

Lacrimosus

By Veronica Tomasiello

Salzburg Cathedral was vast.

Three naves crossed each other behind the altar, shaping a circular corridor the same size as the dome rising up above. Several chapels were scattered along the walls, the vaulted ceiling was supported by large white columns on each side of the central nave, where the benches stood, arranged in countless lines, and the niches carved into the dome were covered with magnificent frescos.

Not many attended the funeral of Morgan's grandma.

Not that she hadn't been a good woman, but over the last few years her disease had forced her to bed and those who had known her had little by little forgotten about her.

On the other hand, the entire sacerdotal crew showed up at the function, lined up alongside the columns of the central nave. Adele Natalie Hermann had either fixed a tunic or sewed a new one for every single one of those men.

Upon her death, the dean himself had decided to officiate at the funeral and now he was spilling holy water on the coffin, murmuring a prayer in Latin that echoed in every corner of the church, dutifully repeated by the attendees' voices. He was wearing the last outfit Adele had made for him before falling too deep into the abyss of her illness.

She would be buried in the crypt, together with the other benefactors of the church, in memory of her service.

Morgan was sitting on the first bench, apparently absorbed in prayer on the kneeler; from time to time, he would spy the dean's movements and cast careful glances at the coffin. It was a simple bier made of smooth, light brown wood, with a bouquet of white chrysanthemums placed on its lid.

What was left of his grandma rested inside it.

He had cried for hours, his face pressed into a pillow, until he was allowed to say his final goodbye to Adele. He had seen her lying on the bed – pale, cold, marred by the disease – with her arms crossed over her chest and with a long, milky white dress on: she didn't look like his grandma anymore. It was just a lifeless body. Morgan had held her hand and kissed one of her ice-cold cheeks.

Adele wouldn't want him to shed his tears for a corpse that couldn't wipe them away.

After the censing of the coffin, the priests that had been the closest to her followed one another on the pulpit to recall what an honest woman she had been. The dean had forbidden Morgan to do the same, for he deemed the boy too upset to handle that task.

The funeral procession took place at the end of the mass, headed towards the left nave and down a staircase leading to the crypt. The undertaker was waiting next to the grave, dressed in his best ceremonial attire, and helped to lower the coffin into the hole he had dug the day before.

The dean was supposed to be the first to drop soil on the bier, but Morgan stepped forward, bent over the grave and let a handful of dirt fall onto the lid – it slid through his fingers like sand in an hourglass.

In the end, the attendees clapped a hand on Morgan's shoulder and took their leave of the dean, and the small crowd gathered around the grave dwindled gradually as the mortician pulled the spade out of the ground and started refilling the hole.

Morgan stared at the coffin until it disappeared under a layer of loose soil.

Chased away by the cold and the humidity reigning in the dungeons, the priests had already gone back upstairs, except for the dean, who simply admonished Morgan not to stay for too long. The man called him "son" and squeezed his hand with his own withered fingers, as he had a habit of doing in a display of sympathy.

Left alone – aside from the undertaker – Morgan looked at the grey marble plate above the grave, embedded into the rock wall: it bore his grandma's name, her birth and death dates, and a short epitaph. There was even a black and white picture of the like that had recently replaced the oil-painted canvasses in the houses of nobles.

All of a sudden a low murmur startled him, making him flinch.

His eyes flickered towards the undertaker, who was still carrying out his task without sparing him as much as a glance. Taking a look around, Morgan realized there was no one else but the two of them.

Then he heard another whisper, too soft to be discernible.

Morgan's head snapped in the mortician's direction, but the man had turned his back on him.

«Excuse me,» the boy addressed him timidly, awestruck by that dark figure curved over the grave «did you say anything?» The undertaker sighed, but didn't even bother facing him, let alone answer him. Morgan took some careful steps towards him and insisted gently, trying not to think that the man was just pretending he couldn't hear him: «Excuse me?»

The mortician lifted up his face, concealed by the hood of his vest, and stopped digging. His black tunic left nothing uncovered except for his hands, whose pale and smooth skin clashed with his appearance, instead gloomy and ancient.

He spoke only after a long scrutiny: «Can you hear them?»

He had a peculiar voice, throaty, fascinating in its own way, once again the voice of a man in the prime of his life, as opposed to what Morgan expected.

In the background, the murmuring wouldn't cease.

«What are you talking about, sir?»

«Them. The dead,» the mortician replied softly. «Can you hear them whispering?»

Unexpectedly, he reached out and touched Morgan's cheek with so cold a hand that the boy drew back on instinct.

«The dead... whispering...?» Morgan echoed him, appalled. He wanted to run away, but something in the undertaker's alluring voice and in what he was telling him had him rooted to the spot. Something tempting, forbidden, remote, something that shouldn't be exhumed from the sands of time in which it had long since sunk.

«They are always talking,» stated the mortician. «Ever since mankind can remember. They are waiting for the cycle of reincarnations to end, for them to be welcomed to Heaven. You...» He studied the boy in silence for a few seconds, then suddenly inquired, grabbing his wrist: «How old are you?»

Frightened, Morgan escaped his hold and ran into the hall, which enshrined other tombs as well as a big crucifix hanging from a wall. The murmurs of the dead followed the sound of his footsteps on the wet ground while he hurried across the room and climbed the steps of the stairway leading back to the church.

Only then, when he was met once again with the warmth and the soft light radiating from the countless candles in the cathedral, did Morgan slow down and walked up to a door. Beyond it, another flight of stairs spiraled up to the first floor, where the bedrooms, the bathrooms and the library were located.

Finding shelter in his own room, he turned the key in the lock several times and slipped under the bed sheets, trembling. He waited silently to hear the undertaker's footsteps in the hallway and only allowed himself to relax when the dinner bell rang.

At that point the searing sorrow for his grandma's death replaced the tension and shot through him like a knife embedded in his chest, and tears stung in his eyes.

He curled up on his side and pressed his hands against his ears: unlike the mortician, the voices didn't leave him be as he wished. He was forced to listen to them in the secret hope to recognize Adele's and talk to her again.

They didn't call for him to join them in the cafeteria, respecting his will to deal with his sorrow on his own.

Morgan stayed in bed, trying to catch at least a single word of what the dead were murmuring – provided that what he discovered was true, of course; now that he was alone, the fear initially instilled in him by the undertaker's revelation and by the man himself looked more and more silly and childish by the minute.

He had probably overestimated nothing but a harmless, superstitious mortician.

However, in a hidden corner of his heart and mind he would still shiver if he thought back about the undertaker, his unnaturally pale and smooth skin, his hidden face and charming voice, whose honesty he hadn't doubted for a second back then. Even now, he couldn't completely persuade himself that what he heard was just the nonsense people scare their children with at bedtime.

In the end he fell asleep, cradled by the whispering voices of the dead.

He suddenly woke up to a particular word that he finally managed to catch from one of the countless voices.

Angel, echoed another one.

Morgan rubbed his eyes, still half-asleep.

«What...?»

He was cut off by a yawn, although no voice seemed to listen to his question anyway.

They were talking much more loudly and clearly than the night before, so much so that, echoing one another, they became annoying.

Morgan did his best not to pay attention to them as he got up and put his shoes on – he had fallen asleep in his clothes. Then there was a knock on the door and on the other side, in the hallway, deacon Klaus recommended that he show up for breakfast and that he not be late for the Literature lesson with the dean.

Higher and higher were both the speed and volume at which the voices chased each other in his head; some repeated “angel” over and over, others muttered sentences whose sense he couldn't quite grasp.

They were confusing him now and he had to struggle in order to focus on the way to the cafeteria, on the food, on the conversations the youngest priests involved him in: after he finished his meal and it was time to join the dean in the library for his lesson, Morgan was relieved when at least some voices disappeared, both in and outside of him.

«How are you today, Morgan?»

The dean was an extremely kind man. He had a round, wrinkled face, blue eyes, deep and wise, so clear that they melded perfectly with his scarce, white hair – which might have been blonde once – and thin lips that rarely smiled. He was grumpy, on seldom occasions almost nice, but polite and honest.

«I'm fine» Morgan lied, faking easiness. In truth, the voices overwhelming him made it hard for him to discern the old priest's words among many others and his eyes were still wet with the tears that not even the night had been able to stop.

«Have you studied our last lesson?» the dean inquired.

Morgan brushed his temple with two fingers. Separating the dean's voice from the others was getting more and more difficult; even reflecting was painful now: the echo of his thoughts was yet another voice he had to listen to. «Excuse me?»

The boy saw the old man's face take on a suspicious expression and his lips opening to heave a sigh. He repeated his question.

Morgan cradled his head in his hands in an attempt to escape that torture.

Angel, angel, angel, angel...

«Make them stop,» he pleaded, then collapsed on the table that witnessed their lessons.

He woke up in his bed because of a migraine threatening to split his head in two; he squinted to recognize the room, lit by the pale glow of the snow that, like a whitish mist, filtered through the window, and the dean absorbed in prayer next to his bed.

Exhausted, the boy fell back into unconsciousness.

He woke up again several times, growing more and more delusional and hot with fever. He woke up and always found the old man by his side: it was the dean who brought a bucket to his lips so that the boy didn't stain the bed sheets when he threw up all the bile he had in him, he who would wipe his dirty mouth with a napkin and watch over him.

NO.

Morgan came back to his senses all of a sudden and in the dim light discerned the dean in the doorway, talking to somebody in the hallway in a hushed voice.

The boy realized that he was feeling better. The fever had abated and the headache was giving him a break. Now the voices were once again reduced to whispers, barely audible and harmless, except for the brusque and desperate “no” that had just woken him up.

The sun should be slowly rising up in the sky, Morgan thought, while his eyes were getting used to the lack of light and he tried to convince his weak body to sit up against the headboard.

That movement caught the attention of the dean, who briefly turned to cast him a glance before giving him his back again and saying something to his interlocutor.

At last the old man left the room and Morgan recognized young exorcist Johannes as the priest that replaced the dean on the chair. The boy reached towards Morgan, bending in his seat as further down as possible, and Morgan felt uneasy in confronting his perturbing eyes, so pale that they looked more white than blue.

«The dean deems it necessary to perform an exorcism on you,» Johannes said.

They were contemporaries and yet the exorcist was very different from him: Morgan had short, black hair, usually messy, and eyes as dark as the sky at night; Johannes had long, blonde hair that he kept tucked in a neat ponytail, and vibrant eyes behind the squared lens of his glasses.

They had never talked much, although Adele had told him about how several years before they used to play together in the hallways of the big cathedral.

«I don't think so,» added Johannes, captivated, as if he was talking to himself. «I think that you hear voices, like I do,» he murmured softly.

Morgan winced, but tried to make it look like a symptom of his illness. Johannes stood still, his face was a mask of seriousness and expectation, his hands rested unmoving on the edge of the bed. Morgan considered his options – tell him the truth and perhaps learn something more about it, or pretend and gain nothing from it – and at last answered him with a nod.

Johannes mirrored his gesture, yet he stayed silent, probably seeking the right words. When he finally spoke, his voice was no more than a whisper, barely louder than all of the others.

«The voices of the dead,» he said, echoing the mortician's own words. «I guess you have tried to find your grandma's». When Morgan didn't reply, feeling like an adult had just asked him if he had checked for monsters lurking under his bed, the young priest went on: «At first I tried to find my parents'. But the murmuring voices are those of the knowing dead».

«The knowing dead?» Morgan repeated in a questioning tone.

«The former reincarnations,» Johannes clarified. Morgan raised an eyebrow, urging him to explain himself further: Johannes had used the same term as the undertaker. «Have you ever heard the story about Sodom? About Lot and the angels he protected from the citizens?»

Unsure about what the exorcist was getting at, Morgan confirmed with another nod: there must be some book about it, somewhere in the cathedral library. He had probably read it some years before, because he remembered the story only vaguely.

«In Sodom, demons would mingle with humans and taint their souls with sin. Two angels were sent to find out whether at least one of the inhabitants of that city deserved to remain alive: they chose Lot, because he defended them from the crowd claiming the strangers in order to abuse of them. When Sodom was burned down by God and Lot and his family were saved and led to their new abode, only two demons survived: they recognized the strangers as angels and followed them to kill them. The two angels and the two demons thus began the longest battle that will ever be fought». Morgan didn't fail to notice the sudden use of the future tense. «The angels and the demons are still fighting: their human reincarnations grow, meet and inevitably battle each other, and it will be like this until one of the factions prevails. The voices are those of the former reincarnations: we are the new ones».

Morgan closed his eyes and waited for his tired mind to put some order to what he had just been revealed, before he opened his eyelids again and met Johannes's gaze.

On one hand he felt relieved that someone else had to deal with those voices, but on the other he wasn't sure it was wise to share the oddest details of his life with an exorcist he hadn't talked to since he was a child.

«How do you know all these things?» was the question he chose among all those he wanted to ask. «Did the undertaker tell you about them?»

Judging by Johannes's bewildered expression, the boy realized that the exorcist had probably never met the mortician; judging by his crooked half-smile, he realized he shouldn't have mentioned that man to him. He didn't like that smile: there was something cold about it, something almost inhuman that alarmed him.

«The undertaker?» repeated the exorcist. «Is the undertaker another reincarnation?»

NO.

The sharp hiss of the voices in unison hurt Morgan's ears and stole his breath, but the boy pretended nothing happened and replied casually: «No, I was talking about the story of Sodom: I've heard the mortician has a habit of telling stories and I was wondering if you'd heard it from him».

The dead had never bristled like that while he was in the undertaker's company, Morgan mused to himself. And, if neither Johannes nor the mortician were lying to him – he couldn't see how he could possibly doubt them by now – then he should be careful about at least two of the other reincarnations.

«Actually, no,» Johannes answered, rising from the chair as if to take his leave. «You should rest, Morgan. We can talk again later, when you feel better,» he concluded. He smiled to the boy one last time and left the room.

Morgan sank into the pillow and was suddenly struck by how much discomfort Johannes's presence caused him: every single muscle of his body was tense, his fingers gripped the sheets so furiously that his knuckles had turned white, and he had unconsciously crawled to the side of the bed opposite to where Johannes had been seated.

As if everything in him rejected the exorcist.

And yet Johannes had been kind to him, while the undertaker had frightened him with his almost maniacal manners. However, for all that he tried to suppress the uneasiness, Johannes's lopsided smile and the voices of the dead hushing him sent a cold shiver down his spine.

While he let himself fall back into unconsciousness, he decided he would do as the mortician had told him, as soon as he felt better, and he would draw his own conclusions.

He recovered completely from the fever two days later, but only on the third day he was allowed to set foot out of the bedroom. Johannes hadn't paid him any more visits – perhaps the dean had forbidden it, given the visible state of tension Morgan was left in after their meeting – and he had no intention of looking for the exorcist before he spoke to the undertaker again.

The morgue rose next to the gates to the graveyard: the walls were made of black wood, in stark contrast with the layer of white snow covering the roof and the sill of the sole, narrow window on the side facing the back of the cathedral.

Intimidated by the ominous scenery made up by the dark building and the tombstones sweeping across beyond the wrought-iron gates on the background, Morgan moved slowly towards the morgue and hesitated before knocking on the door.

He heard no answer coming from inside. Not a sound, as though the mortician was out – not in the graveyard, though, since the gates were sealed by a heavy chain clinging like ivy to the two grey columns holding the gate doors.

And yet Morgan was sure that something deeply wrong had seeped into the morgue. It was the smell stemming from it that caused him such distress: a strong reek of death, of blood. Obviously, it was the kind of stench one would expect from a place like that, but in that smell Morgan felt something wrong, something that shouldn't be, like when the mortician had revealed him whose voices were those in his head.

Without even realizing what he was doing, he grabbed the doorknob with both hands and twisted it until the door gave way with a sharp creak.

Too late did he regret his choice.

The opened door revealed the darkened entrance of the building and a pong of mold and cobwebs overlapped that of blood and made him feel sick: in the dim brightness reflected by the snow on the dust-covered floor, he glimpsed a blood-stained rag of black cloth that shone bright red under the

light from outside. Perhaps it was a sleeve, although he couldn't tell, since most of it was swallowed by the darkness.

The room was faintly illuminated by the light filtering through the windows; Morgan recognized the outlines of a table – probably where corpses were laid – and the ragged profile of a human being on the floor. Wrapped in the same black tunic the boy had seen on the mortician, the body was lying on the side, arms stretched towards the door, knees pulled up against their chest, with the hood drooped behind the head, tangling with disheveled hair.

The dark dress was draped behind the corpse, like one of those black and white snapshots that make up the illusion of a moving picture in which the man on the floor was running and the wind was flattening his robe behind him.

Morgan had seen a corpse only a few days before, but back then he hadn't felt that same deep emotion, even though that body had been his grandma and this time, on the contrary, it was a man he didn't know at all.

It was like somebody had ripped him open with their bare hands and tightened his throat and stomach into a knot so that, no matter how hard he tried to throw up, all the bile remained imprisoned inside of him.

Like the body on the floor was an extension of his body, something that belonged to him.

Overwhelmed by the uncontrollable desire to discover who it was – even though he knew that finding out wouldn't alleviate the pain tearing his soul apart – feeling around blindly he seized a package of matches and a lamp standing on a closet nearby the front door, and switched it on.

When he could clearly see the mortician's corpse, his legs buckled and he collapsed on the closet, almost knocking over the lamp.

The undertaker had long, brown hair that partially hid his face, sharp cheekbones, young features, and once vivid green eyes now glazed over and hollow. Looking at his face was odd: it was like hybrid between that of a child and that of an old man, a timeless face with so pale a complexion that the purplish veins stood out against it.

His fingers were bent towards the palm of his hand, like the petals of a flower defending its corolla, and were soaked in dark blood. Brighter blood was dripping from a gash extending from chest to abdomen, barely concealed by his tunic.

Those gathered behind his back weren't the creases of his black garments, though.

They were wings. They must be as big as the undertaker himself, but they were badly folded over each other and, since most of the feathers that were supposed to cover them were scattered on the floor instead, Morgan could see the bones underneath. A pool of blood spread under them and red blotches smeared the feathers.

«Pitiful, isn't it?»

A hand clasped over his mouth in order not to puke for real and eyes filled with tears, Morgan staggered, trying to keep his balance, and turned towards the exit.

Johannes adjusted his glasses, crooked and broken. His blonde hair was draped over his shoulders, the ends sticky with the blood flowing from a deep wound that split one of his shoulders in two to the point that it was almost separated from the rest of his body.

He was holding a knife stained with the undertaker's blood and only one wing was opened on his back – its twin, Morgan realized with a tremor, had been torn.

«How... how...?» Morgan repeatedly attempted to stutter out his question – how Johannes could have killed that creature, when only looking at it proved to be an endless torture for him instead – then he took a breath and said, struggling to control his trembling voice: «You killed him».

«You did, Morgan,» Johannes replied coolly. «You provided me with the identity of the reincarnation of the second angel. You put your friend in a demon's hands».

When the meaning of that cruel accusation dawned on Morgan, the boy took his head in his hands and closed his eyes, blinded by the tears furiously streaming down his cheeks.

Only then, when every noise was muffled by his palms pressed against his ears, he could hear the voices clearly and realized they were crying. They were sobbing quietly, their laments mingling

together. Maybe they had been crying ever since the angel was killed, but Morgan hadn't paid attention to their moans.

Opening his eyelids, Morgan saw Johannes towering over him, saw the knife he was holding high above his head, and noticed to be crouching on the floor.

He should get back on his feet to deal with the exorcist, but he didn't have the energy for it: when he moved, the nausea would hit him like a punch to the stomach and his head would spin painfully. He was barely able to hurl himself on the side blindly when the blade cut through the air, hungry for some flesh to sink itself into.

Morgan felt the pain explode in every part of his body as the knife jabbed his right arm and his left shoulder bumped against the wall. Blood trickled slowly from the wound, stealing his last energies and numbing the muscles in his arm.

He must be somewhere near the closet with the lamp, because he heard the sound of glass shattering and the crackling of fire corroding the floorboards in front of him.

Through the veil of exhaustion clouding his eyes he saw a wall of flames between him and Johannes; the demon studied him for a moment, then he sheathed his knife underneath his robe and left the building, where the fire was spreading faster and faster.

Morgan tipped his head back, resting it against the wall, and looked up at the ceiling.

Johannes didn't kill him, but he would die anyway; the mortician – the angel – had been murdered because of him; and he didn't even have the strength to get angry at the voices that had never even helped him.

He closed his eyes.

And then he noticed the break distinctly, better than he had ever felt it before – perhaps because he had already ceased to be a body, at least partially.

It was like something uprooted him from his humanity, not as if he was dying, though, but more like he was leaving his body behind to acquire a new one.

A whole universe of new perceptions opened up for him: new ways to see, to hear, to touch, to think about every organism, whether it was a living being or not.

And then there was a sharp tug, when two large wings blossomed on his back and shook off some sticky glaze, similar to the one on newborn chicks' wings.

On instinct he realized he had just awoken as an angel, his true identity, like Johannes and the undertaker; and he understood that, ever since he started hearing the voices, the path towards the awakening had unfolded in front of him and the former reincarnations weren't allowed to reveal anything about it, because the angelic conscience was supposed to wake up on its own.

The flames couldn't hurt him anymore: they were extensions of his body, like every single part of that world, even the smallest and less significant.

Morgan stood up, went through the bluish fire and hoisted the angel's body up in his arms.

Touching it was enough for him to establish a connection with its essence: he saw the mortician's name, Camael; he saw his awakening, happened when he first arrived at the cathedral; he saw Adele's funeral through the undertaker's eyes; he saw his surprise upon finding out that he, Morgan, was the angel he was waiting for; he saw him facing Johannes. His death.

The flames were rising up from the building when Morgan crossed the threshold.

Camael's body was weightless in his arms; hovering a few feet above the gates of the graveyard, Morgan floated over the carpet of tombstones and snow until he reached its borders and landed on a small, undisturbed corner without any gravestone.

He fell down on his knees and carefully laid Camael on the ground. He lowered the angel's eyelids over his empty eyes with two fingers. At last he rested his forehead in his lap and his tears wetted the angel's robe, slid down its folds and dropped on the earth.

Camael's death burnt inside Morgan's chest.

Unlike angels, humans hate. And in his mind there was only revenge, because he was still human.

Underneath him, white flowers flourished from his tears.