



VINTAGE

ANGELS
DENIS JOHNSON

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Angels tells the story of two born losers. Jamie has ditched her husband and is running away with her two baby girls. Bill is dreaming of making it big in a life of crime. They meet on a Greyhound bus and decide to team up.

So begins a stunning, tragic odyssey through the dark underbelly of America - the bars, bus stations, mental wards and prisons that play host to Jamie and Bill as they find themselves trapped in a downward spiral through rape, alcohol, drugs and crime, to madness and death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Denis Johnson was born in Munich in 1949, was educated at the University of Iowa and now lives in northern Idaho.

ALSO BY DENIS JOHNSON
AVAILABLE IN VINTAGE

Fiskadoro

*this book is dedicated to H. P.
and to those who have shared
their experience, strength, and hope*

ANGELS

Denis Johnson

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I accused her as though her prayers had really worked the change:

What did I do to you that you had to condemn me to life?

GRAHAM GREENE
The End of the Affair

1

In the Oakland Greyhound all the people were dwarfs, and they pushed and shoved to get on the bus, even cutting in ahead of the two nuns, who were there first. The two nuns smiled sweetly at Miranda and Baby Ellen and played I-see-you behind their fingers when they'd taken their seats. But Jamie could sense that they found her make-up too thick, her pants too tight. They knew she was leaving her husband, and figured she'd turn for a living to whoring. She wanted to tell them what was what, but you can't talk to a Catholic. The shorter nun carried a bright cut rose wrapped in her two hands.

Jamie sat by the window looking out and smoking a Kool. People still crowded at the bus's door, people she hoped never to meet—struggling with mutilated luggage and paper sacks that might have contained, the way they handled them, the reasons for their every regretted act and the justifications for their wounds. A black man in a tweed suit and straw hat held up a sign for his departing relatives: "THE SUN SHALL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD" (JOEL 2:31). Under the circumstances, Jamie felt close to this stranger.

Around three in the morning Jamie's eyes came open. Headlights on an entrance ramp cut across their flight and swept through the bus, and momentarily in her exhaustion she thought it was the flaming head of a man whipping like a comet through the sleeping darkness of these travellers,

hers alone to witness. Suddenly Miranda was awake, jabbering in her ear, excited to be up past bedtime.

Jamie pushed the child's words away, afraid of the dark the bus was rushing into, confused at being swallowed up so quickly by her new life, fearful she'd be digested in a flash and spit out the other end in the form of an old lady too dizzy to wonder where her youth had gone. A couple of times she tried to shush Miranda, because the baby was sleeping and so was everyone else on the bus, except the driver, she hoped—but Miranda had to nudge Baby Ellen with her foot every two seconds because she wanted to play, right in the middle of Nevada in the middle of the night. "Randy," Jamie said. "I'm tarred now, hon. Don't wake up Ellen now."

Miranda sat on her hands and pretended to sleep, secretly nudging Baby Ellen with her foot.

"Move your foot; hon," Jamie told her. "I ain't playing. Move your foot now."

Miranda feigned sleep and deafness, her foot jerking in a dream to jostle the baby.

"Move—yer—*fut*," Jamie whispered fiercely, and grabbed her ankle and moved it. "You behave. Or I'll tell the driver, and he'll take you and put you off the bus, right out there in that desert. Right in the dark, with the snakes. You hear me?" She jerked Miranda's foot away again. "Don't you play like you're asleep when I can see goddamn it you ain't!"

She stared with hatred at Miranda's closed eyes and soon realized the child had fallen asleep. The weightlessness of fear replaced the weight of anger as the bus sailed down the gullet the headlights made. She put her hand over her face and wept.

In a little while she fell asleep, and dreamed about a man drowning in a cloud of poison. She woke up and wondered if this was a dream about her husband, or what?—a dream about the past, or a dream about the future?

Baby Ellen wouldn't stop screaming.

Jamie held her in one arm, searching beneath the seat with her free hand for the travelling bag, then in the travelling bag for Baby Ellen's orange juice. "There there there there there," she told Baby Ellen. "Have a crib for you soon, and a string to tie on your music box with, and Mama and Miranda'll come sing to you when it's bedtime, and here's your orange juice, thank goodness, there there there there there, little Baby Ellen, oh that a *good* orange juice, such a *serious* orange juice, such a *serious* look, oh, see the pretty sun? See the sun over there, Baby Ellen? That's just a little bitty part of the sun, pretty soon Baby Ellen see the whole sun and then it's morning time for Baby Ellen and Mama and Miranda Sue." She wished she could smother the baby. Nobody would know. They were four days out of Oakland.

She fed Baby Ellen her orange juice and watched the sun as it moved into prominence above the dead cornfields in Indiana, the light striking her face painfully as it ticked over the frozen pools and the rows of broken stalks glazed with ice. Her husband angrily sold stereophonic components for a living. He brooded on his life, and it grew on him until he was rattling around inside of it. Why couldn't she just be thankful to him, he always wanted to know, since he was losing track of what *he* wanted just so *she* could have everything *she* wanted? Couldn't she see how everything kept happening? It was just—he pounded his fist on the wall so the small trailer shook—*one moment goes to the next* . . . He choked her close to death twice, frantic to think she couldn't understand his complaint. And she couldn't. He slept almost every minute he was at home. At night, he cried and confessed how everything scared him. Whenever she looked at him he had his face in his arms, hiding from the pictures in his own brain. Finally he'd blown it, their whole marriage. She'd seen it coming like a red caboose at the end of a train.

Cut loose between Oakland and everything that would happen next, she couldn't stand to let the bus keep moving and thought, I'll get off this bus at the breakfast stop and change my ticket for the next bus on home, and happy trails, all you folks in Greyhound-land. He'd be overjoyed to see her, she was certain of it. What would she say? Forgot my toothbrush, she told herself, and smiled. Forgot my purse. Left my lunch behind. The ticket man would laugh in her face for turning around right in the middle. Liked the trip so much, you thought you'd start all over, said the ticket man. Yeah, have to go back and look out the left side this time, in case I missed something special. At the breakfast stop, Jamie paid a lady to look after Miranda and Baby Ellen while she took a sponge bath in the ladies' room. Miranda stood on a tomato soup crate to play the pinball and took pictures of herself holding her baby sister in a little booth with a curtain. Jamie and Miranda ate cornflakes, and Baby Ellen had apricot-peach dessert. They were running out of money. The turnpike took on more curves and hills as it came toward Cleveland.

Three seats back and on the other side of the aisle, the two nuns sat muttering to themselves, sleepy with breakfast. Secretly Jamie watched, and she realized they were praying, the bright cut rose the shorter nun had been clutching in Oakland now replaced by a dark rosary. Jamie wondered if they made nuns pray each day after breakfast. Did they think to themselves, here I go, praying, and did they hold a portrait in their heads of God's face with his white beard, nodding thoughtfully at their Latin? If praying was their job, then did they get any holidays? She glanced at Miranda making broad, even strokes with a crayon across a woman's face in *People* magazine, and wondered if her own little girl would ever be a nun with a black and white hat on top of her long hair. But then, Miranda wasn't

a Catholic. They hadn't been much of anything in Oakland, though they'd been retired Baptists in West Virginia before the move. You couldn't be very burning for your religion in California, because California was full of atheists and Birchers and Hare Krishnas, and the only ones very serious about religion were the crazy people like that, who were always jumping off the Golden Gate when seized by the power of God. Baptism seemed just another way of getting yourself wet.

In California there were funny-eyed old women convinced the world would momentarily come to an end, or that spacemen would be landing soon for the Judgment. You picked Venusians or Martians or Jesus Christ, or people with twelve arms and blue skin from India. Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed by an atom bomb dropped from a rocket ship.

Jamie heard low snores issuing from the shorter nun when she was supposed to be praying. God had heard it all before anyway, and didn't bother to wake her. From nowhere the bright rose had appeared again, and she choked it in her two hands while she slept.

The man in the seat behind them, Jamie could tell, had her figured for some kind of thrill-seeker. But he was a nice man with a kindly grin and a tattoo of a seahorse on his left arm that fascinated Miranda. "King Neptune gave it to me," he told her, and winked at Jamie and rolled his coatsleeve back down, and that was all he'd say about his tattoo.

As the morning passed, Miranda drew him into her activities, and by the afternoon they were terrific buddies. In his airline bag he had four beers, and offered one to Jamie. For all the pushing and shoving and disrespect for nuns shown on this trip, the seat beside him, as were several others, was vacant. She accepted his invitation to join him. "Thought you were about to jump clear off this

bus a while ago," he said. "I think your kids are drilling your head a little bit." He was wearing his glasses now—silvered wraparound sunshades—so that he had two mirrors instead of eyes. In his face she saw her own face.

And he sported a pencil-thin mustache that just made her ill. A little bit of foam clung to it briefly, and then he licked it away. "I don't never take no planes," he said. "I get sick as a dog on one, even on a cross-the-country jet. I was hitching, but I started to freeze." He jiggled his beer can, popping its aluminum rapidly in his grip. "So now I'm taking the bus. Which I guess you can see for yourself," he said.

"Half the time I can't see anything for myself." She gestured with her Stroh's toward the seat in front of them, where Miranda and Baby Ellen both napped. "Like to drive anybody half blind, looking after them two twenty-four hours ever day." Stroh's, she noticed, was Shorts written backwards. She had never heard of this beer.

"Going to Pittsburgh for some high old times," the man said. "I got me some bread, but I ain't spending none except on wine, women, and song. So that's why I was hitching."

"Jesus," Jamie said. "Twenty-four hours a day ever single day of the year."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess so," said the man.

"Till Miranda's eighteen, and then Ellen'll be—what, twelve? No, eighteen take away five, that's thirteen she'll be. Then five more years till Ellen's grown up, and that makes twenty-three years in all."

"That's a big job you got," the man said.

"No fooling. And then when you're done you're a dried-up old sack and when somebody says What you been doing all these years, you got no idea what in the world to say. Just like a hermit. Just like a nun."

"You better take you a night off next Sairdy," the man said.

She wondered what he was getting around to, and looked right at him. He was about forty, maybe a bit younger. He had curly hair not yet actually too thin, but preparing to go bald in the front. Under a western-style suit coat, designed apparently for a cowboy bandleader, he wore a white teeshirt. He removed the coat now, holding his can of beer between his knees as he did so, and uncovered the shirt's emblem: "Harrah's—Vegas." When he poked his wraparound sunglasses back onto the bridge of his nose with his thumb, his shirtsleeve rose with the movement to reveal a tattoo on his triceps of a single naked breast cupped in two disembodied hands. "Let me guess. I bet your name is Louise," he said.

"No way. My name's Jamie." She looked in the rear-vision mirror, trying to see the driver, wondering if he'd noticed the obscene tattoo on the upper arm of the man she was suddenly sharing a seat with. She could only see the driver's ear in the mirror, she thought, and maybe part of his cap.

"You nervous about that driver? He don't see a thing, Jamie." The man gulped from his beer without ducking to conceal the action. "He don't see."

"How do you know? Where'd you get all this information?"

"I been a driver before. All's you can see is if somebody's in a seat or out of it. And only some of the seats. You got no way of telling if they're drinking beer or pop, or if they're asleep or awake or what they're doing."

They observed the power lines as they dipped and swooped and ran by over the phone poles, the straight rows in the planted fields, less occasional now in Ohio, as they spread out like fans from the horizon, then whipped shut as they passed. The sky had gone grey after dawn, and the hills pushed up directly against the burden of it; a few winter birds glided and wheeled just under it. "Let the boy rock and roll," she hummed to herself, and the man

hummed a melody too, interjecting a hissy whistle into the tune.

“Nope. Nope. No sir,” the man said, popping his beer can. She glanced at him, but he didn’t continue, and she turned her eyes again to the fields running away beside them. “Nope, Jamie, nobody sees this,” he said suddenly, and kissed her cheek.

She swallowed beer. “Hey now—quit!”

“Quit what?”

“I’m married!”

“Where’s your husband?”

“He’s home.”

“Where’s that?”

“He’s home. He’s at the next stop. He’s in Cincinnati.”

“This bus don’t go to Cincinnati.”

“He’ll meet us in Cleveland then.”

“Now, I heard you telling your little girl a while back, she won’t see Daddy no more.” He grinned and opened another beer. It hissed loudly opening and she jerked. No one had noticed. The two nuns were asleep toward the back, one leaning against the windowpane and the other resting her head on her shoulder.

“Well,” Jamie said, “I had to leave him.”

“Now we’re getting honest.”

“Honesty is the best policy.”

“Have another beer, before I drink it all up.”

“You didn’t even say your name yet.”

“Name’s Bill. Bill Houston. Told it to your little girl there, and I thought you must’ve heard.” He took her hand in his.

“Hey, I can’t use this,” she said. “Specially at this moment. Why don’t you just get straight?”

“Oh, all right,” he said. “Forget it. Hey—here. I got something here going to make that beer taste like champagne.” He sneaked a pint bottle of bourbon from his bag, and, catching hold of her wrist, he sloshed some into her can of beer. “That’ll perk her up. Called a Depth

Charger.” He slapped his nose with a forefinger, rolling his eyes and allowing his tongue to fall from the corner of his mouth. A little stupid, but Jamie couldn’t help laughing.

She sipped from her drink and they discussed the passage of eras, the transformation of the landscape, the confusion of people in high places, the impersonality of the interstates. The bus carried them out from under the cloudbank covering Western Ohio into a rarefied light where old patches of snow burned fiercely in the dirt of hillsides. Soon the beer was gone and the cans held only bourbon. “You don’t have to be afraid of me,” Bill Houston said. “I been married three times.”

“Three times? What for?” she said.

“I never could figure out what for myself. After the first time I said, next time you want to do something like that, you better remember. So I got this here.” He displayed a tattoo on the inside of his elbow, a tiny feminine Satan’s face over the motto, Remember Annie. “Didn’t do me no good. Three months later I was right back married again, to a big and fat one. First one, she was little and skinny, so the next one I made sure she was big and fat, sort of for the variety.”

“Variety’s important.”

“Yes it is. Variety’s important.”

“Course, you have to be dependable, too.”

“Third one I married was dependable. I could just never get my mind around it—she was so dependable, but then one day right in the middle of everything she says, what was your first wife’s name. I says it was Annie; she says, oh yeah, Annie what, and I says, Annie Klein! What you asking me for? Well, she was just wondering. So about five minutes later she wants to know what was my next wife’s name. So course I told her, which it happened to be the same maiden name as *she* had. That why you picked me? she wants to know. What do you mean, I told her, coming up on me all of a sudden with this shit—excuse me. She

says, so, I'm wife number three, and Roberts number two, but when it comes to number one, honey, I ain't nothing, and next day she filed. Just all of a sudden like that. I says hey! you're number one! you're number one! But she just went on ahead and filed. Very weird lady."

Jamie said, "You in a band someplace?"

"Me? In a music band, you mean?" He took a pull of his beer, and Jamie fingered the shiny material of his jacket on the seat between them.

"Truth is, I got it at a second-hand type thrift shop," he said. "I must've been under the weather or something. Anyway, what the hell. It don't fit too bad. You know any jokes?"

"Jokes," Jamie said, trying out the word as if for the first time ever.

"Yeah, you know. Like ho ho ho."

"Right," Jamie said.

A spell of dizziness stabbed her head and then passed away. She sensed how the dead smoke of ten thousand cigarets caked the air. Out there in the blinding day the winter would sting your lungs, but here they carried with them a perpetual stifled twilight and a private exhaustion. She didn't know if she was coming awake or going crazy.

And Bill Houston said, "How come they ran out of ice cubes in Poland?"

"This a joke now?" she said.

He was irritated. "*Yeah.*"

"Okay—how come they ran out of ice cubes in Poland?"

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Are you asking me?"

"I must be. Because I sure as hell don't know the answer. You know what we need?" she said. "Ice cubes." She had a feeling she might be laughing a little too loudly.

"Hey, I'm really getting off on this whole conversation," he said with fervor. Good-fellowship thickened his voice. "Now listen: how come there's no ice cubes in Poland?"

"Because they ran out. We just went through all that."

He shook his head. "I can see you're a hard one to deal with," he said with some respect.

"No, I'm not, really." She let her gaze drift out into Ohio. Her mood went blank. "It's just that I'm going to be into some of that divorce stuff pretty soon myself."

"Don't let it get to you. You just stand there, and everything they say, you say yes. Pretty soon you'll be divorced. It don't feel no different."

"I think it might probably feel different," she said.

"I don't know," he said. "Never felt a bit different to me. Course, pretty soon, being married was the difference, and getting divorced was the usual."

"That ain't going to be my way. I'm single from here on out."

"You just keep saying that, like I did."

"You just watch. Once is enough, brother. I had a man running around on me once—that's all, that's it. Not no more. Thanks anyway."

"Well. Takes a lot of will power, stick to the same brand all the time with no variety."

"*I* stuck to the same brand! Wasn't no trouble to *me*! He only had to stay out three nights, and I said that's that. Three nights is just about three nights too many, I says to him. Wasn't long before I found out who it was, and how many times, and ever-thing. I told him, I'm hard to fool. And I am. Hey." She stared minutely forward, scrutinizing the nearer distances. "Do I look like I'm loaded?"

Bill Houston said he'd been working some place for the last few months, but she didn't believe it. He'd had something to do with oil rigging, she wasn't paying much attention. He'd saved up some money, perhaps a good deal of money, and he was lonesome. Cleveland went by like a collection of billboards.

Without actually deciding yes or no, she found she'd agreed to stay over a day in Pittsburgh and see the town with Bill Houston before travelling on to Hershey, where she intended to take up residence with her sister-in-law. But didn't Hershey come before Pittsburgh? Or didn't the place where they were supposed to change for Hershey come first? He didn't know. She didn't know, either, and by God she didn't care. She'd been on this bus five days and couldn't care less. Let her sister-in-law wait all day and all night at the bus station—let Hershey, Pennsylvania, wait one more day for her; she'd been waiting five days for Hershey, Pennsylvania.

She'd discussed killing herself, she confessed, with Sarah Miller, her best friend, who'd gone to the same high school in West Virginia. Discussed how she'd do it in the style of Marilyn Monroe. She'd clean the trailer completely, and dress up in her black negligee. She'd use Sarah's ex-husband's revolver, and Sarah would listen in the night for the shot, and then listen in case the kids woke up. She'd stand right in the doorway when she did it, so she'd be the first thing he found when he came home late from running around on her, stretched out on the floor like a dark Raggedy Ann doll with her brains in the kitchen. Because already he'd stayed out two nights in a row. That was that, that was all, so long. The note would go like this: No Thanks.

But you know who he was doing it with, Bill? Want to know who? Sarah. Old Sarah from the same high school six years ago, same graduation, same California trailer village, and now same lover, same everything, Sarah Miller. Because on the third night, she couldn't take this treatment, not for one second more. She snuck over to Sarah's to borrow the gun and there he was, sneaking home, out of Sarah's trailer with the door creaking so loud in the quiet she took it for herself, screeching, Bill, and he saw, and she saw, and Sarah in the doorway with her

panties saw, so everyone knew that everyone else knew what was what with who. If anybody knows how to handle that kind of a scene, they can tell the world on Johnny Carson or whatever and make a million. So she left. What could anybody say? Just had to pack and not look at each other and be very very quiet, even though Sarah came and was going to knock on the door but went away before she could make herself, twice; and then at nine-thirty the Yellow Cab for the Greyhound and the new life; and she'd left him standing in the kitchen with half a grapefruit in his hand. Everyone was observing her as she wept on Bill Houston's obscenely glamorized shoulder.

She went to the toilet in the back to be sick. Briefly she tried to be graceful, and then she blundered from one pair of seats to the next, commenting angrily on the erratic and inconsiderate driving around here. Wasn't that the way? Never a bus driver who knows where the road even *is*. Three feet from the door she declared she'd changed her mind and would be sick wherever she felt like it, and watch out because she probably would, any second now. Right now she'd see if she wanted to walk a bit more, or be sick first. She'd walk up and down the aisle here for a minute, to take the air and cry for a minute.

And goddamn it, didn't she have a right to cry with the kids driving her crazy for five days on a bus with the windows going by like a movie? You can give her permission to cry or just go on back to your convent with your rose in your teeth. I'll puke here if I want to or anywhere I want to, Sugar. Keep smiling but I can see what you think, the goddamn white line goes right through me every time I close my eyes five days on this bus. Go on, smile. I can see you got to make yourself smile and smile with your convent funny hat, everybody sees you getting mad just like anybody else nun or no nun. Five days on this smelly bus how long you been on? Your whole life is a bus your convent is a bus you do it with the priests and janitors