

THE ANGEL OF DARKNESS

(1974)

Ernesto Sabato

Translated by Andrew Hurley

A Wingèd Rat.

Unable to make a movement or a sound (why call out? so people would come running in and see him and be so filled with disgust and revulsion that they clubbed him to death?), Sabato watched his feet turn slowly into the shrivelled black claws of a rat. He felt no pain, not even the tingling that one might expect from the shrivelling and drying out of the skin. But he did feel repugnance, and the repugnance grew stronger and stronger as the transformation continued: first his feet, then his legs, then, little by little, his torso. The revulsion grew even more terrible when the wings formed, perhaps because they were of flesh, and had no feathers. At last, his head. Until that moment he had followed the process with his sense of sight.

Although he had not had the courage to touch those bat's legs with his hands, which were still those of a human, he could not bear not to stare in horrified fascination at the gigantic rat's claws, covered with the wrinkled and leathery skin of some ancient mummy, that were now his. Then had come, as we have said, an even more striking and horrifying thing—the sprouting of the enormous cartilaginous wings. But when the process reached his head, and he began to feel his face stretch and lengthen into a muzzle, the hairs on his nose grow long and black, and his nose began to sniff at the air about him, the horror of it was indescribable. He lay for a time paralyzed in his bed, where the transformation had come upon him by surprise.

He tried to stay calm, to invent some plan. The plan would have to include silence, because one cry, one scream would bring people who would kill him without mercy, beat him to death with iron bars. There was, of course, the fragile hope that they would recognize in that nauseating creature the features of himself, especially as it was not logical that such a creature would have taken over his room, his bed, so inexplicably.

In the rat's head he now possessed, ideas were furiously boiling. He sat up, at last, and once upright he tried to calm himself, to take things as they were. With care, as though inside a body that did not belong to him (which in some way it did not), he shifted on the bed until he was in the position a human would take to get out of it: on the edge of the bed, that is, with his feet hanging downward. But he realized that his feet no longer reached the floor. From the contraction of his bones, he thought, he must have shrunk, though not all that much really, and that would explain, too, why his skin was so wrinkled. He figured his new height at about four feet. He got up, and he looked at himself in the mirror.

He stood unmoving for a long time. And then he lost his composure—he wept in silence at the horror. There were people who kept rats in their houses—physiologists like Houssay, for instance, that experimented with the repulsive creatures. But he, Sabato, had always belonged to the class of people who are nauseated at the mere sight of a rat. It is easily imagined, then, what he felt as he stood before a four-foot-tall rat with cartilaginous wings and the wrinkled, black skin of those hideous creatures. And him *inside it!*

His eyes had grown weaker, and then he suddenly realized that the weakening of his vision was not some passing phenomenon, some product of his emotional state, but rather would actually in time grow worse, until he became totally blind. And he was proven correct: within a few seconds, though those seconds seemed centuries filled with nightmare and disaster, his sight faded to utter blackness. He stood paralyzed, though he felt his heart pounding in tumult and his skin shivering with cold. Then, little by little, he groped his way toward the bed and sat down on the edge of it.

He stayed there a while. And then, unable to contain himself, forgetting his plan, all his rational precautions, he heard himself give a terrible, chilling cry of anguish, a cry for help. It was not a human cry, though; it was the shrill, stomach-churning shriek of a gigantic winged rat. People rushed in, naturally. But no one showed the least surprise. They asked him what had happened, if he felt ill, if he wanted a cup of tea.

It was obvious that no one noticed the change in him. He did not answer, did not speak a single word, thinking that they'd think he had gone mad. He simply decided to try to live somehow, keeping his secret, even in this horrendous state. Because that's the way the will to live is: unconditional and insatiable.

Shelley Jackson

Cancer

The cancer appeared in my living room sometime between eleven and three on a Thursday. I am not sure exactly when, because I suffer from bouts of migraine, and sometimes I miss things, or see things that aren't there, flashing shapes like the blades of warrior goddesses, the vanes of transcendental windmills. A little airborne sprig could go unnoticed some while.

It was barely visible, a pink fizz, like a bloodshot spot of air. It was so small there was no great wonder in its hanging there, the way a feather might rest on an updraft. It is hard for me to admit it now, but when I first saw it, I thought it was pretty. I blew on it. It drifted sideways, but when I looked for it later, it was back where it had been before.

The cancer grew with improbable speed. At first I watched it curiously, almost fondly. Near the center it distended and grew as solid as meat. The branches divided and divided again. It was a starfish with split ends, an animal snowflake.

I did not speak of it to anyone. Once, the neighbor came to ask me to restrain my hedges. She was a nervous woman with a face too old for her hair. Her child was with her, that little blond creature I had once attempted to befriend. The child paid me no attention, but stared past me in the direction of the living room. I intercepted her gaze out of instinct, not any fear I could have named.

I looked at the cancer every day. Perhaps it was as big as a chicken—no, a parakeet—when I set my hand against it. I took one of its twigs and bent it back on itself. I did this out of curiosity, no more. When the tips darkened and began to wilt, I let go and looked up. The little girl was looking at me through the fogged window, her white fingers like claws on the edge of the sill. When she caught my eye she dropped out of sight. By nightfall the limb had straightened itself again, though it was a darker purple where the damage was.

We pop our kitchen sponges in a bath of bleach and dig the moldy grout from around the sink; it is the season for dentistry, manicures, and laser