



Christopher Bernard

Descending Angel

Cast:

DAVID SYMES, early 30s, a minister

DEBORAH SYMES, late 20s, his wife

VOICE OF RADIO ANNOUNCER

VOICE OF RIQUE GALDOS, mid 30s, a catering service waiter

(A late Sunday morning in DAVID and DEBORAH SYMES' apartment. A kitchen area with a small table in one corner. Window, with light curtains, open at back; sunlight is streaming in, with the faint sound of city traffic.)

(DEBORAH is drying and putting away kitchen things: glasses, plates, etc. While handling a knife, she cuts herself.)

DEBORAH

Ow!

(She sucks on her cut as DAVID enters, removing his minister's collar.)

DAVID

You OK?

DEBORAH

Oh it's nothing, I just cut myself. (cheerfully) So how did it go today?

DAVID

Nobody fell asleep during my sermon. And the collection plate looks like it'll cover the church's electric bill.

DEBORAH

Yay!

(Over the following, DAVID puts his collar away and starts changing his clothes, including removing a silver cross, which he hangs on a small hook next to the door. DEBORAH puts a Band-Aid on her cut.

DAVID is clearly under a very serious strain but is trying to hide it from his wife.)

The Petzolds bickered over the offering – she wanted to put in a ten dollar bill, and he actually took the ten out and put in a five! Otis Redding got his section 8. And Mrs. Washington's out of her wheelchair and now on a cane. But still feisty; she told me, as she was leaving, "Love your enemy, reverend – but pass the ammunition!"

DEBORAH

And your sermon . . . ?

DAVID

Well, it wasn't about the eye of the needle.

(DEBORAH laughs.)

DEBORAH

Speaking of "love thy enemy": I guess you're going to that political thingy later - the dinner ...

DAVID

The landlord still refuses to accept prayers for rent. I'll have to hold my nose ...

DEBORAH

That'll professional! Especially while serving the rubber chicken! Long as you bring me back something.

DAVID

Dessert's supposed to be Red Velvet Cake.

DEBORAH

The devil's favorite!

DAVID (smiling)

Just right for the minister's atheist wife.

DEBORAH

Agnostic! When will you *ever* get it right?

(Over the following speeches, DAVID gradually finishes changing into a waiter's uniform.)

DAVID

The old archbishop of Canterbury had an atheist wife. And they got along like a house on fire.

DEBORAH

That was because he never tried to convert her!

DAVID

Smart guy. Enough to make you think maybe Christianity isn't so much bunk after all.

DEBORAH (smiling)

Nice try.

(DAVID goes to the mirror. He combs his hair, staring into the mirror with a grim expression.)

You-know-who will be there.

DAVID (still looking in the mirror)

Who you-know-who?

DEBORAH

Richard Cook who. "The most dangerous man in the world," according to *Time* magazine.

DAVID (after a brief pause; slowly, still looking in the mirror)

How do you know?

DEBORAH

I read it in the paper while you were edifying your congregation.

DAVID

It'll be interesting to see him. In the flesh.

DEBORAH

You're not thinking of . . . *doing* anything, are you?

DAVID (starting; looking at her via the mirror)

What do you mean?

DEBORAH

You were going on and on the other day about stopping the virus before it spreads.

DAVID

As I recall, *you* were the first to bring that up.

DEBORAH

What are you talking about? *You* were the one obsessed with that movie.

DAVID (turning to her from the mirror)

What?!

DEBORAH

The one with the guard who was just about to lay a bomb for Hitler, and had to go to the john, and managed to lock himself in. And to believe it actually happened . . . !

(Pause.)

DAVID

That was you.

(Long pause. She laughs nervously.)

DEBORAH

Well, *you're* not going to bomb anybody. Just make sure not to lock yourself in the toilet if you do.

DAVID

I'll be sure to keep it in mind.

DEBORAH

I was thinking something more like – I don't know – hitting him with your shoe, like the Iraqis.

DAVID

If that guy *had* killed him, your grand dad wouldn't have met the love of his life in an English pub while waiting for D-Day. And the love of my life wouldn't be here at all.

DEBORAH

The love of your life? Isn't that Jesus?

DAVID

Now, now! (Pause) Imagine how different the world would be if that guy's kidneys had just lasted two more minutes. To think our whole world hung from his ...

DEBORAH (with mock dismay)

David!

DAVID

... sphincter.

DEBORAH

So, man of peace, you aren't *thinking* about anything? Like hitting him with a champagne bottle or something ...

DAVID

What if I were?

(DEBORAH is silent. Neither moves.)

"You don't argue with Nazis. You eliminate them."

DEBORAH

"Love your enemy"?

DAVID

Love your enemy, but love the world more. (Pause, then very quickly) I'll bring Mrs. Washington! She attacks! Cook defends! Bad move: all anybody sees is a billionaire whupping an old helpless black lady, streaming to every smartphone from Paris to Beijing. The twitterverse explodes, the RNC repudiates him, he's denied access to Fox, and is a pariah for the rest of his life. Mrs. Washington knocks Harriet Tubman off the next twenty-dollar bill! But me – I can't even set a rat trap without wincing for the rat. Admit it, Debbie, you married a wuss.

DEBORAH

That's one thing I didn't marry.

DAVID

Brian wouldn't have agreed with you.

DEBORAH (furious, hurt)

*David!*

DAVID

He'd be alive today if I had *done* something.

DEBORAH

It wasn't your, our, fault, how could anyone have . . . !

DAVID

I saw the water come out black from the taps. And they were fracking all over the place. But I trusted the counselors, the camp manager, the EPA. "It's rust in the pipes. Brian's headaches? Just too much sun. There's no scientific evidence blah blah ..." while alarms were shrieking all over my head. I saw *right through everything they said*. And I pretended I didn't. If that isn't the definition of "denial" I don't know what is. I *trusted*, I had *faith* ...

DEBORAH (shouting, almost hysterical)

No! *No!* David! It wasn't your fault, and it wasn't *our* fault, it was the fault of that asshole's *company!* You, we, couldn't have known *then* what, what *everybody* knows *now*. (Pause) Richard Cook killed our boy. *He killed him!* (Pause) OK? Do you get it? Have I finally said it? *He killed Brian!*

(Silence as the two stare at each other.)

He bought off the local government, the governor, the medical types with the promise of a new medical center or whatever it was ...

DAVID

We don't *know* any of that, it's just suspicion ...

DEBORAH (more in control, yet even angrier)

*Yes, we do know that!* (Pause) Do you think Brian was the only one getting sick? And now we know this goddam fucking fracking *shit* is leaking methane all over the goddamn country so that Antarctica can melt even faster! "Two meters by 2100"! Sounds like some dork's idea for a campaign slogan! What have you just been running on about? That's what I hate about so many Christians! They let themselves believe in total nonsense, then deny what's right under their noses. They take on "responsibilities" they can't actually do anything about, then they drop the real ones where they *can!* Jesus makes everything right in the end! Well, you can't hang your whole life on a "might have been." You were the one to insist on that to me. Or don't you remember?

(Long pause.)

So thou shalt not beat thyself over a past none of us can change. And you will not do anything crazy in front of all those billionaires. Nothing is going to bring Brian back. Sorry! I know we agreed we'd never ...

DAVID (contritely)

No, no, it's OK, Debbie. It's my fault. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I should never have ...

(He hugs her.)

DEBORAH

It's OK, David. It's just that when ... when ...

(She breaks down in tears as they hug.  
DAVID's face is grim. They hold each other  
a long time.)

By the end of this moment together, DAVID  
has made his decision.)

(trying to laugh) Anyway, I've hidden your old Occupy signs, so, unless you plan on  
streaking naked through the banquet hall ...

DAVID (a little dreamily)

It's a little late to plan anything so tweet worthy. If I were that quick, we'd have  
ourselves a church in the Hamptons by now.

DEBORAH

Nope. You love your Mrs. Washingtons way too much.

DAVID

Almost as much as my atheist communist liberal pinko wife . . .

DEBORAH

How many mistakes can you jam together into a single sentence, reverend!

(DAVID suddenly swings her in a circle.)

DAVID

OK, OK! Agnostic socialist progressive legally assigned cis-female ...

DEBORAH

Let me down! I have work to do while you're off stealing *amuse-bouches* for the  
struggling!

(As they part, DEBORAH still teary, DAVID seems  
barely in control of himself. He slips on his waiter's  
jacket.)

DAVID

So! Is my tie crooked?

(She straightens it.)

DEBORAH

There.

DAVID (pulling away; softly)

Thanks.

DEBORAH (she suddenly seems frightened, as if she suspects)

You have to go?

DAVID

If I want to collect my wages. And please don't quote scripture at me!

DEBORAH

“And the wages of sin ...”

DAVID

“... is Death.” (Pause) But the wages of not showing up on time are a helluva lot worse, like not being able to pay the utility bill.

DEBORAH

The minister curses! (Pause; joking awkwardly) Where will it end?

(A long pause.)

DAVID

Yes. Debbie. (Pause) I have to go.

(DAVID stops in front of DEBORAH, holds her by the shoulders, stares deeply into her eyes.)

DAVID (again, dreamily)

Jesus loves you.

DEBORAH

Get out of here! You sound like a Baptist . . .

DAVID

No, I mean it. (Pause) He does. (Pause) He does with all his heart.

(He kisses her gently; a kiss of peace.)

DAVID (whispering)

Bye, Debbie.

(He leaves abruptly.)

(DEBORAH doesn't move, then raises her hand to her mouth.)

DEBORAH (to herself, softly)

And the wages of love is eternal life.

(DEBORAH notices the cross hanging from the hook by the door, takes it and runs to the open window.)

DEBORAH

David, you forgot ... !

(She has missed him, returns from the window, and pensively re-hangs it on the hook.)

(Lights dim, then rise a few moments later. Same scene, later afternoon.)

(DEBORAH is sitting at the table watching her laptop, where someone is giving an unintelligible speech.)

DEBORAH (feverishly)

There he is ...! Wait till I tell him! Hah! ... It's central casting ...

(She turns away for a moment, humming to herself.)

(A distant SCREAM, then more SCREAMS. DEBORAH turns back to the laptop.)

DEBORAH

Oh God! ...

(More SCREAMS, followed by sounds of GUNFIRE and a crowd panicking. More GUNFIRE, more SCREAMS, sounds of commotion, ringing alarms, etc.)

(Lights and sounds dim until the only thing that can be seen is DEBORAH's face lit by the laptop screen. She does not move over the following.)

(In the darkness, the VOICE OF RADIO ANNOUNCER is heard over.)

VOICE OF RADIO ANNOUNCER

Earlier today, a waiter at a gala dinner for Senator Wayne Peckham in downtown Manhattan attempted to assassinate Republican billionaire donor and fracking tycoon Richard Cook. The waiter plunged a knife into Cook's chest, just missing the heart. The attempted assassin made no attempt to flee, but was shot almost immediately by security guards and pronounced dead at the scene. Cook was rushed to Bellevue Hospital, where he is in stable condition. Rique Galdos, another one of the waiters, spoke to reporters.

VOICE OF RIQUE GALDOS

His last words were something else, man. I can't believe it. He was lying, like, two feet from me. He said, "I told him, 'I love you. But I love the world more.' Can you believe that? Man, I'll never forget it."

(Lights dim up on same scene. DEBORAH is still staring at the laptop, now silent and dark. The telephone rings. She lets it ring several times then goes over and pulls out the jack.)

(She walks over to the window and throws it open.  
The room fills with birdsong.

(She walks back to the center of the room, then,  
tightly hugging herself, kneels and bursts into tears,  
on the floor.

(She suddenly stops weeping and pulls herself up,  
deep in thought. Then, having made a decision, she  
stands and quickly dresses to leave. While doing so,  
she sees DAVID's cross hanging on the hook,  
removes it and hangs it around her neck so it shows  
prominently.

(She takes a large purse and a Bible, then goes to  
the kitchen area, opens a drawer, and removes a thin  
steak knife.

(She looks the knife over closely, tests its sharpness,  
then holds it, for slicing; then – gingerly, as if  
unsure whether this is how it's done – for thrusting  
downward. She stares down at a cutting board lying  
on the table, and plunges the knife into the board  
with all her might.

(She lets go of the knife, still stuck in the board, and  
stares at it; then unsticks the knife, opens the Bible  
and folds the knife inside it, and puts the Bible  
inside her purse.

(She looks herself over in the mirror, then walks to  
the apartment's front door, turns and looks around  
at the room. On a sudden impulse, she kisses the  
cross hanging around her neck. Then she leaves.

(A few moments later, her footsteps can be heard  
walking at a firm, steady pace outside the window.  
The footsteps fade away.

(Birdsong. A breath of air blows in the curtains.

BLACKOUT.

End of play.)

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Christopher Bernard is co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. His novel *Voyage to a Phantom City* was recently published by Regent Press. His new collection of poems, *Chien Lunatique*, will appear this fall.

