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Where the Truth Lies

The sun was still up. We wanted to make it to the statue before nightfall so we could see it before our only source of light was a phone screen. The crimson sky of the waning sun bathed the headstones in an inviting glow. We walked down the middle of the paved path meant for the vehicles of those who knew where they were going. After five minutes of walking down this path and scanning the horizon of the cemetery, we stopped.

"You have no idea where we're going, do you?" my friend asked.

"I told you I've never been here before. I wasn't expecting the entire city to be buried in a single graveyard," I replied.

"This place is big. How many people do you think are buried here?" he asked, scratching the beard he'd been growing to show off back home.

"A lot. I'd rather not think about it though. We should just keep walking and find the statue."

"You know what we should do? Come back at midnight and read some Poe. We could be dark and brooding and wear all black."

"Maybe—if she doesn't kill us first. If we make it out of here alive, then I'll think about it," I replied with a nervous chuckle.

I knew the stories well enough. I also knew the history. A few days earlier when I decided to investigate the Black Angel, I did a little background reading to prepare. The University of Iowa's Main Library is a massive building, just as a major collection of human knowledge should be. As I ascended the stairs, I watched students with arms full of books scuttle past me, and others pay-

ing such close attention to their phones that they almost missed steps, barely catching themselves on the hand rail. I silently laughed to myself, thinking about the near comical dichotomy of the students here. Finally, I reached my floor and stepped into the Special Collections room and asked if any information existed on the Black Angel. I was assured that they had something. I filled out a small slip and took a seat at a table near the reception desk.

After a few minutes of waiting, I was handed a tan folder with the words "Black Angel" scrawled on the tab. I opened the folder and immersed myself in a wave of newspaper articles and various documents of the past. Dozens of myths regarding the angel bombarded me. I began to learn a few of the stories of Iowa City's past. The Black Angel hosts numerous tales on the menacing darkness which engulfs the statue. Many claim that the angel was originally white and some evil deed cursed the sculpture to show the sins of some devilish being. Some stories say that a preacher murdered his son and tried to hide his sin by erecting the statue over the boy's grave. The angel, however, transformed from a bright white statue to a deep black to reflect the preacher's evil-doing. Other myths claim that the woman buried under the white angel was anything from an adulterer to a murderer and again the angel's change in color reflected the malevolent being beneath it. Another story, this one less evil and more loving, claims that after a man buried his wife, the angel turned black to reflect his grief.

While these legends bring some fun to the Oakland Cemetery, none of them tell the true story of the Black Angel, officially known as the Feldevert Monument. As I read each article, the pieces began to connect and the story cohesively linked to give the angel's history. The Black Angel marks the graves of Teresa Feldevert, her son by her first marriage Eddie Dolezel, and her second husband Nicholas Feldevert. The abridged story is that Teresa, born in 1836 in Strmilov, Bohemia, came to Iowa City and became a midwife. Her son, Eddie, passed away at the age of eighteen in 1891, and twenty years later, her second husband also passed away. Teresa then commissioned a bronze angel to be built as a monument for her family (with a bronze statue, oxidation would chemically alter the monument to the black color it keeps to this day). On November 23rd 1924, a few years after erecting the monument, Teresa passed away.

After about an hour of reading these articles I looked up at the wall and checked the clock. I had plenty of time before the collections closed. I stretched my arms and back and heard a loud, somewhat alarming, crack. My eyes widened and I darted my gaze to the woman at the desk who looked at me with a worried expression as she brushed her gray hair out of her face. I gave an

uncomfortable smile and awkwardly looked back at the papers in front of me to alleviate my embarrassment. I started sifting through the articles to see if I could find any useful information I missed. I planned on getting up and leaving soon, but spotted a sheet of paper I had neglected to look at earlier. The sheet, aligned horizontally rather than vertically, pulled me to a legal document I could barely read due to the archaic use of cursive. I looked to the top and spotted the words: Johnson County Census—Iowa City, 1885. I found a document over a century old. It may not have been the real thing, but I still got goose bumps thinking about the lives documented on this paper. I scanned the document, reading over the names of citizens who once crossed the same streets I do, but who are now most likely resting in Oakland Cemetery where I would soon trek. I then found the names I searched for: Teresa and Edward Dolezal. For whatever reason, seeing the names in this time-locked document revitalized my will to look over the articles.

This second reading showed me a few new aspects. The first article about the Feldevert Monument, written in 1939, hooked the reader with some of the myths regarding the angel. The majority of the article, however, was the simple history of Teresa's life and the reason for the monument. Seven years later, when the next article on the Black Angel appears, it becomes less about the history and more about the superstitions. The history is presented as a murky set of events and the legends make up the bulk of the story. Already, the sensational becomes the major priority of the statue's tale. As the years go on, nearly every decade has at least one story on the Black Angel, even into the new millennium. The focus of these articles varies between the true story of the Feldevert Monument and the mythical legends of the Black Angel. One thing stands true about each piece, however: no matter the focus of the story, the myth always finds its way into it. In every story, no matter the seriousness of the content, at least one legend strategically hooks the reader to continue.

While the fact that writers used a hook never threw me off, the fact that every author chose the ghost story made me think. Each article used these legends knowing the instant attention they would draw. This idea threw numerous queries at me. I began questioning this constant recurrence of these legends simply for the people. The readers seem to want them. They give people a feeling of the unknown. They create a feeling that more exists in this world than we know. Pondering these ideas, I leaned back in my chair, an audible creak echoed in the room, and again the woman at the desk looked at me sharply. I again gave an awkward

smile of apology as she swept a few strands of gray hair behind her ear and turned to her computer. I decided to end these uncomfortable exchanges before I upset the woman at the desk any further. I handed in the file, gathered my things, and headed out to greet the cool autumn air as I walked home. As I paced across the perfectly perpendicular and parallel grid of streets that make up Iowa City, the thoughts from the library still haunted my mind. I thought about the unknown and the fascination of it. It seems natural for people to think about it. What do we know and what do we not know?

I passed a church on my left. A monumental brick building with stained glass adorning every wall towered over me. I stared for a few seconds then stared at the sidewalk to focus on my thoughts. What do we know about the afterlife? Religion allows us to look at that question and create an answer, one which we crave and we love solving. We question whether life exists beyond our planet. We dedicate some of the planet's most brilliant minds to scour the galaxy, the universe, for any signs. We have no idea and so we must do everything we can to find out. Even my most irrational fear spawns from this question of the unknown. Deep water has always instilled a sense of fear in me. What exists beyond the depths I can view? Oceans and seas terrify me due to this question. Even in a swimming pool I fear the deep end. Is a shark going to emerge from the bottom of a chlorinated pool and attack me? Of course not. But I can't see that far down, so something in me refuses to submit to reason. When I realized I was back at my apartment I asked my roommate to join me on my trip to the cemetery and we planned to head out at the end of the week.

We walked for five minutes, stopping whenever the rustling of a branch from a scavenging squirrel or the voices of other visitors shattered the hollow silence we shared. Our eyes constantly darted, not in search of the statue but to make sure we were still alone. We occasionally locked eyes with each other, but never said a word until a looming black mass appeared a few yards away.

"There it is."

We approached the statue, stepping more slowly and deliberately as it began to tower over us. Standing on the tomb, the angel must have been ten feet tall. Thus, it was given the perfect position to stare down upon those who visit the grave. The angel, which I originally imagined would have open arms, looking to the sky to direct the dead, instead curled her figure over the grave as though she were keeping something from leaving. She stood above us, her right arm and wing outstretched, as if she were beckoning us closer. We accepted her invitation and stood directly below the waiting arm. Her entire being seemed like the purest black I had

ever seen, as if this object in front of me was a void, completely empty of any physical properties. As I looked up, I met her eyes. She stared down with countenance lacking any human emotion.

I took a step back to look at the entire grave. Two names were written on the stone, both with birth dates from the early 19th century, but only one had the date of death. Most likely, after the last survivor of the family was buried, no one inscribed a date because no one was around to do it. The feeling of despair and unease began to subside as logical ideas ran through my head. I then took a second look at the statue and saw the graffiti of what appeared to be initials carved into the left wing of the angel. I couldn't make out what letters these jagged marks formed, but I thanked the creator for helping me back to reality. I looked at the statue, which first appeared as a hauntingly perfect black, and saw the weathered statue as the dingy, lichen-covered mass it was.

"So, we're supposed to die soon, right?" my friend asked from behind me.

"As long as we don't touch her we should be fine. The stories say you die weeks or maybe just days after that."

"Well now I feel like I have to."

I turned to look at my friend as something appeared in the corner of my eye then disappeared just as quickly.

"The hell?" I said.

"What?" my friend said as he looked over both his shoulders.
"You see something?"

"No. Nothing. Maybe we should go. It'll get dark soon and I don't want to get too cold on the way home."

"Sounds like a plan," my friend said, scratching his beard as he looked over his shoulders.

I took one final look at the angel's dark figure as the sun began to set behind it. She still stared with those emotionless eyes. I resigned from our contest and quickly turned around. As my friend and I walked out, I constantly restrained myself from turning back. I focused on the gravestones lining the path back to the city, knowing that each one we passed would lead us closer to the exit. I shouldn't feel this fear again. I dispelled it, but something brought it back.

I know the facts. I know Teresa Feldevert is buried with her son, Eddie Dolezal, and her husband Nicholas. I know that despite the missing date, Teresa died in 1924. I know Teresa commissioned the angel out of bronze and the oxidation over time morphed it into a sickly black. I trust the things I know. I trust my mind. But sometimes I'm not so sure. Because as we stood in front of that statue and I turned to look at my friend, I know what I saw. Directly

behind him was an old woman. Clad in a black dress. Her hair, a silvery hue, fell in a tangled mess across her face. In that split-second I saw her, she stared at me. Her eyes, black as the statue, connected with mine, and she was gone.