



ANGELA AND HER THREE WISHES

By Eileen Bell

The Fight

Angela Simonson's day started exactly the same as all the others. She had a fight with her mother.

Angela was in the bathroom finishing her makeup. She spiked a tendril of dyed black hair and ran a ragged, black tinted fingernail under one eye to remove a bit of extra liner, then looked at her reflection. She looked pretty good, but not over the top enough. She needed more.

She reached for her new contact lenses and put them in, smiling as cat eyes stared back from the mirror. *Now*, she thought, *That's perfect.*

She knew her mother would hate the contact lenses, but whatever. Her mother didn't like anything Angela did anymore, as far as Angela could tell. *If only she'd lighten up, things would be better around here.*

Her mother yelled from the kitchen. "I told you to put the milk back in the fridge!"

"I told you I'd do it in a minute!" she yelled back. "I'm getting ready for work."

"We both have to get ready for work, Angela."

Angela turned on the blow dryer to drown out her mother's voice and yelled "What?" over the high-pitched scream. She

knew she was acting like an infant, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. The tone of her mother's voice drove her seriously crazy sometimes.

When her mother didn't bother answering, Angela's irritation cranked up another notch. The only thing she hated more than her mother screeching at her was her mother ignoring her.

She slapped off the blow dryer and walked into the kitchen. Her mother stood at the counter, listening to the news on her ancient counter television as she stared out the window.

"It's snowing again. Remember your hat and scarf," she said, without turning around.

"Whatever," Angela replied.

"There's toast. Want some?"

Angela knew her mother was trying to make up with her, but really, when was the last time she'd eaten toast?

"I need caffeine," she said, crossing the floor. As she walked past the small kitchen counter television, the screen flickered and the sound turned to white noise.

"Angela, get away from the TV," her mother said.

Angela knew she couldn't go near a television or computer without causing it to wig out — or blow up — but the reminder fanned the flames of her anger even higher. Another thing in her life that wasn't fair.

"If you'd buy a TV from this century, that wouldn't happen, I bet."

"I can't afford a new one," her mother sighed. "You have another court date coming up and somebody has to pay the lawyer."

"I told you it wasn't my fault," she said, reaching for a coffee mug.

"It never is."

Her mother turned away from the window, looking at Angela for the first time since she'd walked into the room. She gasped and grabbed Angela by the arm, staring at her eyes, her face whitening.

Here it comes, Angela thought. She's going to go bat shit. Again.

Knowing she was doing exactly the wrong thing, Angela smiled and batted her eyes at her mother. "You like them?"

"Take those out." Her mother's voice sounded strangled. "Please."

"They're just contacts," Angela said. "What's the deal?"

She pulled her arm from her mother's slack grip and filled her cup with coffee. The carafe chattered against the edge of the mug.

"You know what the deal is," her mother replied. She still sounded like she was choking on her words. "You don't even look human that way."

"I'm just as human as you are," Angela said.

"Then why don't you act like it?"

Angela stared at her mother as she poured her coffee into the sink and dropped her cup in after it. The sound of ceramic breaking made her smile. So did the stricken look on her mother's face.

"I choose not to."

Her mother ran to the sink and picked up two pieces of the cup. When she tried to fit them together, a crack formed in the larger piece and then broke, falling and smashing into what sounded like a million pieces in the bottom of the sink. It could never be repaired.

"Do you have to break everything you touch?" her mother sobbed.

Angela blinked. She'd actually made her mother cry. She hadn't meant to do that. Not really. She opened her mouth to say sorry, but her mother turned on her, and the fury on her face froze the words in Angela's throat.

"Sometimes I wish you'd never been born," she said.

Angela stared at her, the words cutting her to the very bone. "I can't believe you said that. Take it back."

Her mother shook her head. "God help me, I can't."

"You know what *I* wish?" Angela decided to cut back. Deep. "I wish my father hadn't been the one to die. He would've loved me just the way I am."

"Well, neither of us are going to get what we want, now are we?" her mother replied, then burst into fresh tears and ran from the room.

As her mother's bedroom door slammed shut, Angela grabbed the small television off the counter and hugged it to her chest. It fizzled and wowed and a crack finally zagged across the screen. As acrid smoke puffed from the back, she dropped it to the floor. It landed face down with a satisfying crash, but she didn't feel any better. In fact, she felt worse. Her mother loved that stupid counter-top television.

The Television

Ellen Simonson peeked through the blinds of her bedroom window as Angela kicked through the snow to the bus. The tension in her shoulders eased as the bus sped down the street and disappeared around a corner. Finally, she was alone.

She walked out to the kitchen and saw the shattered television face down on the floor.

"Oh no," she said, and knelt to touch its still-warm plastic case. *Please, please, please let it be all right.*

It wasn't. More tears threatened, and behind the tears, more anger. Anger at Angela. Anger at Angela's father, Arturo. She kicked the broken TV, feeling mean satisfaction when bits of plastic snapped off and bounded across the room.

"I wish you *were* dead, you son of a bitch!"

But she was certain Arturo wasn't dead. She didn't have that kind of luck. Her daughter's father was out there somewhere, in this Realm or his own, doing unspeakable things.

"What a waste," she whispered. "Twenty years of my life lost, trying to keep her from you." Protecting her little girl from that monster, and then watching her turn into him. More and more like him every year. More and more monstrous. In every way.

"I even bought this stupid house," she muttered, half-heartedly taking another kick at the dead television. "Hoping the stability would make her more human." She laughed bitterly. If anything, staying in one place had allowed the differences in her daughter to blossom and grow, like diseased fruit on a poisoned tree.

As Ellen surveyed the mess in the kitchen, her anger collapsed and degraded to something much more familiar. Despair. Utter and absolute despair.

I did everything I could to make a good life for her, and it wasn't enough, she thought. I shouldn't have run away from you, you crazy-eyed freak. I should have let you take her. At least I'd have my life.

The Box

Angela got off the bus two stops early, telling herself, as she always did, it was so she could get more exercise.

It wasn't. She didn't want the people on the bus to know she worked at an adult-only video store. She didn't know why she cared, but she did.

As she kicked through the snow, replaying the fight with her mother in her head, she passed an abandoned blue Firebird and

saw a glint of something metallic in the back seat. She looked around to see if anyone was watching. No one was. In fact, no one was anywhere near her. She had been handed a rare moment.

She pushed aside a piece of cardboard covering the broken side window and stuck her head inside the car. A small box gleamed in the rays of a shaft of light. She grunted as she pushed herself through the opening, waist deep.

I wonder why no one has stolen this yet, she thought. Someone monumentally stupid left it here.

She picked it up, surprised at its heaviness, and wriggled back out of the window. Still no pedestrians, and even more surprising, no traffic.

Mom will love this, she thought as she tucked the box inside her coat, feeling warmth from the box where there should have been cold. She'd give the box to her mother that evening. She hoped her mother would like it enough to forgive her. Ellen was the only family Angela had.

The traffic returned and a bus screeched to a halt not ten feet ahead of her. A dozen vacant-faced people stepped through the doors, and plodded down the sidewalk past her.

Roger Miller, a wire-thin emo with long sideswept bangs, wearing more eyeliner than Angela, stepped out of the bus with the rest. He worked with Angela, and she suspected he was not only an emo, but a cutter as well.

He scuttled over to her.

"Nice eyes," he muttered, looking at Angela's newly acquired cat's eye contacts.

"Thanks," she replied. "I bought them yesterday."

"They look absolutely evil."

His compliment didn't make her feel any better.

"We better get to work," she said.

"I gotta have coffee first."

He pointed at the Starbucks wannabe tucked in a teeny space between the *Slippery When Wet* video store and the karaoke bar across from it, called *Wild 'n Crazy*. The coffee bar was appropriately named *In Between*. "You want?" he asked.

"Sure. Just hurry or Joey's going to get pissed."

Angela walked into the video store and Joey, the eternally angry night guy, looked up. "Late again, bitch."

"Only a couple of minutes," she said as she hung up her coat, tucking the pilfered box inside the sleeve.

"Whatever," he said. He booked out, leaving Angela to clean up the front counter. She snapped on rubber gloves and thought pleasant thoughts as she spritzed with factory strength disinfectant and wiped everything in sight.

Roger arrived with two huge coffees balanced one atop the other. She snatched the top cup and slurped a quarter of it before realizing she had taken his. Triple sweet was downright nasty if you weren't expecting it.

She watched him take a huge gulp of her four shot Americano, black. "How is it?" she asked.

"Great." He set the huge paper cup aside. "Give me mine."

She sipped more of his ultra sweet something girly. "I don't think so," she said. "I could get used to this."

"Yeah. Sure you could. Come on, don't be a bitch. I need my caffeine."

"How can you even taste caffeine in this?" She held the cup just out of Roger's reach. "It's positively fagorific, I swear."

He pulled his arm down and glared. "You really are being a bitch, you know that? Did you have a fight with your mother again?"

"No," she lied, handing him his cup and picking up her own. She took a sip, trying not to think about his germs. It actually didn't taste too awful, and she chugged half of what was left.

"You're lying," he replied. "I can always tell when you fight with your mother. Was it 'bout you rigging the exams again, or something else?"

One year before, Angela had convinced stupid, infatuated Alan Ripley to rig every diploma multiple-choice exam so that only the letter B was correct. She thought it was funny, but her mother didn't, especially when Angela was expelled from school, and then had to go to court over the whole business. Her mother started treating her like she was some sort of demon spawn after their first day in court. That's when she'd told Roger about their fights.

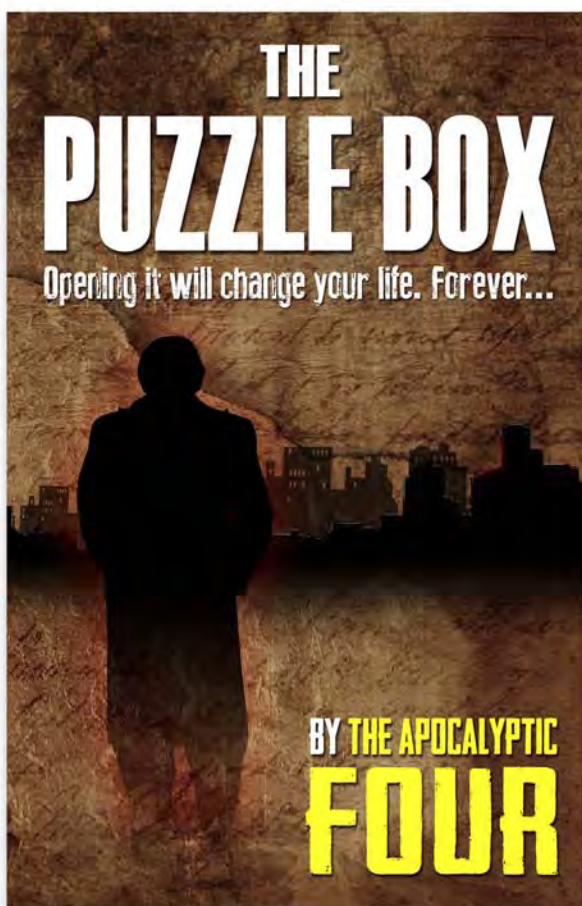
She wished now that she hadn't said a word to him.

"We didn't fight about anything," she said. "Everything's fantastic. Amazing. Now go work the cash like a good boy and leave me alone."

She ignored him, pointedly, and went back to work, determined not to speak to him again for the rest of the day.

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