

THE ANGEL THEORY

By

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Image on cover: The Fallen Angel (1847) painted by the French artist Alexandre Cabanel. The Fallen Angel depicts the Devil when he was cast out of Heaven.

To my partner in life, my rock, my best friend and the love of my life, Mary. Forty-four years and counting that you have given me support, inspiration, love, and hope.

Chapter One

It was an email that changed my life forever. Looking back on it now, I wonder why I sent it. There was an underlying unhappiness in me which gnawed at me. Time was running out and I still hadn't forgotten the dreams that I had when I was in my youth. I guess it was only natural to try to turn the clock back to where I was when I had those dreams.

Turning 55 did not make me any more worried about getting older than I already had been. It did make me look at where I was and where I was going. I couldn't keep on doing what I was doing forever. It was just this general sense of unhappiness over where I was in my career that I couldn't shake. Now was the time to examine my exit strategy.

Being an attorney engaged in the general practice of law has more downs than ups. You're always worried about making payroll and cash flow. Even when a good case comes through the door, there is someone on the other side trying to beat your head in and stop you from winning. The other side wants to be a hero, to take away any recovery from your client, and, of course, deny you a fee.

I was tired of it. I was tired of adversaries whose egos were bigger than their abilities. Tired of chasing down fees and chasing down clients.

The one thing they don't teach you in law school is how to transfer your skills into another profession. The truth is, there is not much else you can do after you've been practicing law for 30 years. Even moving to another firm is difficult. Large firms are prejudiced against one-man operations like mine and trying to find a partner who will carry his or her own weight is next to impossible.

In the current economy, there are plenty of lawyers who are out of work and willing to work for less than the going rate. The thought occurred to me to pick up a young lawyer, hungry to learn, and bring him or her along. Let someone with more energy do the grunt work in court that really knocked you on your ass if you did it for too long. But I had gone that route before. Training someone who was clueless about what to do inside a courtroom took a lot of time and a lot of effort. Usually, it was a total loss for a couple of years. After the lawyer finally got their fee under them, they usually were on their way out the door, looking for another job, a better opportunity, more money.

If I stayed with it, what was the endgame for me? I had to figure a way out to get something out of the practice that I had built up over 30 years. None of my kids had any interest in being a lawyer. They saw the amount of work that went into it and flatly rejected the law as a profession.

I can remember sitting at my oldest son's desk in his room when he was five years old, working while he tried to go to sleep. He was afraid to go to sleep without someone in his room, so I went from lying next to him in bed while he tossed and turned, to working at the desk in his room as he got older. I thought that would comfort him, but it left a lasting impression that being a lawyer was just too much hard work. Instead of memories of how I comforted him while he struggled to sleep, he only remembers that Daddy was always working.

Looking back on it now, maybe I should have appreciated what I had, a practice that I enjoyed, sometimes, the freedom to make my own hours and being in a respectable profession. It was just getting too hard to keep doing it forever. Long days, followed by long nights. The work never seemed to end, although I should have been happy that I had enough work to keep me busy. It's just that I worked very hard for what I made. I made an okay living, I wasn't wealthy, but I wasn't poor. I provided for my family and my kids never wanted for anything in life.

Was it enough though to provide for me when I retired? I just was tired enough of it now to not want to do it forever. I saw 65 peeking around the corner, just 10 years away. That's what turning 55 will do to you, make you look back, see where you've been, worry about where you're going and how you're going to end up.

Unfortunately, unhappiness in your career bleeds over into your personal life if you're not careful. I wasn't good at separating the two.

It was a week before my birthday was when I received a return e-mail from Peter Swanteck. I hadn't seen Peter in over 20 years.

When people my age start messing with social media such as Facebook, all it does is make it makes you think about the times when you were younger, thinner, and better looking. I opened a Facebook account so I could see what my youngest daughter was up to in high school. It wasn't that I didn't trust her, but I was curious as to how this whole thing worked. Of course, she blocked me from her account. She did not feel comfortable with me looking at what her and her friends were posting.

Now that I had an account, I was afraid of being embarrassed if no one ended up as my "friend". It didn't take long for the requests to come in. First came an invitation from someone I had known in kindergarten. I couldn't believe it; my first thought was "why would I want to see someone whom I hadn't seen in over 50 years?" I accepted the friend invitation and the next thing I knew I had 30 or 40 of them from people that I had gone to high school with.

I remember high school was a particularly bad time in my life. I couldn't imagine why any of these people wanted to be my friend now when most of them wouldn't even talk to me in high school. I was a geek who was pretty much afraid of my own shadow. My group of friends was very small. Basically, it was Peters Swanteck and our mutual friend Jeff Staines. Jeff and Peter were both brilliant and I felt inadequate in their presence. All through high school, Peter and Jeff battled to see who was the smartest in our class. In the end, Jeff's finished as valedictorian and Peter finished a salutatorian. I was shocked and surprised when the rankings came out and I was number three. They were science and math whizzes, which were never my strong points. We all took the same courses at first, but I did it because I had to-- they did it because they loved it.

I always thought that they were so much smarter than I was. Of course, they were in math and science, but Jeff had trouble writing a sentence in English and Peter had trouble communicating period. He was one of those people that you could hang out with, and he wouldn't say a word to you. You had to keep the conversation going constantly, because Peter might respond if you said something interesting but otherwise, he was just content to sit there.

I remember Peter as a pretty fair athlete. He played third singles on the tennis team and could hold his own on the basketball court. To help him get ready for tennis season I went down to the high school courts and hit some balls to him that summer before our senior year. I thought I was okay at first, but then I realized that I could be competitive against Pete. By the end of the summer, I was giving him a run for his money.

In the fall of our senior year, I took him to a third set in our match before he beat me. In the spring, I finally took a match from him. I used to love playing with him because he was better than me and he brought out the best in my game. I would always try as hard as I could and when I finally broke through and beat him, he wasn't interested in playing me anymore.

That spring, Pete challenged the number one player on the team to a match for the top spot. John Perino held onto his number one spot, but just barely. Perino was an arrogant little shit that I had played Little League baseball with in fifth grade. He was the shortstop on our team while I

played first base. He did have one hell of an arm and I used to cringe when he would throw the ball to me because he threw harder than any other ten-year-old that I knew, and if I did manage to catch his throw, it would hurt my hand. I had my S&H Green stamp Mickey Mantle baseball glove that my grandmother saved her stamps and bought for me. It wasn't as good as the other boys,' but it was better than the old hand-me-down that I was using before my grandmother took pity on me.

I used to secretly take joy in the fact that Perino could only throw to first base about 50% of the time. The other time his throws would sail high or wide. Still, he thought he was the greatest thing since sliced bread. No one was cockier than John Perino. He even pitched now and then, and I remember him bragging once about not giving up any hits in an inning despite walking five runs home. The only reason he got out of the inning was that we had a five-run rule--once a team scores five runs the inning was over.

After I watched Perino beat Peter in their match, Perino strutted off the court to laugh it up with a group of his friends. Each one of them was as cocky as Perino, Brian Mann and Mark Kessler included. Perino didn't win by all that much, but they acted like Peter hadn't scored a single point against him. They were mocking Peter when they passed by, and I felt that I had to do something to save Pete's honor.

"Pretty good game, for a little shit like you," I said, trying to summon my best sarcasm. *That* was the best I could do at that time? "Little shit?" It makes me cringe to even think about it. "Want to try your luck against me some time?"

When your soon to be 18-year-old mind comes up with a sarcastic retort that you are sure cuts right through to someone's heart, the last thing that you expect is for it to break up the person against whom it was directed into uncontrollable laughter. Of course, Perino, Brian Mann and Mark Kessler thought it was hysterical. I was a nobody in that high school, undistinguished, slightly overweight, and in the shadow of both Jeff and Peter. At best I was invisible. At my worst I was a dumpy nerd. I wasn't an athlete, no one saw me on the tennis court battling against Pete, and I was pretty much afraid of my own shadow in class. Since Little League, Perino hadn't even bothered to say hello to me in the hallways.

"If you're afraid of playing me that's all right, John," I tried to recover. "But if you want a game, I'll gladly play you."

"Why should I even bother to play someone like you?" Perino snapped back.

"We all know you won't play me because you're afraid that I'll beat you."

"Fat chance."

"Well, all you have to do is play me to find out." Perino laughed again and his posse laughed with him.

"Of course, we can bet \$20 on it and make it really interesting," I added. I had been working at my uncle's landscaping business and \$20 was a whole week's salary for me. Back in 1986, this was a lot of money and a big deal for me.

"Sure, I'll take \$20 off you. I probably won't even break a sweat," Perino snapped back quickly to the laughter of Mann and Kessler.

"You're probably tired, so we can do it tomorrow," I challenged.

This is what I counted on. Perino would see me as a patsy and he had just finished beating Pete 6-4, 6-4. I don't care who you are, you're going to be tired after two sets. I am sure that he didn't think that I would even press our match to three sets and that he would be done with me six – zero, six – zero. I would've come back tomorrow and played him, but by then I would have been

thinking about what the hell I was doing, and I would have been so nervous that I would probably have psyched myself out. Going on impulse and adrenaline, I had my best chance now.

Perino started unscrewing the wooden racquet cover that he had been placing over his racket while looking at me like a wolf about to devour raw meat. Those were the days when everyone still played with wooden rackets. Metal racquets were just coming into fashion and nobody that I knew had one yet. At least Perino had Kessler and Mann to cheer him on and taunt me. Peter stayed to watch, but as usual he didn't say a word or even congratulate me if I hit a nice shot.

The one thing that I could do, and the reason that I was finally able to beat Peter, was serve. There was something about my serve that made it unhittable if I caught it just right. The problem was is that it always didn't work. When it was on, I could serve four aces in a single game. When it wasn't working, I couldn't even get a soft second serve in and I would have to lob the second serve over so slowly that anybody with moderate ability would slam it down my throat. As I went to my side of the court, I wondered which it would be.

We chose for the first game and Perino served, playing like it was a warm-up session. At first, he thought that all he had to do was hit to my backhand, which is most people's soft spot. It was mine too, but when I wasn't messing around with Pete on the court, I would be down at the grammar school hitting the ball against the school wall. That's what we did back in the 80s. There was no Internet and no cable television until I got to high school age. We had three channels, plus three local stations to occupy our time. If you were bored or needed something to do, you went outside. We didn't drink water out of bottles but out of a hose. We spent the summers playing basketball down at the basketball courts and when I was 17, I discovered that tennis could be fun.

Still Perino had a picture of me from Little League in his mind. I was never a great athlete, only adequate. Perino did have a great arm and he was athletic. He maintained that athleticism up through high school, but was a small, arrogant person, always with a smirk on his face. He was only about five foot six or seven and was very compactly built. Back in the 80s, he had his curly locks in an Afro.

I just tried to get the ball back over to him and establish a rhythm in the first game. We were tied at 40 all when he hit a shot to my forehand and I had the whole left side of the court open. I don't normally try to hit big winners; it wasn't my style and I missed more than I made. I didn't want to embarrass myself, but my instincts kicked in and I thought it was now or never. I hit a forehand winner.

Perino didn't say anything, he simply turned as if I had just hit the luckiest shot in the world and I had never intended to do what I did. I knew he was pissed off, when he tried to serve up an ace on his next serve. It went way long, and he still had a smirk on his face because he expected to come back and ace me on the next serve as well. It went wide, double fault, my game.

Now I went back and decided that if it was my day, I had to try to put everything into my serve. This was the one that I had been working on all summer, all fall, and all spring. Typically, I would get on a streak and be able to hit seven or eight in a row and then it would go away, never to come back in that match. If I had it, I might as well try to use it until I couldn't do it anymore.

As soon as I hit my first serve, I knew that I had hit it good. I placed it right in the corner of the service box and Perino reacted a second too late, making a wild swing at it and missing, while attempting not to look like I just blown one past him. He nonchalantly went to the next service box as if I hadn't just surprised the hell out of him.

In the background, Brian Mann and Mark Kessler started to taunt me.

"Lucky shot. He'll never do that again," said Brian.

But I did do it, with the next shot and the one after that. Three aces in a row.

Now Perino was standing back there, waiting, twirling his racket, and daring me to do it again. I gave it my best shot and I hit the serve just right and put it right on the line. It was clearly a good serve.

“Out!” yelled Perino.

“That was long?” I asked

“By a mile,” he replied.

“It wasn’t out, it was good. But let’s play by your rules.” I knew it was good because Mann and Kessler didn’t say a word.

Having three game points I decided to try for another big serve on my second serve. This one I placed about 3 inches inside the line in the left corner of the box when Perino was cheating to the right expecting it to go in the same place. He couldn’t recover in time to come close on his swing. Another ace. Game over. I was up 2-0.

When Perino waved at the serve as it went by him, he came up with a slight limp. He started walking to the net looking at his friends and not even looking me in the eye.

“I turned my ankle,” he said walking off the side. “We’ll have to finish this another time.”

“Just give me my \$20 now.”

“Fuck you I will.”

“Come on pussy boy. Pay up or play.” I had no idea what got into me that day. Meek and mild Bill was beating Perino and rubbing his nose in it.

“Blow me asshole. Try challenging me when I’m not tired and hurt.”

“Any time John, any time. I’ll be waiting for you if you got the guts to come play me.”

Challenging Perino, trying to play my best tennis in front of an audience, not to mention serve my best, was out of character for me. I felt like I was drunk on my own success, and I wanted to press the point. Maybe I felt that I was getting back at all those punks who always took me for granted, looked right through me, and thought I was a nobody. As Perino packed up and walked off the court, I stood there staring at him and making kissing noises at him. He never looked back and neither did his friends.

Peter stood there with me and then silently watched me pack up. We drove off in my car and I never heard from Perino again about finishing the match.

While I remember being close with Pete when we were in high school, but I don’t ever remember confiding in him or even talking with him about serious subjects. When I went away to college, he stayed in North Jersey and commuted to Newark to attend New Jersey Institute of Technology, where he studied physics. We kept in contact while we were both in school, and during one summer break from school we even took a road trip down to Virginia to camp in the Blue Ridge Mountains for a few days. He came up to visit me at my college in Syracuse, New York once.

When I went to law school Pete was in graduate school. He had been given a scholarship to Princeton to pursue his master’s and then his doctorate. After I graduated law school, I think that one of the last times that I saw him was at his wedding. Patty and I had shown up late, and we walked in on Pete’s wedding, which was being held in a Friend’s Meeting House. I had no idea about the religion or what was occurring. All I knew was that everyone was silently sitting around the bridal couple in who sat in the center of the room. When we walked in, the bride stood up and waived at us and invited us in.

After we sat down, no one said anything for a good fifteen minutes. After that long silence, someone rose and started talking about the couple, their virtues and then sat down, which was followed by an even longer period of silence. Someone else stood up and said some nice things about the bride for a few minutes and then sat down to another period of silence. I was getting worried that everyone was expected to speak and that I would have to say something, when the bride suddenly stood up and announced that they were now “married.” The wedding was over, and we moved on to the reception.

While Facebook started out as a social site for college students, old farts like me learned that it was a way that we could keep in contact with people in their family and from their past. I was reluctant to go on Facebook at first, but once I did it seems like everyone I went to grammar school with started sending me friend requests. People I barely knew from high school, and certainly didn't like, sent me friend requests. I started looking up people from my past who I did want to keep in contact with, like my old friend Pete.

I sent Peter a message through Facebook. I was a little surprised that he was on Facebook and even then, I wasn't sure that it was him. I got back a typical Pete reply, “Of course this is the same Peter Swanteck from high school. How many Peter Swanteck's do you think there are out there. Very, busy no time to talk.”

If it came from anyone else, I would've been insulted, but I knew Pete was in Southern California, having taken a position at Cal Tech as a physics professor. I looked up his bio on the Cal Tech website after I saw his affiliation on the Facebook page. After his curt message, I was not inclined to contact him, that's why I was so surprised when I got another Facebook message asking me for my personal e-mail about six months later.

Pete sent me an email with his cell phone number and asked me to give him a call and catch up on things. I learned that Peter was divorced with no children and reasonably unhappy with his teaching position at Cal Tech. I guess it was the same for all of us. I replied with an email suggesting we get together the next time I was in Southern California.

I discovered that his university office was only a short distance from my son's apartment in Los Angeles. Tommy had moved to Los Angeles after graduating college with a film degree so that he could be at the center of the entertainment industry. It had worked out reasonably well for him, at least he was working.

Since Patty and I were scheduled to go out and visit with Tommy, I arranged to have lunch with Peter. I thought it would be nice to see him and catch up. I wish that I had known what I was in for.

CHAPTER 2

I love Southern California. It is everything that New Jersey isn't. There are mountains and beautiful views. The flatness of southern New Jersey and its drab winners can't compare to the great weather in California.

My son Tom had been living in Los Angeles for about five years. After graduating college with a degree in film, he moved to Los Angeles and managed to get a job with a company that produced commercials. He started out as a production assistant and worked his way up to being a producer himself, while he wrote a screenplay on the weekends. My wife and I miss him terribly and we try to come out and visit him at least once or twice a year.

My daughter was also going to school in Southern California. The trip would be one where we could visit with both for a few days. I had been to Southern California so many times in the last five years that we were done doing the tourist thing. I would've loved to relocate to California, but who is interested in hiring a 55-year-old lawyer.

Three years ago, I did something that I still wonder at my reasons for doing so. I took and passed the California bar exam, notoriously the hardest bar exam in the United States.

Of course, coming off surgery for cancer played a part in my decision. I think that after going through such a harrowing experience, I wanted to prove to myself that I still had it. Passing the bar exam is hard enough when you're just out of law school, when things are fresh in your mind. After 30 years of practice, there are many things that are on the exam that you just don't see or use in practice. I had to go back and relearn things I hadn't looked at since law school.

Taking that bar exam was incredibly hard and the only thing that I had to show for it was a fancy certificate to hang on the wall and a \$500 yearly bar fee to keep my license active.

I gave some thought to going out to California and starting a new practice, however I remembered all the effort that it took to do so. The job market across the United States was terrible, and worse yet in California. The uncomfortable fact that I face is that no one wants to hire a 55-year-old lawyer. Sure, you have a lot of experience to bring to the table, but you are set in your ways and may not be around for much longer. Age discrimination is alive and well. You also are looking for a higher salary than some young law school graduate or even a lawyer with five- or ten-years' experience. I never really gave it a serious effort, but I looked around at some of the legal ads for lawyers and then gave up in disgust.

Our trips to California were planned around my son's work schedule as well as my daughter's University class schedule. I didn't want either of them to miss time from their pursuits. Patty and I would generally do our thing during the day and then have dinner with both at night. We would make sure we had at least a three-day weekend when we could all spend some time together. So it was no big deal to get away to have lunch with my friend from high school Peter Swantek after we arrived. Patty had known Pete but wasn't a real big fan. She begged off when I asked her to come with me, so I went to meet him alone.

He was still the tall, thin, lantern-jawed person that I remembered. His blonde hair was turning grey and there were some lines around his eyes, but he was instantly recognizable.

We met at a restaurant in near downtown LA that was known for their roast beef sandwiches, Phillip's. I suggested the place after I had seen it profiled on the Food Network. It was supposed to have LA's best roast beef sandwich, and it lived up to its billing. We waited in a long line, ordered at the counter, and watched them make our sandwiches while we waited in line. The person who took your order made your sandwich right in front of you. I ordered the roast beef double dip as did Peter. Pete looked around for a table and picked one near a group of teenagers

rather than near the rear of the restaurant where I saw an empty tables. They ignored us when we sat down and started to bring each other up to date on our lives.

Peter filled me in on the last 20 years of his life, from when he left MIT until coming to Cal Tech. After graduating college, he had gotten his doctorate at Princeton University. He had gotten a scholarship there and then elected to go into teaching, first going to the University of Rhode Island, then to MIT. He had come to Cal Tech about 10 years ago.

Pete and his wife had split up about three years ago after over 20 years of marriage. I met Sandy when Pete first started going out with her as a graduate student at Princeton. She was a bit quirky, and I remember her coming to a party at the law firm where I was clerking. The law firm had a reputation for throwing wild themed parties that everyone was expected to go to and cut loose. It was a "Mad Hatter" party where you were supposed to bring a crazy hat to wear. Both Pete and Sandy wore Easter baskets upside down on their heads, complete with plastic grass. I considered Pete a bit off center, Sandy was weirder by far.

Sandy had also been a college professor who Pete told me got bored with teaching and then bored with him. He didn't explain very much, just that they had decided to go their separate ways. No kids, dogs, or other attachments. Since then, he had gotten a dog for companionship but there was no one new in his life at the present time.

Apparently being a college professor isn't as glamorous as I had thought. I envisioned leisurely classes where you imparted your knowledge to eager young students. He described the pressures of research and publishing. Getting grants was a scramble and his colleagues at the University were always climbing over each other to get that grant money. Campus politics determined who got tenure and choice departmental positions.

Three years ago, Pete had published a modern study of Einstein's theory of relativity which had discussed the possibility of time travel. Theoretically, as one travels faster in time, time became relative, allowing someone to go into the future, or so it seemed. I, quite honestly, didn't understand what he was saying on the theoretical plane, and he lost me when he went into the difference between going backwards in time and toward the future. We had finished our lunch at that point and were working on our coffees. I think my eyes started to glaze over because he stopped suddenly, as if he realized that he was wasting his time trying to get me to understand the theory behind time travel.

"There are no laws of physics which would prevent time travel. Einstein discovered that time is like a river, which may have whirlpools and may bend like a pretzel. If the universe rotates and you were to go around the universe, you could theoretically come back before you left," he said, taking his coffee cup and stirring it with a spoon. "Look, if this is the universe," he dropped a cough drop from his pocket into the cup of swirling coffee, "This cough drop is you going around the river of time. If you go fast enough, you disappear and come back at a different point on the river.

"Traditional theory holds that it takes an enormous amount of energy, enough to create a black hole, which is not theoretically possible at the present time, to produce time travel. If you use a series of concentrated energy points, such as in a laser, and used a very specific point of reflection, much less energy would be required. That is what I argued in my paper. That it was theoretically possible now, and with existing technology.

"Well, publishing that paper was probably the biggest mistake of my career," he said. "I came under a shitstorm of criticism for it. The entire University physics department attacked me as well as everyone else in academia."

“I take it you are not going to finish that coffee now that you polluted it with a cough drop,” I said. “Why did you get attacked?”

“They ridiculed me. The idea that Einstein’s theory of relativity could apply to time travel is accepted but never seriously pursued as a practical matter in academia. If you look on the internet there are a number of crackpots who claim that they have already traveled in time. These are the same people who claim alien abductions. I was attacked from all sides and ridiculed. A few of the faculty members went to the chair of the department and questioned whether I should be removed for cause. They thought that I brought disgrace on the University.”

“And what did you do?”

“I was writing an academic paper based on one of the most revered scientists in history. He had raised issues that have never been discussed or brought to light on a practical basis, only theoretical. I wanted to have an academic discussion about them.” Pete shook his head. “I never thought that I would bring down ridicule on myself.”

“Too bad there wasn’t some way you could prove them wrong, from a practical sense,” I said.

“There is.” Pete smiled for the first time since we had greeted each other. Although it was a sad smile.

“There are practical ways to prove Einstein’s theories in the laboratory. I started working on this, but I felt that I could not ask for grant money because of the attacks that had been brought against me. I was finishing up a grant that I thought was going to run the rest of the academic year, but I felt that I could end the project sooner. I had a little bit of the money left that I hadn’t accounted for. You would be surprised Bill; in academia these grants are handed out but the accounting behind them is always a little fuzzy.”

“You mean you get the money, and you don’t have to tell them exactly what you did with it?” I laughed.

“Exactly. Sometimes you give a general accounting, but no one asks you for a profit and loss statement. Those of us in academia use these grants to supplement our income and pay ourselves a salary. It’s a pretty good racket, if you know how to play the game right.”

Peter paused and looked around. “There’s a great park a few blocks from here that we can walk to and sit and enjoy the sun,” he said. I looked at my watch and saw that I had some time before I promised Patty that I would get back to her at the hotel, but I wanted to check in with her all the same.

“Let me make a quick phone call to Patty to see if she is okay with me not getting right back.”

It turned out that our daughter had gotten out of class early and driven over to our hotel. They were just about to leave to go shopping. My afternoon was now open. We were going to meet our son for dinner and my only instructions were that I was to get back to the hotel by six.