

## **Empty Windows**

by Sara Birch

"You know, Short here saw angels in his window one night. They were floating around outside, lookin' in at him. He said they were beautiful."

My stepfather came closer. I shrank back and peered at the little man he'd brought into the house. They both smelled like liquor, old sweat, and something else. Something sinister.

Short lived up to his name. A tiny man, his face, whiskers and clothes were gray, a wraith who rose from the desert floor and seeped under our door like fog. He was beaming, a pilgrim who had seen the face of God and lived to tell about it. Short was a believer, right down to his scuffed shoes and empty wallet.

We had recently moved to a rental house in Phoenix. Our living room had a television set balanced on a wobbly metal stand and two faded chaise lounges we found in the backyard. The house was dusty, battered. There were spiders in corners and stains on the walls.

The sliding glass doors were fly-spotted, greasy with fingerprints, cracked at the bottom. Beyond the doors, the lawn had turned to straw long ago, bleached by the sun. Far from my friends, my only visitors were jet streams, white billowing lines that shattered the blue as people left the desert for somewhere else.

I was seventeen years old that summer. A high school graduate, I had barely earned my diploma. A career truant, I was steeped in too much trauma to tolerate the normalcy of

school. When my mother and step-father announced they were venturing west again, I had reluctantly signed on. There were no other options.

So, two months before, I had helped push an old washing machine up the ramp of a U-Haul trailer, along with beds, lamps, and clothes, the detritus of a tattered life. Cardboard boxes, once filled with memorabilia, were a reminder of a past when things weren't as crazy. We had fallen on hard times. My step-father was a drunk and a cruel man. My mother was confused, depressed, and strapped with a toddler. Her boxes held a lifetime of broken dreams. They'd decide where to go in the morning. A flip of a coin. All I knew was we were heading west. Maybe California or Arizona.

The sun rose, and it was off on another trip down Route 66 in the back of a pickup truck. I hung on to my old cat in her crate. We careened through mountain passes and across bridges that spanned canyons so vast, it was tempting to jump from the truck and fling myself over the guardrail to see if I could fly somewhere better, where men weren't cruel, mothers didn't cry, a place where hope might guide us into something brighter. The frightened cat urinated. It seeped out of the crate and into my clothes. I reeked of urine. The wind across the bow of the truck bed was chilling, stiffening my jeans.

We drove all day and into the night. Overhead were a million stars, chips in the ragged night as though it wore sequins. "At least there's that," I thought. The stars didn't care who I was, or where I was going. They danced for me the way they did years ago, when I was a little girl and wondered what hid in the folds of darkness.

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When I was four years old, teachers at my Sunday School gave me a picture of Jesus in Sunday School. His likeness fit in the palm of my hand, and it glowed in the dark. I huddled deep in the closet among the shoes and dirty clothes, staring at his serene face, which was bathed in a greenish light.

When I was seven, I wrote letters to God and tossed them in the fireplace, hoping He read the smoke signals as my words rose from the chimney and into the universe.

My mother re-married when I was twelve. I left Jesus behind on the closet floor. We journeyed down empty roads with the Devil at our backs. But sometimes, the Devil walked through the front door with a guest.

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Short got the extra bedroom. He slept on the floor in a blanket. I did my best to avoid him, but he'd corner me, sharing stories of angels. He saw himself as a missionary for a celestial realm, there to guide us on a pathway to Heaven. Foul breath breached yellowed teeth and struck my face in clouds. Recalling the picture of Jesus in the closet, a thirsty space in me wanted to believe in Short's angels. I carried his words into my room like a disciple and unpacked them on my pillow each night. Nothing appeared in the windows, nor did I hear heavenly music. The only sounds were a dog barking at dawn, and the furtive noises in a slumbering house. Nights were disappointing, and the days glared in the desert sun.

One afternoon, Short and my step-dad staggered in, beer burps tangling with onions and peanuts. They had been on a bender, days spent at the nearby Elbow Room, a hollowed-out nest for drunks and vipers.

"Short's going back home. I'm gonna put him on a Greyhound." my step-father announced.

Nodding, I went back to reading a book, feigning indifference. I figured I'd never know if angels peered in the windows now that Short would take his crusade elsewhere.

Short said goodbye, rheumy eyes dancing in his head. He left under the guidance of my step-father. They leaned inwards towards each other, shuffled out to the pick-up truck, an ark in a sea of sand.

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The next day I walked four blocks to a pay phone and waited. At four o'clock, it rang.

"Hi," I said.

My boyfriend's voice was far away. About fifteen hundred miles as the crow flies. He was a nice boy who came from a good family. He had no idea what I had gone through for years. None of my friends did. In my family, we wore our secrets well.

He held me tight the night before I left. We stood on the front steps at midnight. The porch light had burned out long ago. The truck and trailer crouched in the driveway like mongrels who hungered for the road.

"I'll miss you," he whispered. A chilling wind blew through our clothes, ruffled our hair. I saw his silhouette in the dark, placed my head on his chest.

"I'll miss you, too," I said, then stepped across the threshold and closed the door on normal.

Every week, on Sunday afternoon, I stood in the phone booth, cooking in the heat. A few cars honked as they passed. I closed the door and turned my back. Wiped the sweat from my forehead.

"How are you?" he asked, his voice warm and concerned.

"Good," I lied, knowing I'd never see him again. I held the dirty phone to my mouth as we talked, wondered who else spoke into it, or thumbed through the ripped pages of the directory. What other nomads had stood here tethered to a cord that reached across the miles?

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Years later, a man would follow me home from a train station in the Midwest. He'd write a song about me and the angels Short had promised. We'd sing in coffee houses, then dance in empty boxcars by the railroad tracks.

By then the angels would be just part of a story, a chapter in a life spent counting telephone poles along empty highways.

But on that day, in the summer of my seventeenth year, I opened the phone booth and stepped onto an uneven sidewalk. Looking down, I noticed weeds pushing through the cement. Weeds that would survive long after the sidewalk crumbled under the cruel sun. Weeds that flourished and never gave up, no matter how often they were stepped on.

That night, I parted the curtains in the bedroom, pretended the tears on my cheeks were milk from the moon etching stars on my face. I wondered if I looked like an angel through the pane to seekers who passed in the darkness.

**Sara Birch** writes about growing up in an unconventional family. As a young girl, Sara moved multiple times throughout the United States. Her dream was to stay in one place long enough to find her way around in the dark. She currently lives between the mountains and the sea, with rain as her muse.