

ANGELS

By

Kitty Hoffman

The snow fell in large soft whispers, blurred and comforting. Like the touch of her mother's hand when she pulled the covers over her at night, the snow caressed the little girl with promises of peace. The streetlights were shimmering, and because she had taken off her glasses she walked by instinct and memory alone, allowing her conscious mind to rest.

They had been learning to read that day, using the pictures of the boy and girl, the house and street, to guide them as they tried to make sense of the strange foreign letters. *Dos is Berele. Dos is Serele. Berele geyt. Serele geyt.* It was so easy to read in English now, she had been doing it for ages. But these complicated dark letters, moving in the wrong direction, confused and frightened her. She saw them rarely—in the book that her father read from when he told the story of the Exodus every spring, while she sat absorbed in the oriental pictures of slaves building the Pyramids while Pharaoh's men cracked whips; in the letters above the wide double doors of the old *shul* where she had once seen the men, wrapped in strange white shawls, chanting and swaying.

But mostly the letters made her think of tears, large dark curly tears that curved and marched and pointed along the page, with tiny little tears under them to mark their position. Like her mother's tears, when she covered her eyes and blessed the *yahrzeit* candles in memory of her dead, or when she locked herself in another room and thought that no one could hear her. The little girl always knew when her mother had been crying, because she could see a far-off look in her eyes, a softness in her face, that was not there at any other time. At those moments she knew that her mother was far away, across the world, in another time before the killing began.

Her parents had been fighting again that morning. It was the worst way to wake up: hearing her father's shouts and reproaches, her mother's angry sobs. It was never clear what sparked these outbursts—a dropped knife, a missed gesture, a confusion of nuance. Somehow, inchoately, the little girl understood that these slights were beside the point, that what she overheard was really a periodic eruption from under the mantle of normalcy that enveloped her parents' rage. Like the men swaying in the temple, covering their passions with the ritual prayer shawl, her parents cloaked their vengeance with the structures of banality. But

though she sensed that the source of these rages lay deep within her parents, from that time of death of which they seldom spoke, it nevertheless confused and frightened her that they always, inevitably, turned to fighting about her. Her health, her growth, a new dress; her friends, her teachers, a new toy. Was she becoming spoiled? Was she forgetting her origins? Would she fit in with the others?

It was as though they could fight about anything at all, the subject a mere pretext for the release of bitterness and blind pain. And sometimes it seemed to the little girl that every morning started with its dark litany of frustrations. Like the ancients who laid on their *tefillen* and recited their list of prayers, her parents put on their costumes of normalcy in this land far from home and rehearsed their epic of desolation. They had no one to destroy but each other; they had nothing to contest but her. The deeds were done, the villains escaped; all that remained was the mad fury of murderous frustration.

The girl believed that her house was filled with ghosts. Her parents were real enough, their shouts and rages confirmed their solidity. But her life was not lived with her parents alone. When they sat at the dinner table, especially if it was a holiday, the spirits of the family somehow sat with them. The little girl knew that in other holiday houses there were crowds of people, uncles and grandmothers and cousins. In her house there were only the flames of the candles, burning for the disappearance of a world. She knew the ghosts by name now—*Tchicheh Roseh*, Aunt Rose, with her thick gleaming hair and her patrician manner, respected for her husband's wealth and loved for her own gentleness; *Feter Ahrin*, Uncle Aaron, who could fix every problem and solve every dispute. There was the ghost of her mother as well, a pampered girl with long dark braids, rebelliously arguing with the rabbi, and of her mother's best friend Pesia with her fancy dresses. Her parents would sing sometimes at the holiday table, old songs of love and yearning, or stirring songs of the youth movements. The little girl never understood these songs, but she would sing along with the beauty of the sounds and the melancholy of her parents' voices.

Sometimes she would invite one of her friends home with her. They always seemed to like her parents, who would dispense exotic treats and play mischievous games. But the ghosts were always silent on those occasions, and the little girl would feel lonely and afraid. Also, she would notice a strange apprehension around her mother's eyes, as though this intrusion of normalcy was a blessing to be carefully watched.

#

Let's make angels - it's easy. The little girl saw her friend suddenly drop down flat onto the snow and slowly, carefully move her arms and legs out to the side and back. Her arms were wings, and her legs made the outline of a skirt, so that when she stood up there was the image of a perfect angel pressed into the soft snow. Although she wasn't quite sure what it was, the little girl sensed that there was something bad about this. Her clothes would get snowy and wet, she would come home rumpled and messy. Her mother would know what she'd been up to, and whatever it was it would somehow fill her mother with dread, with fear of disruption of the tight bright world that she had managed to create. The girl tried hard to avoid these disruptions, to match the rhythms of her day to the structures of her mother's need, to avoid at all cost the desperate ragings of her mother's terror.

And yet, there was something irresistibly appealing about the fresh snow, the soft twilight, the magic of the quiet street filled with her mind's echoes of the Yiddish words they'd been learning. Under a streetlamp she saw her spot: a slight incline, a pure expanse of white, a tender invitation. Her heart beat faster.

The bank of snow was comfortable as her bed at night. Slowly she stretched out her arms, her legs, and moved them rhythmically back and forth. Slowly she opened her eyes, and through the softly falling snow she saw the early stars. And slowly they came—Tchicheh Roseh, Feter Ahrin, Pesia, her mother; a young boy with bruised knees, two girls dancing, the rabbi waving his finger in a moral lesson, the tall young men home from studies abroad; a young bridegroom bravely hiding his bashfulness, a peddler with his sack of clothes, the head of the town council in his arrogant silk waistcoat. At first, they moved slowly, gently, across the sky. Then with more liveliness they joined hands in a circle. Suddenly the *klezmorim* were there, playing a *freilachs* on clarinet and fiddle; they were all dancing together, even the rabbi, even the head of the town council, even her distinguished Feter Ahrin, whirling across the sky in a triumphant circle of life. They stamped their feet; their eyes flashed; shouts of joy escaped their lips. Her mother's town, dancing in the sky; all her family, dancing in the sky. The snow melted away; her clothes, her skin, her bones, melted away. She rose up to meet them, they made a place for her in the circle, her hands joined in the chain of generations. They twirled her around, spinning faster and faster, singing the old songs of the holiday table and leaping in joy. Suddenly they all linked arms over each other's shoulders, and before she knew what was happening, she was being lifted off her feet, twirled through the air, spun around the sky on the strength of the town. They were all one now, one whirling shouting mass of energy, twirling in the sky, beyond time and space, beyond history, all generations linked together,

beyond death, beyond life, a mass of energy whirling in the sky, ghosts, and angels.

#

The little girl closed her eyes, and then opened them again. The stars twinkled in the sky; the snow fell softly. She rose gently, careful not to disturb the outline of the angel she had made in the snow. Carefully, she brushed herself off. It was time to go home; her mother was waiting.

#

Author's Note

“Angels” originally appeared in *Celebrating Canadian Women: Prose and Poetry by and About Women*, ed. Greta Hoffman Nemiroff, Fitzhenry and Whiteside (Toronto) 1989.

Editor's Note

A shorter version of “Angels” was published in *Syncopation Literary Journal* Volume 2, Issue 3 under the title “Snow Angels.”

#

Kitty Hoffman has lived in several cities and travelled the globe. Conceived in a refugee camp in Germany, born in Norway, and raised in Montreal, she has a deep interest in identity, exile, and spirit. Her award-winning writing has appeared in literary anthologies and journals including *The New Quarterly*, *Boulevard*, *The Commons*, and *Prism*. She is presently seeking representation for her book of literary nonfiction about her medieval ancestor, the father of European kabbalah, and her childhood among Holocaust survivors.