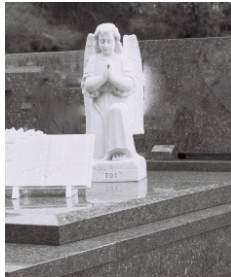


32

Guardian Angel



After Tom, Days 2–4

Friday is a freebie—permission to enjoy the freedom of unencumbered time before my parents leave and I delve into a busy work schedule. We go out to breakfast at Nancy’s Café and stroll the full length of Del Monte Beach. In the evening, Dad and I hike up to the lookout point with Oceanna bundled in her sling and watch the sun melt into the sea. I tell him how grateful I am for all that has happened. Not that Tom died. A while back, I decided his dying wasn’t a God-issue. No blame there. It is how Tom’s drawn-out death brought both he and I to life that has me praising the whole experience. Dad doesn’t say much. He’s a nodder and that works for me.

“It definitely hasn’t been all roses,” I say. “More that it’s beyond being sad or happy—bad or good. Someday, I’ll weave all of this together. Paintings . . . poetry, who knows.”

Come Saturday I’m homesick dreading Mum and Dad’s departure.

“See you soon. Maybe we’ll come for Christmas!” I say, hugging each of them with River on my hip. I’m careful not to say goodbye as if the word could break my boy. More likely, it could break me.

The door closes behind them and it feels like a vacuum. No buffer. There is so much to plan—the memorial, the job, the home, and the future I’ve been pacing in wait for. I’m tempted to fill this naked void with plans except I’m suddenly depleted of all energy. The children and I nestle into bed and I put on 101 Dalmations. All three of us are out cold before it’s over. At four a.m., turn off the T.V. and slip fluidly into dreams until seven, when River wakes me.

“Daddy came to visit, again.”

“Really?” I ask genuinely interested in what he experiences. “What did he say?”

“You’re silly, Mamma. He can’t talk,” he answers, looking at me like I’m some kind of dimwit.

“What do you mean?”

“*Maaamma*,” he says exasperated. “Like that!” He points to the ceiling light.

“Oh, I get it. He looks like light. How do you know it’s him?” I genuinely want to know.

“Because it *is*.” He runs out of the room, tired of spelling out simple concepts to a grown-up.

In truth, I’m a little disappointed not to be getting any signs myself as promised. I run through dream scenes of the night. No Tom. Maybe tonight.

Once Oceanna has nursed and we are all dressed, I suggest we walk to the corner market for cinnamon rolls and the Sunday paper. River is ecstatic. It’s been over a month since he’s been to Mal’s. Skipping ahead, down the sidewalk, he announces names of neighbors as if orienting me to the ritual being transferred over to me from Tom. At Mal’s, River announces to the guy behind the counter that his daddy died.

“Sorry to hear that little guy,” the storekeeper consoles, coming around to the front and squatting down at eye level. His hair and eyes are both sandy-brown. With the right haircut, he’d qualify as attractive.

River looks ready to climb up into his lap. I’m mortified.

“We’ll take two cinnamon rolls and a paper.” I cut in before one of us does something inappropriate.

“Sure thing.” He understands. “Two cinnamon rolls coming up!” He taps the register. I’m relieved he charges me full price.

At home, I set the baby in her swing, make myself some coffee, and River a sippy-cup of rice milk. Cinnamon rolls in-hand, we settle onto the couch.

“Now you read the funnies, like Daddy,” he instructs as he unravels his roll into a long road of pastry.

“Okay,” I concur, feeling the importance of this first with River and without Tom.

The paper isn’t my gig, so I flounder around the sections, getting distracted in search of the funnies. In my search I find Tom. Not like I didn’t know his obituary would be printed, it’s just I’d been checking the paper daily since Wednesday and found nothing. I was planning to call tomorrow and see why they hadn’t run it after I went to such lengths to get it to them the morning of Tom’s death.

As I stare at the handsome picture, taken just after our wedding four years ago, I can’t believe it’s been just a week since the awkward scene at the photography store where I had it printed.

The clerk had told me the turnaround time would be a week because I didn't have the negative. Uncharacteristically, I had started to cry.

"You don't understand," I had said. "It's for my husband's obituary."

"Oh, I'm so sorry Miss," he had frowned.

"No, he's not dead yet," I had denounced, attempting to defer the pity. It only confused him more.

I remember the clerk called over his supervisor—the fixer of all problems—and he had asked confidently: "What can I help you with Miss?"

Either I looked especially young or my widowhood was showing prematurely. No one had called me Miss since high school.

"Please," I had said. "I need this picture copied by tomorrow—maybe the day after. I can't wait a week. It is for my husband's obituary. He's dying, maybe even dead by the time I get home."

The supervisor's face had turned red and then mine did, sympathetically. "Sure, we can do that for you, Ma'am, no problem. Why don't you get home and we'll see you tomorrow."

"Thanks." I had picked up the picture the next day and sat down to write a customized obituary. Doing so reminded me who I was losing before he was gone. If the obituary didn't capture at least the flavor of his vivacious spirit, the photo would pick up the slack. The envelope had sat by the phone, ready to go, once Tom did. It went out with Wednesday's mail and here he is five days later making his debut in the Sunday paper.

"You sly dog!" I say aloud, remembering back to when Tom told me he'd communicate via the newspaper. By God he has, despite my insistence that it wouldn't be a reliable method.

"What dog, Mamma?" River muffles through a full mouth of cinnamon roll as he pulls the paper aside to see what I'm talking about.

"No dog, River, it's Daddy's picture. Just waiting for us in the Sunday paper. Here's a little story about him."

"Read it Mamma!" he begs. I do, slowly, savoring the one-time deal of an obituary.

"Now funnies," River demands the moment I'm done. We open to the comics. River looks for his favorite.

"Look Mamma guardy angels!"

There, in the one frame comic, was a woman who was waving goodbye to her son and daughter as they went out to play. She was looking up with a confident smile at two angels hovering above the children. Out of her mouth came the words: "Have a good day!" Over her head a thought bubble reads, "*All of you!*"

"Hmph. And the name Thomas means twin—two angels," I think out loud. "Looks like Daddy found a way to let us know he's officially you and your sister's guardian angel, River!" I pop off the couch and get a pair of scissors to cut out both his obituary and the comic. I'll frame them together to remind me of the possible connections between the living and the dead, should I ever doubt them.

Returning to the couch, I feel close to Tom, as if he's been sitting with us anticipating the joy we'd feel in this simple ritual. River's delight is contagious and I find

myself laughing over silly comics that had never before even lifted the corners of my mouth.

“Thank you,” I whisper to the empty side of the couch.