

THE TALLEST ANGEL
(For the kid who lives inside each of us.)

(87,227 words)

A Novel
by
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THE TALLEST ANGEL

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	“ANGELS”	IV
INTRODUCTION	“BEHOLD, THIS DREAMER”	V
ONE	“MAROONED”	1
TWO	“INTO MY FOGGY PAST”	16
THREE	“VICTORY”	32
FOUR	“OH CAPTAIN ... MY CAPTAIN?”	44
FIVE	“WELL, IMAGINE THAT”	52
SIX	“A LOOK INTO MY CRYSTAL BALL”	67
SEVEN	“PIRATES”	83
EIGHT	“EXPLORING MY FUTURE”	99
NINE	“MIRROR, MIRROR, ON MY WALL”	111
TEN	“REALITY CALLS”	119
ELEVEN	“TO DREAM, OR NOT TO DREAM”	131
TWELVE	“THE NEVER ENDING CHURCH SERVICE”	150
THIRTEEN	“SCHOOL”	159
FOURTEEN	“CORNERED”	172
FIFTEEN	“I’M WORRIED SICK”	180
SIXTEEN	“MAKE US A BLESSING”	192
SEVENTEEN	“WILL THE REAL <i>VICTORY</i> PLEASE STAND UP”	208
EIGHTEEN	“DON’T GIVE UP THE SHIP”	221
NINETEEN	“HOT FUDGE FRIDAE”	231
TWENTY	“A HEAVENLY RAINBOW”	242
TWENTY-ONE	“CAROLYN’S ‘VICTORY’ ”	249
TWENTY-TWO	“BIG PLANS”	265
TWENTY-THREE	“FRIENDLY ADVICE”	275
TWENTY-FOUR	“ROLL ’EM”	285

<i>ANGEL/Peters</i>		III
TWENTY-FIVE	“FRIDAY-THE-13TH CRUISE.”	298
TWENTY-SIX	“STORM’S A BREWIN’ ”	310
TWENTY-SEVEN	“SHIPWRECK”	317
TWENTY-EIGHT	“SEA-SICK???”	329
TWENTY-NINE	“THE RESCUE”	336
THIRTY	“RIGHT NOW”	348
THIRTY-ONE	“HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS”	360
THIRTY-TWO	“BE NOT AFRAID”	377
THIRTY-THREE	“TODAY”	390

FOREWORD

ANGELS

The Bible tells us that some human beings have entertained them without ever knowing it. Wordy pictures abound of these mysterious beings, clothed with wisdom and power, coming to the aid of mankind throughout the centuries. But it is not an everyday happening. Rare are the times and told in hushed tones of how these awesomely-powerful Heaven-sent creatures have visited select individuals and bestowed upon them special favor.

The mind conjures Hollywood images of ten-foot-tall white-robed cherubim and seraphim, outstretched wings ablaze as they rocket around the globe or out to the far reaches of the universe at the whim of their maker. But who knows of their appearance, really? Some say angels have taken the form of men. Others tell of animals speaking with an angel's voice.

Perhaps the strangest story of all, however, is told by a man who remembers when, at the age of eleven, he sailed away into his own magnificent adventure with the tallest angel of them all.

INTRODUCTION

Opening remarks from the valedictorian speech given by Mr. Richard Clinton Elliott III, age 18, on Friday evening, May 28, 1976, Rock Harbor area high school gymnasium, Rock Harbor, Maine.

“BEHOLD, THIS DREAMER”

“Not so long ago I knew a boy who daydreamed and everything he dreamed came true. Well, almost everything.

“Now, when I say daydream, I’m talking one Super Bowl, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Baily, gen-u-wine grade-double-A imagination here. You know, your basic *Gone With the Wind* caliber daydreams.

“This kid’s Technicolor imagination regularly featured breathtaking adventures set against the backdrop of a raging Nor’easter off the Maine coast. With billowing clouds of sail harnessed by ropes — much like powerful teams of mountainous white workhorses, straining to the task, pulling before the wind — the boy’s ship plowed the boiling seas.

“This Cecil B. De Mille imagination often directed a cast of thousands ... of waves, that is. Cracking its lightning whip with thunderous power it drove these unruly herds of lathered beasts onto the grinding granite shores, exploding them into galaxies of liquid diamonds, soaking the kid’s face.

“Hey, I’m talking Cinemascope, Hi-Fi daydreams. The kind that feature surly bands of swooping, squawking, screeching, scuffling, scrawny, shabby (breathless) pirate gulls (gasp) sword fighting over breakfast, again!

“Sometimes the boy’s hooky-playing Huck Fin imagination would coax our hero away from school, far away to other more important double-feature adventures. Commanding a Navy fighter through the clouds on a combat mission; cutting through the line for an NFL game-winning touchdown; fighting off a bloody band of cut-throats with his gleaming sword! Eh, all common everyday feats of daring for our young man.

“Then later this Disneyland imagination might fill the sound stage with silent sultry fog. Drifting slowly, flowing seductively, it ever so gently teased the boy’s senses with the misty perfumes of the sea.

“And then his leading lady, the eleven-year-old neighbor girl, would step before the camera to whisper her line.

“ ‘Richie, close your eyes.’

“Each time he obeyed her dreamy command he could almost feel her soft lips touch his face. Wow! She had given him a gift he would never forget, the very first kiss of his young life. The first kiss, that is, from someone who was not his mother or grandmother or his dog, Ruff. Richie ran this particular daydream a lot. It was one of his box office favorites.

“Then, at the end of a long hard daydream he would often treat himself to buckets of imaginary homemade peach ice-cream covered with steamy hot fudge and wash it down (in his mind) with gallons of frosty cherry Coke, all from Mr. Smith’s drugstore fountain.

“Now these select full-length features, as well as any number of short subjects, could be playing at this kid’s “Imagination Theater” as he sat in Miss Hurley’s fifth grade class room, at ten-forty-five, on a Thursday morning, in April of 1969, chin propped on his palm ... staring out the window at the rain!

“How do I know? Yesterday I was that boy.”

ONE
“MAROONED”

Fall of 1992

Like all the other storms in my life, this one had decided to turn ugly, too. But, as Grandpa used to say, “What you see is what you get, Richard. Sooooo, don’t believe your eyes, believe what you see with your heart.”

Hey, I’m working on it Grandpa, okay?

We’d been overtaken by a tropical storm that had sailed up through the Gulf of Mexico, crossed the Florida panhandle, and was now swinging up through Alabama, headed northeast. It never did reach hurricane intensity in the Gulf but you could have fooled my family and me.

The drunken wind slapped us around, causing our small U-Haul trailer to cringe as it was drug along behind by an outstretched arm, much like a whining child being led away by his mother to be scolded. The flood of rain overran our wipers — tin soldiers on parade — marching in regimented formation back and forth in their rubber boots, oblivious to the enemy’s attack.

I knew when we left Pensacola that morning we’d be running ahead of the storm but I didn’t expect it to cut us off at the pass. Right now my immediate goal was to find the next exit and someplace safe until this squall blew herself out.

“WHOA! LOOK AT THAT LIGHTNING!” Mike, our ten-year-old said, jerking away from his lookout at the passenger-side rear window.

“I could feel that one clear to my fingertips,” my wife said. “Honey, I think we need to get off somewhere. As soon as possible?”

I glared. “Babes, I’m trying.”

Mike stretched his neck, gazing over the front seat at the speedometer. “Dad, you’re only going fifteen miles an hour.”

“Hey, lighten up, Michael. This thing doesn’t have radar. I’ve already had to stop twice because I couldn’t see and I’m not about to rear-end somebody.”

“Daddy, are we going to be okay?” our seven-year-old daughter, Kelly, asked. She was sitting in the front seat beside me, as far from the passenger door as she could get and still remain in her seat belt. She twisted her fingers, blinking away a tear.

“Not to worry, Kelly. Everything’s under control.” With a glance over my shoulder and a nod toward my daughter, I signaled my wife that we had a young lady in the front seat who just might be scared to death.

Babes leaned up and stroked Kelly’s hair. “It’s okay, sweetheart, don’t be afraid. We’ll get off at the next exit and find someplace safe to wait ’til this old storm’s over.”

Kelly was dubious.

“Besides, your daddy knows what to do in a storm. He’s a tough old sailor.”

Kelly wiped her eyes. “Really, Daddy? Were you ever in a storm like this on the ocean?”

I remembered the particular storm my wife was referring to. It had happened many years before my naval career started. “Kelly, I don’t want to brag, but”

“Here we go again,” Mike said. “Another one of Dad’s wild stories.”

“No, Michael,” Babes jumped in, “your Dad and I WERE in a storm at sea once, LOTS worse than this one. It was years ago when we were in grade school together, back home in Maine. It was one of the most wonderful adventures of my life. We were on an old sailing ship that almost sank and your daddy was a hero and rescued our whole class. He was magnificent.”

“My little cheerleader,” I said over my shoulder.

Babes rubbed the back of my neck. “That’s when I knew I was in love with your daddy and that I wanted to marry him someday.”

“OH, SICK!” Mike said, turning back to his side-window lookout.

“Daddy, tell us about when you rescued Mom,” Kelly prodded.

“Maybe later, okay?” I headed down the first exit ramp I’d seen in seventeen miles, eased around a large branch lying across the pavement, then made a quick right turn at the stop sign. Transparent slabs of rain cut in front of the car like the teeth of a giant saw mill blade. I swung left into the Phillips-66 truck center, around a row of semi-tractor trailers, and pulled up close to the entrance of the truck stop restaurant. The family piled out and ran inside.

Once they were clear of the Suburban I spotted my emergency landing strip. Several large trees spread their arms over a picnic table at the far edge of the truck parking area, inviting me over. *Perfect!* I made a wide u-turn in the pattern, lined up on the deck and eased to a stop under the overhanging limbs of the biggest tree. *Right on the numbers!*

I reached back and patted our Lab. “Good dog, Max. Guard the car, boy.” He whined and I had to hold him from jumping out as I eased the door closed. I ran for the building holding my flight jacket over my head.

We stood inside the main entrance to the truck stop, watching the dark gray underbelly of clouds skim low overhead, like some imperial starship searching for Luke Skywalker and his crew.

“Daddy,” Kelly snuggled close, “It’s as though the storm knows we’re in here and it’s still trying to get us.”

“Okay, gang, let’s move back away from the windows,” I said.

Just then a tall thin trucker, his wiry red hair brawling with the wind, crawled down out of the cab of the semi he’d just parked and leaned hard against the blow, sidestepping for the shelter of the restaurant. He pulled the door closed behind him and squeegeed the rain from his face with a long finger. His shirt was drenched, as was his still-defiant hair.

“Twister jist touched down about twenty mile west of here along I-85,” he said in a crusty southern drawl. “Ripped through a trailer park, like the tail of some giant snake. Heard reports on the CB of three or four funnels touched down in the last hour, both sides of Montgomery. Looks like it’s headed this way. I ain’t a movin’ that rig ’til this ol’ gal decides to settle down.”

At that he ducked his head under the large wooden eighteen-wheeler-shaped sign that read, “Reserved for Professional Drivers ONLY,” and hunched at the counter. We overheard him retelling his story to the other drivers as he tore the tops from four packets of sugar at once, then dumped them into his coffee.

My family stared at me with apprehension.

“Like the guy said, I guess we ain’t a movin’ that rig ’til this ol’ gal decides to settle down,” I told them.

We threw our hands up to shield our eyes as a tremendous strike of lightning hit at the far edge of the parking lot. It was so close it lit the inside of the restaurant as though a million prickly flashbulbs had gone off in a phone booth. The lights flickered, then went out as thunder shook the building.

“Daddy look!” Kelly froze, pointing across the parking lot.

We snapped our heads around, just in time to see the lightning fade and half of the old oak shade tree, pushed by the wind, fall slowly across the picnic table, AND OUR U-HAUL.

“Aw, give me a break!” I moaned. I wanted to kick something. I stared at the Suburban, shaking my head. Elliott, you idiot, parking under that tree in a storm like this. I can see the Pensacola headlines already. ‘U.S. Naval career officer, former Blue Angels pilot and Persian Gulf fighter ace, Captain Richard C. Elliott, flies U-Haul trailer into shade tree during storm.’ The guys at the base would have a field day with this one.

“Hey guys,” Mike said, “the Statue of Liberty painted on the side of the trailer looks like she’s holding up that tree now instead of her torch.”

The trailer contained most of our personal belongings and “special stuff” — those delicate things Babes had been afraid to trust to the Mayflower movers the day before. They had tried to assure her that they would be particularly careful with the fragile items but, she just smiled and held out against all reason.

“I don’t know why in the world we need to tow a trailer when that enormous moving van is sitting RIGHT OUT THERE in front of the house,” I had said at least a hundred times. The subject caused quite an argument between us so, as usual, my wife slipped into her quiet-and-distant mode. In the end I towed the stupid trailer.

“Guess I’ll go check the damage,” I said. “I just wonder how many trees fell on the Mayflower van today.”

“I wouldn’t have parked there,” she said, pushing past me. She shoved the door open with the help of the wind and headed for the Suburban.

I caught up with her by the first set of diesel pumps. “LISTEN, BABY, THERE’S NOTHING YOU CAN DO UNTIL THIS THING LETS UP.”

She looked at the trailer once more, then turned back toward the building.

After we were safely inside again I said, “Relax. It’s only a caved in roof. Grief, it’s probably not even leaking. U-Haul will give us another trailer later, we’ll transfer our stuff, and be on our way in a couple hours. Besides, we’ve got insurance on the contents.”

That last comment brought a crocodile glare. She looked away toward the trailer, now appearing more like a wrinkled little orange-and-white lunch box valiantly supporting half of that enormous oak tree salad.

“Rich, grandmother Elliott’s china is in there and all of our old pictures. All our valuable things.” Her eyes pleaded for understanding.

“Hey, and what about Max?” Mike asked.

“And Theodore is still in the car, toooooo,” Kelly added. Theodore E. Bear was Kelly’s teddy, and was as much a part of our family as Max, or even me.

I was heading back outside when an Alabama State Patrol car swung in close to the doors. The trooper had rescued a young couple with a new baby and escorted them inside. Most of the people in the restaurant crowded around.

“It doesn’t look good, folks,” The highway patrolman said. “We’ve got two semis on their side about fifteen miles down 85, toward Montgomery. Cars off the interstate in both directions between here and there, quite a few trees and power lines down, phone lines are gone. We’re closing this stretch of 85 from Montgomery northeast to the Georgia state line until further notice.”

Someone asked how long the road would be closed.

“Right now we don’t know, Ma’am. The eye of the storm is moving this way. Could be all night, maybe longer.” He turned to the truck-stop manager. “George, tune your CB to channel nine. We’ll keep you posted.”

The patrolman filled a thermos with fresh coffee then just before heading back to his car he asked, “Who belongs to the U-Haul with the headache?”

I raised my hand like a guilty first grader.

“Not a good place to park,” he said, drawing a thin smile.

Babes snooted at me, then asked, “Officer, where’s the closest U-Haul rental center?”

“Second exit east from here, Ma’am, but they closed the station early because of the storm. Won’t catch ’em now ’til morning. I’d suggest you folks just settle in here for the night. Looks like it’s going to be a long one.”

When I returned from assessing the damage to the trailer the lights to the restaurant were on again — someone had started the emergency diesel generator out back — but there was still no electricity to the rest of the hotel. I handed Theodore Bear to Kelly and told Babes, “At least the tree missed the Suburban. You know, guys,” I said clowning, “there’s got to be a reason why something like this would happen.”

“Yeah, there is, Dad. You parked under the tree!” Mike said.

I threw my arm around his neck and rubbed his head with my knuckles as I talked to Babes. “Some boxes of clothing on top were smushed but it looks like they cushioned the valuable stuff underneath. I couldn’t see any leaks in the roof. Otherwise, everything seems okay.”

She bought that story, at least for now, so she said, “It’s almost five, we might as well go in and have something to eat while there’s electricity to the restaurant. We might not get a chance later.”

Sometimes I am amazed how my wife can bounce between near panic one minute and “Que sara, sara” the next. Oh, but I love her.

While I was outside my family had already decided that we were going to have the “Trucker’s special! Chickfry steak, mashpots, gravy, grits, veggies, pie ’n coffee combo,” as listed on the blackboard at the entrance of the restaurant.

“I’d rather have a couple of fresh Big Macs, some wonderful crispy fries, and a delicious chocolate shake,” I said. I grinned and tilted my head as though I was Tim Allen doing a McDonald’s commercial for the Super Bowl.

“Hey, lighten up, McNut. You’ll get your old Big Macs tomorrow,” Babes said, as though brushing crumbs from the table.

Babes had nicknamed me “McNut” years before because I was a certified nut about McDonalds’ Big Mac sandwiches. Remember when their commercials talked about the guy having a Big Mac attack? That was me. My handle among the other fighter pilots was “Big Mac,” and when I was in Pensacola my plane was unofficially named “BIG MAC ATTACK.”

“Come on, Dad,” Michael said. “Chicken-fried steak is the stuff truckers eat, man.”

I rolled my eyes.

Kelly and Babes each took one of my hands and led me into the dinning area like a whipped bear. “Goodbye, BIG MAC,” I said over my shoulder. “We shall meet again.”

Deep in thought, Babes nibbled at her dinner while staring periodically at the U-Haul, that had now begun to resemble a squatty little orange toad sitting under a leaf in a rain storm. Babes realized I was watching her and said softly, “What’s wrong?”

The awareness of what a wonderful girl the Lord had given to me for my wife touched me gently once again and I squeezed her hand across the table. I couldn't fathom my life without my Babes.

Yet, that's exactly what my dad faced right then. He and Mom had called several weeks before and after an unusually awkward time of chit-chatting Dad said, "Son, we were going to wait until you and the family got here on your vacation but we decided you'd want to know so you can be praying with us." He paused, then took a deep breath. "Rich, the cancer is back."

"What? I thought those treatments for the lymph nodes were suppose to take care of all that. Will she have to go through chemo?" I was groping.

"No, son. Your brother and I took Mom down to University Hospital in Boston for tests two weeks ago. We waited to tell you until we were sure."

"Dad, you're the doctor. What does this mean?"

He spoke with firmness but his voice was heavy with hurt. "Richard, the melanoma has spread to her lungs. Once this happens there's virtually no cure. Outside of a miracle from the Lord, Mother has about six months to a year to live."

I was stunned. My mind went into a flat spin and I didn't remember much of what Dad said after that. We agreed to talk more when I got home.

"We love you, don't worry, everything's going to be okay," I told him.

Back when I hit the age of eleven I began to learn how to control my imagination — you know, fly it like a jet. I learned to set my life goals, lock on target, then watch everything glide into place. In other words, I found the secret of using my faith like a tool to make my dreams come true, even though sometimes it seemed to work mysteriously for me. Among other things I learned that, with hard work, persistence, and faith, I could accomplish almost anything I set my heart on in this life. It didn't appear there was anything I couldn't handle because I had learned early on to "Never give up, never quit, always believe in your dreams."

But there was one nagging problem which my faith and determination simply could not get a grip on. An old dilemma which stood defiantly, just out of my control. And that one unanswered question had grown into a genuine paradox for me. From the time I was young I would periodically ask myself why a loving God would let certain people suffer and die. I mean,

good folks like Pastor Grant's first wife, Mary, at age 42, or my baby sister, Ruthie, at six months — I was seven then — or the Parkers in that airplane crash in their prime of life.

Now, since Dad's phone call, that old boyhood problem had slithered up out of the abyss of my subconscious and forced its slimy ugly head into my mind again. Why did it have to be Mom? She never hurt anyone. Now she wouldn't be around to enjoy the grandkids. And worse than that, *they* wouldn't have *her*. It wasn't fair. I shook that thought from my head and finished the last of my blueberry pie.

Later, after taking our things to our room, we drifted down the long corridor, lit only by the glaring emergency lights, and found a darkened area off the lobby, which the hotel manager called The Great Room. It was an enormous lodge-type barn of a room with a towering cathedral ceiling, massive dark-stained log beams, and a huge hand laid moss-rock fireplace whose cavernous mouth could, I was sure, devour a four foot log. A huge rustic coffee table, leather chairs and couches were arranged in front of the hearth, resembling wagons circling a campfire.

"Oh, man! look at that bear hide rug," Mike said.

Kelly pulled my shirt sleeve. "Daddy, look at the big deer head."

"That's a moose," I told her. "That's a deer head over on the wall by the pool table and that's a bobcat up there above the fireplace."

With the help of our kids, the manager built a fire in the fireplace and even agreed to let them bring Max in from the car. "Just this once," he said, "but he can't lay on the bear rug."

Soon the old southern hardwood was crackling and popping happily. The fire was the only light in the large room. We were chatting with an older couple we'd met in the restaurant, Frank and Guyla McGrady. Frank's red-white-and-blue baseball cap read *McGrady Trucking* and matched a sparkling new Kenworth rig I'd spotted in the parking lot earlier. The sweetness of Guyla's smile and big Frank's full head of silver hair reminded me of Mom and Dad.

The young married folks the trooper had brought in earlier were sitting on the hearth with their baby. Mike sat cross legged on the bear-hide rug, petting Max, who was sprawled out beside him.

"Hey, Dad," Michael said, "tell us about your adventure now. You know, the story about the shipwreck."

The young mother's interest perked.

“Yes, Daddy,” Kelly said, “Mom told us there was an old ship and a big storm, worse than this one, and that you were a hero and rescued everybody. Tell us, tell us.”

Mike leaned his elbows on the heavy oak coffee table, waiting. Kelly bounced on the edge of her seat with anticipation.

“Okay. I guess you guys are old enough to understand now.”

“Understand what?” Michael asked.

I stretched. “Kids, first maybe I should go waaaaaaay back to the beginning and tell you about a special dream I had when I was a boy; a dream that started that whole wild and crazy summer adventure for your mom and me. That’s when I learned the *secret formula* of how to make my dreams come true.”

Babes spoke up, eyes twinkling, “Make yourselves comfortable, kids. You’re about to hear the story of the world’s greatest daydreamer. And I have a feeling this is going to be the long version.”

Note: This complete novel is now available in electronic book form, for sale at the Amazon – Kindle bookstore. You may download it to your Kindle Reader, PC, cell, and more.

Thanks much and Lord bless,

Carl Peters