. Purely ordinary. Like Anne herself: no exotic bruising, no secret sheen. Just stood there in the doorway playing with the end of her baggy T-shirt, flipping it as she talked, and that thin-lipped smile that said, Are you ready to leave yet? Just one big disappointment, but Lurleen didn't show it, kept up her own smile through the strain of the stillborn chatter until she was back inside her own place, sucking up the last of her beer.

"Well," through a closed-mouth, ladylike burp. "*Well.*"

How could someone so dull have such a wild sex life? Be better off meeting the boyfriend; he had to be the real show. Fucking angel. Lurleen's giggles lasted through the rest of the beer, her long, cool shower, and half hour's worth of mousse and primp. When she left for the bar, Anne's flat was silent still, not even the requisite TV drone. From the parking lot, the lifeless drift of her curtains, beige to Lurleen's red, was all there was to see.

At the bar she met a couple of guys, nice ones—she couldn't quite remember which was Jeff and which was Tony, but they kept her dancing, and drinking, and that was nice, too. After last call she swiveled off her seat, sweet, and smiled and said she was sorry, but she had an hour to make the airport to pick up her husband—and even as she said it, she had to wonder why; it was one of them she'd planned on picking up, and never mind that she couldn't remember who was who; names didn't exactly matter at that time of night; words didn't matter past Who's got the rubber. But still she left alone.

Coming home, off-center slew into her parking space, radio up way too loud, singing and her voice a bray in the cut-engine quiet; she almost slipped going up the stairs. Shushing herself as she poured a glass of milk, her invariable after-binge cure-all. Lifting the glass, she caught from the damp skin of her forearm an after-shave scent, mixed with the male smell of Tony. Jeff? It didn't matter, such a pretty boy.

But not as pretty as the boy next door.

And, her thought seeming eerily a signal, she heard the preliminary noises, shifting warm through the wall as if they stroked her: Anne's breathy, wordless voice, that rush of sound, half-sinister whirlwind pavane. Pressed against the wall itself, her bare-skinned sweat a warm adhesive, Lurleen stood, mouth open and eyes shut, working her thin imagination as Anne, presumably, worked her thin body, both—all three—ending in vortex, whirlpool, mouthing that dwindling symphony of screams, Lurleen herself louder than she'd ever been, with any man. Loud enough that they could, maybe, hear her through the walls.

Slumped, damp, she could not quite admit it, say to herself, You want them to hear you. You want *him* to hear you, whoever he is. You want what Anne's getting, better than any bar pickup, better than anything you ever had. Glamorous and dirty. And scary. And hot.

By the next night, she was ready, had turned her bed to lengthwise face the wall: willing herself, forcing herself like an unseen deliberate splinter in their shared and coupling flesh; she *would* be part of this. She had never had anything like what went on over there, never anything good. She would have this if she had to knock down the wall to get it. Fingers splayed against her flesh, heels digging hard into the sheets and letting go, crying out, Hear me. Hear me.

Exhausted at work, but on time, she couldn't take any of Roger's bitching now, not when she had to think. Make a plan. Anne, she was a sorry-looking bitch, no competition once the boyfriend got a good look at Lurleen. The

trick was to get him to look. To see. See what he'd been hearing, night after night. Of course, it wouldn't be all that easy: if Anne had any brains at all, she would want to keep her boyfriend and Lurleen

far, far apart. Lurleen decided she would have to take it slow and smart, *be* smart—not exactly her strong point, but she could be slick; she knew what she wanted.

She began to stalk Anne, never thinking of it in so many words, but as sure and surely cautious as any predator. Waiting, lingering in the hallway after work, for Anne to come home from whatever unfathomable job she did all day. Never stopping to talk, just a smile, pleasant make-believe. She made it her business to do her laundry when Anne did hers; at the first whoosh and stagger of the old machine, Lurleen was there, quarters in hand; her clothes had never been so clean; she had to see. Any jockey shorts, bikini underwear, jockstraps, what? She meant to take one if she could, steal it before, before it was clean. Smell it. You can tell a lot about a man. Lurleen believed, from the smell of his skin, not his aftershave or whatever, but the pure smell of his body. Until his body was beneath hers, it was the best she could do. She pawed through the laundry basket, poked around in the washer: nothing. Just Anne's Priss-Miss blouses, baggy slacks, cheap bras—and just about everything beige. Balked angry toss of the clothing, stepped on it to push it back into the basket. Maybe he liked Anne *because* she was so beige, so . . . nothing? *Could* a man want a woman to be nothing? Just a space to fill? Lurleen had known plenty of guys who liked their women dumb—it made them feel better—but anyway, Anne didn't seem dumb. Just empty.

And still, night after night the same, bed against the wall, Lurleen could be determined; Lurleen could work for what she wanted. Drained every morning, the sting of tender skin in the shower, even Roger noticed her red eyes.

"Not moonlighting, are you?" But she saw he knew it was no question, half-gaze through those tired eyes, and she even, for a moment, considered telling him, considered saying, I want the boy next door, Roger; I want him real bad. I want him so much I even jerk off so he can hear me, so he can know how he turns me on. I want him so much I don't know what to do.

She wasn't getting anywhere. Drumming slow one finger against the order counter, staring right past some guy bumbling on about some opera or something, she wasn't getting *anywhere*, and it was wearing her out. No time for anything else, bars, guys, whatever; there wasn't any other guy she wanted. Anne's smiles growing smaller, tighter, her gaze more pinched; was she catching on? Tired from sitting in the hallway—once or twice another neighbor had caught her at it, loitering tense and unseeing until the tap-tap-tap on her shoulder. Hey, are you O.K.? "Fine." Harsh involuntary blush. "Just looking for an earring." Right. Tired from staking out the parking lot, hot breeze through the window, she didn't even know what kind of car he drove. Tired to death and still no glimpse of him, proud author of the sounds; it was killing her to listen, but she couldn't stop. She didn't want to stop.

And then that night, mid-jerk, mid-groan, they stopped. The sounds.

Ceased completely, but not to complete silence: a waiting sound, a whisper. Whispering through the walls, such a willing sound.

She yanked on a T-shirt, ends tickling her bare ass as she ran, hit on the door with small, quick fists. "Anne? Are you O.K.?" Never thinking how stupid she might look if the door opened, never considered what excuse she might give. I didn't hear anything, so I thought you might be in trouble. Right. So what. Bang bang on the door.

"Anne?"

The whisper, against the door itself. Hearing it, Lurleen shivered, convulsive twitch like a tic of the flesh, all down her body, and she pressed against the door, listening with all her might. "Anne." But quietly, feeling the heat from her body, the windy rush of her heart. Waiting. "Anne." More quietly still, less than a murmuring breath. "Let me in."

Abruptly, spooking her back a step: the sounds, *hot* intensity trebled, but wrong somehow, guttural, staggering where they should flow, a smell almost like garbage, but she didn't care; once the first scare

had passed, she pressed harder into the door, as if by pure want she could break it down; she would get in, she would. T-shirt stuck, sweating like she'd run a mile. I'm sick of just listening. The hall was so hot. Sweat on her forehead, running into her eyes like leaking tears. The doorknob in her slick fingers.

It turned. Simple as that.

In the end, so quick and easy, and it seemed almost that she could not breathe, could not get enough air to move—but she moved, all right, oh yes, stepped right inside into the semidarkness, a fake hurricane lamp broken beside the bed, but there was light enough, enough to see by.

Like angels in love, mating in the cold, graceful rapture of thin air. Hovering above the bed, at least a yard or maybe more—no wonder she never heard springs—instead the groaned complaint of the walls itself as his thrusting brushed them, on his back the enormous strange construction that kept them airborne, as careless as if it had grown there amongst the pebbled bumps and tiny iridescent fins. His body beautiful, and huge, not like a man's, but so real it seemed to suck up all the space in the room, big elementary muscles, and he was using them all. Anne, bent like a coat-hanger—it hurt to see the angle of her back—her eyes wide and empty and some stuff coming out of her mouth like spoiled black jelly, but it was too late, Lurleen had sent the door swinging backward to close with a final catch, and in its sound his gaze swiveling to touch hers: the cold regard of a nova, the summoning glance of a star.

Her mouth as open as Anne's as she approached the vast brutality of his embrace, room enough for two there, oh my, yes. Fierce, relentless encroachment promising no pleasure but the pleasure of pain. Not an angel, never had been. Or maybe once, long, a long, long time ago.