

Angel of Light

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"Angel of Light" was published in Cosmos, an Australian magazine. It is a really likeable Christmas story about future Islam and pulp magazines and aliens, certainly an unusual combination.

It began innocently enough. Christmastime and no money. I went down into the cellar and searched deeply for something to give the children. Something they wouldn't have already found during their *hajjes* down there.

On a high shelf, behind bundles of sticks waiting for the cold, I could just see an old wooden chest, pushed far back into a corner. I dropped some of the bundles onto the floor and pushed the others out of the way, and with some difficulty slid the chest to the edge of the shelf. From the thick layer of dust on top, I assumed it was from my father's time or before.

I had a warning thought: Don't open it. Call the authorities.

But just above the lock was engraved the name. John Billings Washington. John Washington was my father's slave name. I think the Billings middle name was his father's. The box probably went back to the twentieth century.

The lock was rusted tight, but the hasp was loose. I got down from the ladder and found a large screwdriver that I could use to pry it.

I slid the chest out and balanced it on my shoulder, and carefully stepped down, the ladder creaking. I set it on the work table and hung one lantern from the rafter over it, and set the other on a stack of scrap wood beside.

The screaming that the screws made, coming out of the hardwood, was so loud that it was almost funny, considering that I supposedly was working in secret. But Miriam was pumping out chords on the organ, singing along with Fa-timah, rehearsing for the Christmas service. I could have fired a pistol and no one would have heard it.

The hasp swung free and the top lifted easily, with a sigh of brass. Musty smell and something else. Gun oil. A gray cloth bundle on top was heavy. Of course it held a gun.

It's not unusual to find guns left over from the old times; there were so many. Ammunition was rare, though. This one had two heavy magazines.

I recognized it from news and history pictures, an Uzi, invented and used by the old infidel state Israel. I set it down and wiped my hands.

It would not be a good Christmas present. Perhaps for 'Eid, for Ibriham, when he is old enough to decide whether he is to be called. A Jewish weapon, he would laugh. I could ask the imam whether to cleanse it and how.

There were three cardboard folders under the gun, once held together with rubber bands, which were just sticky lines now. They were full of useless documents about land and banking.

Underneath them, I caught a glimpse of something that looked like pornography. I looked away immediately, closed my eyes, and asked Mohammed and Jesus for strength. Then I took it out and put it in the light.

It was in a plastic bag that had stamped on it "nitrogen seal." What a strange word, a tech word from the old times.

The book inside had the most amazing picture on the front. A man and a woman, both white, embracing. But the woman is terrified. The man seems only resolute, as he fires a strange pistol at a thing like a giant squid, green as a plant. The woman's head is uncovered, and at first she seems naked, but in fact her clothes are simply transparent, like some dancers'. The book is called *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, and is dated Summer 1944. That would be 1365, more than a hundred years before Chrislam.

I leafed through the book, fascinated in spite of its carnal and infidel nature. Most of it seemed to be tales—not religious parables or folk tales, but lies that were made up at the time, for entertainment. Perhaps there was moral instruction as well. Many of the pictures did show men in situations that were physically or morally dangerous.

The first story, "The Giant Runt," seemed at first sacrilegious; it was about a man furious with God for having created him shorter than normal men. But then a magical machine makes everyone else tiny, and his sudden superiority turns him into a monster. But he sees an opportunity for moral action and redeems himself. The machine is destroyed, the world is normal again, and God rewards him with love.

Nadia, my second wife, came to the door at the top of the stairs and asked whether I needed help with anything. "No," I said. "Don't wait up. I have something to study here. A man thing." I shouldn't have said that. She would be down here after the morning prayer, as soon as I left for work.

I looked at the woman on the cover of the book, so exposed and vulnerable. Perhaps I should destroy it before Nadia or Miriam were exposed to it. A present for Ibriham? No; he would like it, but it would lead him away from proper thought.

I put both lanterns on the table, with the book between them, for maximum light. The paper was brown and the ink, faded. I turned the crumbling pages with care, although I would probably burn the book before dawn. First I would read as much of it as I could. I composed my mind with prayer, reciting the Prophet's *hadith* about the duty of learning.

In 1365 a war was raging all around the world, and various pages took note of this. I think this was only a year or two before America used nuclear weapons the first time, though I found no mention of them. (There were several exhortations to "buy bonds," which at first I misread as bombs. Bonds are financial instruments of some kind.) There were short pieces, evidently presented as truth, about science being used against the enemies of America. The ones that were not presented as true were more interesting, though harder to understand.

Much of the content was religious. "Horatius at the Bridge" was about a madman who could find the "soul" of a bridge and bring it down with the notes from a flute. "Terror in the Dust" and "The Devouring Tide" described scientists who were destroyed because they tried to play God—the first by giving intelligence to ants and then treating them as if he were an almighty deity, and the second, grandly, by attempting to create a new universe, with himself as Allah. The last short story, "God of Light," had a machine that was obviously Shaytan, trying to tempt the humans into following it into destruction.

The language was crude and at times bizarre, though of course part of that was just a reflection of the technological culture those writers and readers endured together. Life is simpler and more pure now, at least on this side of the city walls. The Kafir may still have books like this.

That gave me an idea. Perhaps this sort of thing would be rare and sought after in their world. I shouldn't accept Kafir money—though people do, often enough—but perhaps I could trade it for something more appropriate for a Christmas gift. Barter could be done without an intermediary, too, and frankly I was not eager for my imam to know that I had this questionable book in my possession.

Things are less rigid now, but I sharply remember the day, more than forty years ago, when my father had to burn all of his books. We carried box after box of them to the parking lot in front of the church, where they were drenched with gasoline and set afire. The smell of gasoline, rare now, always brings that back.

He was allowed to keep two books, a New Koran and a New Bible. When a surprise search party later found an old Q'ran in his study, he had to spend a week, naked, in a cage in that same spot—the jumble of fractured concrete in the middle of the church parking lot—with nothing but water, except a piece of bread the last day.

(It was an old piece of bread, rock-hard and moldy. I remember how he thanked the imam, carefully brushed off the mold, and managed to stay dignified, gnawing at it with his strong side teeth.)

He told them he kept the old book because of the beauty of the writing, but I knew his feelings went deeper than that: he thought the Q'ran in any language other than Arabic was just a book, not holy. As a boy of five, I was secretly overjoyed that I could stop memorizing the Q'ran in Arabic; it was hard enough in English.

I agree with him now, and ever since it was legal again, I've spent my Sundays trying to cram the Arabic into my gray head. With God's grace I might live long enough to learn it all. Having long ago memorized the English version helps make up for my slow brain.

I put the old book back in its nitrogen seal bag and took it up to bed with me, dropping off a bundle of sticks by the stove on the way. I checked on both children and both wives; all were sleeping soundly. With a prayer of thanks for this strange discovery, I joined Nadia and dreamed of a strange future that had not come to pass.

The next day was market day. I left Nadia with the children and Fatimah and I went down to the medina for the week's supplies.

It really is more a woman's work than a man's, and normally I enjoy watching Fatimah go through the rituals of inspection and barter—the mock arguments and grudging agreement that comprise the morning's entertainment for customer and merchant alike. But this time I left her in the food part of the medina with the cart, while I went over to the antiques section.

You don't see many Kafir in the produce part of the medina, but there are always plenty wandering through the crafts and antiques section, I suppose looking for curiosities and bargains. Things that are

everyday to us are exotic to them, and vice versa.

It was two large tents, connected by a canvas breezeway under which merchants were roasting meats and nuts and selling drinks for dollars or dirhams. I got a small cup of sweet coffee, redolent of honey and cardamom, for two dirhams, and sipped it standing there, enjoying the crowd.

Both tents had similar assortments of useful and worthless things, but one was for dollar transactions and the other was for dirhams and barter. The dollar purchases had to go through an imam, who would extract a fee for handling the money, and pay the merchant what was left, converting into dirham. There were easily three times as many merchants and customers in the dirham-and-barter tent, the Kafir looking for bargains and the sellers for surprises, as much as for doing business. It was festive there, too, a lot of chatter and laughing over the rattle and whine of an amateur band of drummers and fiddlers. People who think we are aloof from infidels, or hate them, should spend an hour here.

Those who did this regularly had tables they rented by the day or month; we amateurs just sat on the ground with our wares on display. I walked around and didn't see anyone I knew, so finally just sat next to a table where a man and a woman were selling books. I laid out a square of newspaper in front of me and set the *Thrilling Wonder Stories* on it.

The woman looked down at it with interest. "What kind of a magazine is that?"

Magazine, I'd forgotten that word. "I don't know. Strange tales, most of them religious."

"It's 'science fiction,'" the man said. "They used to do that, predict what the future would be like."

"Used to? We still do that."

He shrugged. "Not that way. Not as fiction."

"I wouldn't let a child see that," the woman said.

"I don't think the artist was a good Muslim," I said, and they both chuckled. They wished me luck with finding a buyer, but didn't make an offer themselves.

Over the next hour, five or six people looked at the magazine and asked questions, most of which I couldn't answer. The imam in charge of the tent came over and gave me a long silent look. I looked right back at him and asked him how business was.

Fatimah came by, the cart loaded with groceries. I offered to wheel it home if she would sit with the magazine. She covered her face and giggled. More realistically, I said I could push the cart home when I was done, if she would take the perishables now. She said no, she'd take it all after she'd done a turn around the tent. That cost me twenty dirham; she found a set of wooden spoons for the kitchen. They were freshly made by a fellow who had set up shop in the opposite corner, running a child-powered lathe, his sons taking turns striding on a treadmill attached by a series of creaking pulleys to the axis of the tool. People may have bought his wares more out of curiosity and pity for his sons than because of the workmanship.

I almost sold it to a fat old man who had lost both ears, I suppose in the war. He offered fifty dirham, but while I was trying to bargain the price up, his ancient crone of a wife charged up and physically hauled him away, shrieking. If he'd had an ear, she would have pulled him by it. The bookseller started to offer his sympathies, but then both of them doubled over in laughter, and I had to join them.

As it turned out, the loss of that sale was a good thing. But first I had to endure my trial.

A barefoot man who looked as if he'd been fasting all year picked up the magazine and leafed through it carefully, mumbling. I knew he was trouble. I'd seen him around, begging and haranguing. He was white, which normally is not a problem with me. But white people who choose to live inside the walls are often types who would not be welcome at home, wherever that might be.

He proceeded to berate me for being a bad Muslim—not hearing my correction, that I belonged to Chrislam—and, starting with the licentious cover and working his way through the inside illustrations and advertisements, to the last story, which actually had God's name in the title... he said that even a bad Muslim would have no choice but to burn it on the spot.

I would have gladly burned it if I could burn it under *him*, but I was saved from making that decision by the imam. Drawn by the commotion, he stamped over and began to question the man, in a voice as shrill as his own, on matters of doctrine. The man's Arabic was no better than his diet, and he slunk away in mid-diatribes. I thanked the imam and he left with a slight smile.

Then a wave of silence unrolled across the room like a heavy blanket, I looked to the tent entrance and there were four men: Abdullah Zaragosa, our chief imam, some white man in a business suit, and two policemen in uniform, seriously armed. In between them was an alien, one of those odd creatures visiting from Arcturus.

I had never seen one, though I had heard them described on the radio. I looked around and was sad not to see Fa-timah; she would hate having missed this.

It was much taller than the tallest human; it had a short torso but a giraffe-like neck. Its head was something like a bird's, one large eye on either side. It cocked its head this way and that, looking around, and then dropped down to say something to the imam!

They all walked directly toward me, the alien rippling on six legs. Cameras clicked; I hadn't brought one. The imam asked if I was Ahmed Abd al-kareem, and I said yes, in a voice that squeaked.

"Our visitor heard of your magazine. May we inspect it?" I nodded, not trusting my voice, and handed it to him, but the white man took it.

He showed the cover to the alien. "This is what we expected you to look like."

"Sorry to disappoint," it said in a voice that sounded like it came from a cave. It took the magazine in an ugly hand, too many fingers and warts that moved, and inspected it with first one eye, and then the other.

It held the magazine up and pointed to it, with a smaller hand. "I would like to buy this."

"I—I can't take white people's money. Only dirhams or, or trade."

"Barter," it said, surprising me. "That is when people exchange things of unequal value, and both think they have gotten the better deal."

The imam looked like he was trying to swallow a pill. "That's true enough," I said. "At best, they both do get better deals, by their own reckoning."

"Here, then." It reached into a pocket or a pouch—I couldn't tell whether it was wearing clothes—and brought out a ball of light.

It held out the light to a point midway between us, and let go. It floated in the air. "The light will stay wherever you put it."

It shimmered a brilliant blue, with fringes of rainbow colors. "How long will it last?"

"Longer than you."

It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. I touched it with my finger—it felt cool, and tingled—and pushed it a few inches. It stayed where I moved it.

"It's a deal, sir. Thank you."

"*Shukran*," it said, and they moved on down the line of tables.

I don't think it bought anything else. But it might have. I kept looking away from it, back into the light.

The imams and the white scientists all want to take the light away to study it. Eventually, I will loan it out.

For now, though, it is a Christmas gift to my son and daughter. The faithful, and the merely curious, come to look at it, and wonder. But it stays in my house.

In Chrislam, as in old Islam, angels are not humanlike creatures with robes and wings. They are *male 'ikah*, beings of pure light.

They look wonderful on the top of a tree.