

And now Mrs. K. has it both ways, enjoying a mild disinhibition, a release of thought and impulse, without any threat to her self-control or of further damage to her cortex. She hopes to live, thus reanimated, rejuvenated, to a hundred.

[Short Story]

IT HAD WINGS

By Allan Gurganus. From the Winter 1985 issue of the *Paris Review*. Gurganus's first novel, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, will be published by Alfred A. Knopf next year.

Find a little yellow side street house. Put an older woman in it. Dress her in that tatty favorite robe, pull her slippers up before the sink, have her doing dishes, gazing nowhere—at her own backyard. Gazing everywhere. Something falls outside, and loud. One damp thwunk into new grass. A meteor? She herself (retired from selling formal clothes at Wanamaker's, she herself a widow and the mother of three scattered sons, she herself alone at home a lot these days) goes onto tiptoe, leans across a sinkful of suds, sees out near her picnic table—something nude, white, overly long. It keeps shivering. Both wings seem damaged.

"No way," she says. It appears human. Yes, it is a male one. It's faceup and, you can tell, it is extremely male (uncircumcised). This old woman, pushing eighty, a history of aches, uses, fun, now presses one damp hand across her eyes. Blaming strain, the luster of new cataracts, she looks again. Still, it rests there on a bright air mattress of its own wings. Outer feathers are tough quills, broad at bottom as rowboat oars. The whole left wing bends too far under. It looks hurt.

The widow, sighing, takes up her mug of heated milk. Shaking her head, muttering, she carries the blue-willow cup out back. She moves so slow because: arthritis. It criticizes every step. It asks, about the mug she holds, Do you really need this?

She stoops, creaky, beside what can only be a young angel, unconscious. Quick, she checks overhead, ready for what?—some TV news crew in a helicopter? She sees only a sky of the usual size, a Tuesday sky stretched between weekends. She allows herself to touch this thing's white forehead. She gets a mild electric shock. Then, odd, her tickled finger joints stop aching. They've hurt so long. A practical person, she quick cures her other hand. The angel grunts

but sounds pleased. His temperature's a hundred and fifty, easy—but for him this seems somehow normal. "Poor thing," she says and—careful—pulls his heavy curly head into her lap. The head hums like a phone knocked off its cradle. She scans for neighbors—hoping they'll come out, wishing they wouldn't.

"I don't know. Will warm milk help?" She pours some down him. Her wrist brushes angel skin. This sticks the way an ice tray begs whatever touches it. A thirty year pain leaves her, enters him. Even her liver spots are lightening. He grunts with pleasure, soaking up all of it. Bold, she presses her worst hip deep into crackling feathers. The hip has been half-numb since a silly fall last February. All stiffness leaves her. He goes, "Unhh." Her griefs seem to fatten him like vitamins. She whispers private woes: the Medicare cuts, the sons too casual by half, the daughters-in-law not bad but not so great. These woes seem ended. "Nobody'll believe. Still, tell me some of it." She tilts nearer. Both his eyes stay shut but his voice—like clicks from a million crickets pooled—goes, "We're just another army. We all look alike—we didn't, before. It's not what you expect. We miss this other. Don't count on the next. Notice things here more. We wish we had."

"Oh," she says.

Nodding, she feels limber now, sure as any girl of twenty. Admiring her unspeckled hands, she helps him rise. Wings serve as handles. Kneeling on damp ground, she watches him go staggering toward her barbecue pit. He is certainly awkward, very awkward for an angel. The poor thing pulls himself onto her pit's blacked chimney. Standing, he is handsome, but as a vase is handsome. When he turns this way, she sees his eyes. They're silver; each reflects her: a speck, pink, on green green grass.

She now fears he plans to take her up, as thanks. She presses both palms flat to dirt, says, "The house is finally paid off—not just yet," and smiles.

Suddenly he's infinitely infinitely moreso. Silvery. Raw. Gleaming like a sunny monument, a clock. Each wing puffs, independent. Feathers sort and shuffle like three hundred packs of playing cards. Out flings either arm; knees dip low. Then up and off he shoves—one solemn grunt. Machete swipes cross her backyard, breezes cool her upturned face. Six feet overhead, he falters, whips in makeshift circles, manages to hold aloft then go shrub-high, get gutter-high. He avoids a messy tangle of phone lines now rocking from the wind of his wings. "Go, go," the widow, grinning, points the way up. "Do. Yeah, good." He signals back at her—left open-mouthed down here. First—a glinting man-shaped kite, next an oblong of aluminum

[Postage Stamps]

RETURN TO SENDER



These postage stamps were recently issued by St. Vincent as part of a "Leaders of the World" stamp series sponsored by a group of Caribbean nations. Also featured in the series are Michael Jackson and the 1963 Buick Riviera.

in sun. Now a new moon shrunk to decent star, one fleck, fleck's memory: usual Tuesday sky.

She kneels, panting, happier and frisky. She is hungry but must first rush over and tell Lydia next door. Then she pictures Lydia's worry lines bunching. Lydia will maybe phone the missing sons, "Come right home. Your Mom's so lonely, she's inventing . . . company."

Maybe other angels have dropped into other Elm Street backyards? Behind fences, did neighbors help earlier hurt ones? Folks keep so much of the best stuff quiet, don't they.

Palms on knees, she stands, wirier. This retired saleswoman was formal-gowns adviser to ten mayors' wives. She spent sixty years of nine-to-five on her feet. Scuffing indoors, staring down at terry slippers, she decides, "Got to wash these next week." Can a person who's just sighted her first angel already be mulling about laundry? Yes. The world is like that.

At her sink, looking out again, she sees her own blue-willow mug in grass. It rests in muddy ruts where the falling body struck so hard. A neighbor's collie keeps barking. (It saw!) Okay. This happened. "So," she says.

And plunges hands into dishwasher, still warm. Heat usually helps her achy joints feel agile. But fingers don't even hurt now. Her bad hip doesn't pinch one bit. And yet, sad, they will. By suppertime, they will again remind her of what usual suffering means. To her nimble underwater hands, the widow—staring straight

ahead—announces, "I helped. He flew off stronger. I really egged him on. Like anybody would've, really. Still, it was me. I'm not just somebody in a house. I'm not just somebody alone in a house. I'm not just somebody else alone in a house."

Feeling more herself, she finishes the breakfast dishes. In time for lunch. This old woman should be famous for all she's been through—today's angel, her years in sales, the sons and friends—she should be famous for her thorough life. She knows things, she has seen so much. She's not famous.

Still, the lady keeps gazing past her kitchen café curtains, she keeps studying her own small tidy yard. An anchor fence, the picnic table, a barbecue pit, new Bermuda grass. Hands braced on her sink's cool edge, she tips nearer the bright window. Just in case. She seems to be expecting something, expecting something decent. Her kitchen's clock is ticking. That dog still barks to calm itself. She keeps gazing out: nowhere, everywhere. Spots on her hands start darkening again. And yet, she whispers to whatever's next: "I'm right here. Ready for more."

Can you guess why this woman's chin is lifted? Why does she breathe as if to show exactly how it's done? Why should her shoulders, usually quite bent, brace so square just now?

She is guarding the world.
Only, nobody knows. ■