

Guardian Angel

A Short Story

By

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The biting wind swirled in all directions chilling him to the bone. Even the foil insulated blanket wasn't enough to preserve his feeble body heat. His clothing was soaked by the wet snow that had dropped from the sky during the night. On top of the cold and wet, he had to remain vigilant to protect himself from the wolves of the night that sniffed around his few possessions for scrapes of food and other sustenance. Sleep didn't come easy here, especially in the winter. As the golden orb peeked over the horizon, shafts of yellow light burned his eyelids forcing him to roll away, shedding the last ounce of warmth remaining in his cocoon. He tried pulling the ragged, wool cap down over his eyes.

He drifted off again. The stranglehold of sleep grasped at his consciousness; dragging him down into its depths. Dreams of home and family invaded the darkness, floating above him, bringing an evasive, but welcome contentment. For just a moment he was back. Happy and whole, he was a man again, until the floating images rose, pulling away. He wasn't ready to let them go, but something kept him grounded while his hopes, his happiness, faded into the horizon.

"Hey, Stinky, I said get up and get moving." The toe of a boot dug into his back, pushing and prodding.

The man rolled, squinting, a hand raised, trying to shield his eyes from the brilliant sun. "What day is it?" His voice was dry like the cracked earth.

"Saturday. Now get a move on." The man in blue turned and disappeared around the corner of the old brick building.

Jason Cavelli tried to push himself to a sitting position. Each movement, no matter how slight, brought on waves of shivers. The makeshift foil blanket helped, but it was no match for winter's fury. Jason scored big the day he found several rolls of aluminum foil in the dumpster behind the supermarket. They went into his duffle bag where all his possessions resided. His luck continued later in the afternoon when he found some fiberglass insulation that had blown against a

fence from a home renovation. It took the rest of the day to sandwich the itchy, pink stuff between the layers of foil. The rest, he stuffed into a small, faded-yellow tee shirt to lay his head on. Yellow was her favorite color.

Jason pulled his knees into his chest and wrapped his arms around them. Emaciated muscles screamed against the stress. The beat in his head amplified with the exertion, causing a grimace against the pain. His stomach cramped at the sweet scent of fresh bread wafting down from the chimney of the nearby bakery. His own putrid body odor turned the cramps into heaves.

Had he eaten yesterday? Last night he lifted a box of wine from the porch behind Pietros'. He watched from the shadows as the waitresses sipped from it while on break. They bragged about the innovative ways they evened the score when one of their cheap customers complained. The wine likely contributed to his pounding head.

This was Saturday. For Jason it had become the Angel's day. While the other six days of the week were nightmares, Saturday was his dream. The good kind, like the one he was having fifteen minutes ago. The one that drifted away. He reached into his duffel and felt around. His gritty fingers brushed against a few photographs with jagged edges rubber-banded together and an old wallet with an expired driver's license. Underneath the wallet was the sliver of soap wrapped in a frayed rag and an old round mirror with most of the silver scratched off. He stuffed the rag in his jacket and stowed the duffel behind the big blue dumpster before shuffling down the street.

Now came the task of finding a place to wash. In the summer it was easy. Any outdoor faucet or hose would serve. It was freezing now and those faucets would be turned off. Two blocks away was the mini-mart; his first choice. Housed in a fifty-year old corner building, bordering an inner-city Italian neighborhood, the renovated brick façade with its broad expanse of glass gave Jason the angle he needed.

This task took timing and patience. Waiting from a hidden vantage point, he watched for the clerk to be distracted long enough to slip in the door and into the bathroom. This morning the lotto was up to thirty-million and the line to buy tickets stretched to the back of the store. The lotto machine was situated such that the clerk had his back to the entrance.

Jason looked down and pushed open the glass door setting off a chime somewhere behind the counter. The tattletale went unnoticed by the frazzled clerk, punching in numbers that brought hope to those that could afford the chance. A quick left-turn and down the long isle to the green door that housed the men's room. The isle seemed to lengthen as he struggled to get to the small room; heart racing and lungs sucking air, his atrophied muscles protested against the sudden activity. As he reached for the door it felt like he was tethered to a leash. A lunging dog, whose owner yanked at the collar pulling him away. "Outside Buddy. This bathroom's for payin' customers."

Jason's legs collapsed as he was pulled along like a predator pulls its prey; the green door falling away. It hurts to be physically thrown out of a building to the street. More so when you long to be on the inside. This wasn't a first, but this time the pain radiated to the bone. He needed to be clean again. At the very least, he wanted not to stink like the sewage and garbage he dug through and slept in. Not today. Not for his new found angel. But what now? What was left? There was no resolve left to think about other options.

The south side of the store offered shelter from the wind. He slumped against the grainy brick. A sharp glint brought his eyes to the reflection in the round worn mirror. The hideous image that stared back had dead, black eyes. Its lips were gone, grown over by strands of brown weeds and ashen skin was drawn tight around the eyes like a drum. The mirror slipped through his glove-covered fingers and shattered on the concrete, bringing Jason from his trance and drawing his attention to his four-legged brethren cowering in the shadows.

The mutt's matted fur was soaked from lying in the snow. Dark blood crusted his muzzle, probably from fighting over a scrap. Its posture told its tale; front legs stiff, rear haunches ready to bolt, ears raised, lips curled, ready to peel back to make way for biting teeth and tail tucked tightly between its legs. The collar around the dog's neck was a remnant of prouder, happier days. Life on the street took its toll no matter what species. The street causes change.

Jason pulled off a glove and held out a boney hand. The mutt inched forward, never changing posture; ready to bolt. Jason whispered something; something encouraging. The dog sniffed at the air, inching forward then back until finally it was close enough to smell the outstretched hand. Jason moved, ever so slightly, to pet the animal. In a blur, the trust was broken and dirty teeth tore into the thin flesh of his fingers. A muffled cry echoed through the alley as he drew his hand in, burying it under his other arm. Tears glistened in his eyes. The pain ran deep.

Long minutes passed. The sun edged higher in the sky, pulling the temperature up with it. He could sit here, or there. It didn't matter, really. The line would get long at St. Cecilia's so it would be better to sit there. There was usually plenty of food, but the chairs would disappear quickly and he was tired of sitting on the ground. He really wanted to be clean for this, but that wasn't going to happen. Unwrapping the sliver of soap, he used the tattered rag to wrap around his bleeding hand and rubbed the bit of soap against the skin and hair on his face. It was all he could do to try to cover the stench.

The walk to St. Cecilia's was uneventful. No street toughs were out this early to hassle him and the neighborhood was now accustomed to the dregs of the earth filing along on Saturday mornings. On the surface, the streets hadn't changed much since his childhood. But as a child, he hadn't been aware of the dark side of life. Things were all sugar and spice way back then, but that was a lifetime ago. Several seedy bars moved in, followed by the adult video store. Now there was even a pawn shop. He wasn't sure if the pimps and drug dealers brought in the businesses or if the businesses brought the clientele.

Back in the early '60s St. Cecilia's was healthy and relatively wealthy. The hard work of the community had built the magnificent new church. The community grew old and so did the parish; dying of old age and a radical change in morals. The schoolyard once ensconced by a small fence was now encased in razor wire. The buildings were in dire need of tuck-pointing, the rectory gutters were rusted and hanging at odd angles and thick paint curled from the window frames. The windows and doors in the rotted school were boarded shut. Jason had tried to seek shelter there on several occasions, but the young gangs patrolled the area, like they owned the place.

The line outside the church hall was still small, running only halfway down the side of the building. Most of the familiars were there; Raggedy Anne, as he referred to her, laid on the concrete next to her corroded wire shopping cart, Jed Clampett sat behind her, propped up by the building; his shaking hand outstretched for money as if frozen by time. The Tasmanian Devil was last in line, grumbling to nobody about the war.

The sight of the steeple brought a throb to his temples. For the past four weeks this is what he lived for. There was no explanation for his connection to her. No logical reason for the way he felt. It wasn't the food, it was her. Their interludes were of the briefest sort. A smile here, a hello there. Last week, she asked how he was doing and introduced herself. Dorothea she had said. The lilt in her voice carried a tune in his mind.

A long shadow broke the sunlight beating on his face. Jason's eyes lifted, trying to make out the tall, silhouetted figure. The figure spoke in a loud solemn voice. "The mission will open in twenty minutes. Please take the time to pray to the Lord for providing."

Father Joe Petrovich started every Saturday morning with the same plea. A plea that fell on deaf ears. Where had the Lord been in their time of need? Faith didn't exist on the street. Hope was a cancer that only led to one place; disappointment. Death was a means to an end. An end of suffering.

Twenty minutes. Twenty minutes is an eternity. Twenty minutes, alone in one's thoughts with no hope, no happiness, no nothing. There was a time, not too long ago, that twenty minutes passed in a flash. Jason took his place in line behind old Fred Sanford; a black guy that lived in a gutted car in the next alley. Sanford eyed Jason with the same mistrust that all homeless people viewed the world with. The homeless get used to being eyed with mistrust, even from their own.

"If'n it gets any colder, I'm, jus' checkin' out."

The gravely voice came from Fred Sandford's face, but the gray wool on his face masked his lips. Jason sat on the hard concrete and leaned back against the cold rock that formed the foundation of St. Cecilia's.

“Ah said I was jus’ gonna check out. I’m jus’ too tired.”

Jason studied Fred’s face. The eyes were dark, the weathered chasms of his face gave him the look of a Halloween ghoul; one of those latex corpses that normal people put out on their front porches.

“I know how you feel,” Jason said in a soft voice. He was beyond offering words of encouragement. As his mind began slipping into the dark, the gong of the church bell high overhead startled him, washing his soul with the tiniest bit of joy.

The line moved slowly as Jason futilely tugged at his worn clothing like some young executive on his way to meet the CEO. He pulled a crusty comb from his back pocket and yanked it through the tangles of his dark hair, wincing whenever it caught a knot. In front of him, Fred continued his diatribe on humanity and how he wasn’t long for this world. When the warm air struck his face, Jason no longer heard anything. His mind was set and his eyes scanned the church hall for her. She had to be here.

The hall served as a gymnasium and theater. A well-worn upright Aeolian flanked the side of the stage that was decorated with paper-machete for a set that looked to be a Shakespearian play. Overhead, the basketball goals were pulled to the ceiling and faded banners hung down professing the ‘75 and ‘76 Knights as city soccer champions. Stacks of torn gymnastic mats were stacked in the corner to make way for the rows of white plastic-covered folding tables and chairs.

The aroma of sausage gravy and fried ham lifted his spirits a little. There was the sour undertone of body odor and garbage that was hard to get used to. He picked up a metal tray, plastic fork and knife and the one napkin they were allowed to take. One biscuit, a stingy portion of gravy, some powdered eggs, a slice of ham and this would be his best meal of the week. She wasn’t there in the serving line, but she never was before. In the past, she just seemed to show up.

He hurried to a table near the side entrance to the stage. That seemed to be where she appeared from in the past. He situated himself so he could stake out the door and easily be seen. His heart raced as the tray dropped from shaking fingers hitting the plastic-lined table and splattering milky-white gravy over his pants. Wiping the mess from his dirty dungarees with the napkin, he made up his mind that today was his day. He would strike up a conversation with Dorothea. If he didn’t have a heart attack first. Feeling the pounding in his chest, that was a distinct possibility.

Minutes passed like hours as Jason picked at the tasteless food, wiping his ratty beard with the napkin after each bite. The turnout today was heavy and he didn’t want to get pushed out of the door too quickly. Perhaps she wouldn’t show up. Maybe she was working in the back. Maybe she didn’t like the look in his eyes last week. The negative thoughts piled high as a mountain. Jason looked down at his plate. A few biscuit crumbs floated on a tiny portion of runny eggs.

“How are you doing Jason?” The voice carried over his shoulder like a light breeze.

He turned and raised his gaze to meet hers. Light from the ceiling spread around her oval face and glistened off her blond hair. His angel had appeared. The fork rattled off the plastic plate, falling from his trembling fingers.

“He—He—Hello Dorthea.” He never stuttered.

She strolled around the table and pulled out a folding chair across from him. The knee-length dress flowed behind her as she walked and the flip in her hair bounced in stride.

“It’s getting cold outside. Do you have a warm place to stay?” She sat and smoothed the rumples from her dress with the palms of her hands.

“I’ve got a place. It’s... It’s not exactly warm, but it’s out of the wind.” His voice showed the shame that came with the territory of the streets.

“Jason. You do have a place? I mean an inside place, don’t you?” Her brow furrowed as her hands moved, ever so slightly, toward his. Something seemed to stop her compassion.

“Uhh, no. It’s more like I’m camping.” The slight smile was mostly covered by the unruly hair on his face.

This time her hands reached out and touched his arm. The feeling was electric. The love poured into his soul bringing warmth with it.

“Can I ask you something, Jason?” The pity on her face turned to concern.

“Sure.”

“If you’re uncomfortable, you don’t have to answer.” She paused. Maybe she was uncomfortable. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?” He squirmed in the chair, which suddenly seemed hard as a rock.

“You’re different than the others. I can tell.”

“Different? I don’t think so.”

“Jason, most of these people are.... I don’t know how to put it.” She leaned across the table and whispered. “They’re bums. They chose this. But you. You didn’t.”

“Nobody here chose this. Nobody in their right mind would do this to themselves.” His eyes lowered to his empty plate.

“See, that’s what I mean. I don’t mean to sound cruel, but most here can’t put a sentence together. You’re better than this. You shouldn’t be here.”

Jason rubbed his forehead with callused dirty hands. “Dorthea, two years ago I had a life. I had a job, a home, wife and a kid. I made a mistake and lost it all. This is what I have now. I did this to me and it’s my punishment.”

Her eyes glistened and a mascara-stained tear rolled down her cheek. She picked up a paper napkin and dabbed at it. “Your punishment?”

A sharp pain radiated square in the middle of his head. “Yes. My mistake. My punishment.”

“You remind me of someone, Jason. Someone I knew long ago. He was strong and full of life. When things went bad, he would crumble, but only for a moment. Then he always managed to bring himself back.” Dortehea’s hand slid down to grasp his. Her skin was incredibly soft.

“I wish I had those qualities.”

She stroked the back of his hand, sucking the breath out of his body. “I think you do. I believe in you.” She stood suddenly. “I— I have to go. Please, please Jason. God has forgiven you. You need to do the same. You’re better than this.” She turned and disappeared behind the stage, but her sadness stayed, covering him like a blanket.

“Wait.” He tried to stand, stumbling over the chair. She disappeared through the doorway that lead to the back of the stage.

Was she right? Had he served his time? Did Kathy forgive him? Did God forgive him? Could he forgive himself?

He wandered back into the cold; barely feeling its tight grip on his lungs. When he looked up he was standing at the door to the parish rectory. He saw his hand reach for the doorbell. It seemed to act independent of his mind. Like he was no longer in control. Somewhere behind the hand-carved oak door, baritone pipes rang out his presence. He tried to will his body to turn and flee, but the distant sound of footsteps kept him firmly rooted.

There was the metallic sound of latches being thrown before the big door creaked open. Father Joe’s dark figure loomed in the narrow opening. His young face was hard to read. “May I help you?” His voice was soft, a mixture of compassion and concern.

“Father. I need to talk to someone. I really need to talk to somebody.” After a long hesitation, Jason continued, “Please. I’m not asking for a handout. I want... I need my life to change.”

“Come in, my son.” The priest turned and held out an inviting hand, pointing to the dimly lit study off the foyer. Dark-stained bookshelves lined one wall while the other three were covered in pictures of past parishioners. A massive ornate cherry desk dominated the center of the cozy room. “Have a seat.” Father Joe chose not to sit behind the desk, but took the seat next to Jason instead. “I’m Father Joe. What can I do for you, Mr....?” The priest shifted in his chair wearing a look of wariness.

“Jason. Jason Cavelli. Look, Father, I know what you must be thinking. About me that is. But please hear me out”

“Jason, I’m sorry if I gave the appearance that—”

“It’s okay Father. I’m used to it.”

“Forgive me if I offend you, but, you don’t sound at all like the other homeless people we get here.”

“Just how do the homeless sound, Father? How many of us do you really talk to?” His words hit the priest square in the face. “I’m sorry. Here I am intruding in your home and I’m insulting you.”

“It’s okay. You’re right.”

“No. You’re right Father. I understand how we are perceived.”

“What can I do for you Jason?”

“I grew up in this parish. My parents lived three block from here until they passed.” Jason paused, placing his face in his hands. He had already talked more today than he had in a year. “I want—no, I need a change. I need some help to change.”

“I’m listening.” The priest’s voice was soft and reassuring. He passed a bottle of water from a refrigerator under the desk to the ragged man sitting across from him. “Tell me what I can do for you.”

“I’ve been homeless for two years now. Before that, I had a wife and son, a nice home and a good job as a senior accountant.”

Father Joe’s eyes widened. “What happened to you, my son?”

Jason took a long swallow of the cold water. It felt exquisite, chilling his throat. “It was September 18, 2004 and we were late for our son’s soccer game. It was my turn to drive and I had four other boys in the van. They were all hyped up and...well, being boys. I turned for just a second to quiet them down.” His eyes had that familiar burning. “I ran through a red light.... It...it all happened so fast. The next thing I remember was pulling my wife from the burning wreck.” Tears streamed down his face and he fought to draw air into his lungs. Father Joe offered him a tissue.

“Take your time, Jason. I know this is hard.”

“I could hear the boys screaming.” His words came out in bits, between the sobs wracking his body. “I couldn’t get to them. My boy. I heard him screaming, ‘Daddy. Daddy.’ I tried to get the door open. I failed him. I failed my son. Oh, God. Forgive me.”

Father Joe reached across the space between them and touched Jason’s shoulder as he was bent over, crying. “It’s okay, Jason. God forgives you.”

A long silence ensued as Jason collected himself, the sobbing subsided. “My son and the other four boys died. My wife, Lisa, and I weren’t hurt; physically. It took twenty-minutes for the firemen to put out the fire. They made us leave the scene before they removed the burnt bodies. We never saw our son again.” He fought back more tears and sniffed. “I wasn’t charged with a criminal offense. It was ruled an accident, but four months later the law suits from the

other parents broke us. Their stares and words did far worse. I used to sit by these people on Saturday afternoons and laugh with them while our sons played soccer. They hated us. I mean in the worst way. I know they wanted us dead.”

The priest shifted in his seat, wringing his hands nervously.

“We lost our home and had to sell our furniture. We moved into a small apartment. With my wages being garnished, I sold the car. Lisa tried to find work, but she was an emotional mess. Hell, I was too. At work, my performance had dropped off. I couldn’t concentrate and made some costly mistakes. Three months later, I was fired. Every night, Lisa cried herself to sleep in my arms. I was in a downward spiral and being sucked under. My arms were getting too tired to pull myself up.” Jason couldn’t look into the priest’s eyes anymore. He had gone through this story a million times, but never spoke the words out loud.

“On August 18th, 2005, I left Lisa in that rat hole of an apartment to hunt for a job. Any job. I came back around four in the afternoon. I thought the place was empty. I thought she left me. Oh God, I wish she would have left me.” Tears once again streamed down his face. “I went into the bathroom and there she was. In the tub. The water was crimson with her blood. Her beautiful brown hair stained red. Our one kitchen knife was on the floor with a letter and an eviction notice.”

“I’m so sorry, Jason.”

“She...She couldn’t take anymore. She wrote that she wanted to overdose on drugs, but there wasn’t enough money to buy any. Father, she was deathly afraid of knives. She used scissors to cut the food with. I can’t imagine the fear she had cutting her wrists.” He sat in silence for a moment. “I...I tried to go with her. But I didn’t have her courage. I wasn’t man enough to draw the knife over my wrists. I failed everyone.” There were no more tears to shed.

“Suicide wasn’t the answer, Jason.” Father Joe stood and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Come with me.”

They walked to the church hall where the line for breakfast had dwindled to the last stragglers and descended a dark stairway, ducking under large pipes and cobwebs. The smell of mold permeated the moist air as the priest wound through old furniture, stage props long forgotten and stacks of rotting boxes. Finally they came to a locked door and Father slid a rusty key into the handle and jiggled it until it turned. The door groaned with age as it swung open on rusty hinges.

“It’s not much, but it was the caretaker’s room. We haven’t had a caretaker for twenty-five years. There’s a bathroom in the corner, a bed and that’s about it.” He inspected the room in the feeble glow cast from the naked bulb dangling in the center of the small room. “I’ll have our house mother gather some fresh linens and towels and put together some toiletries.”

“Father, I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Don’t let me down, Jason. Don’t let yourself down. In the far corner there are clothes donated by the parishioners. Find some things that fit.”

Tears gathered in Jason’s eyes again. “I won’t let you down.”

“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.” Father Joe waited for the music, then genuflected and started down the long aisle behind the altar boys. In the back of the church, among the sparse congregation was a familiar face beaming back at him. With a nod of the head, the new Jason Cavelli followed the priest back to the rectory.

As the priest removed his scapula and robes he spoke, “Jason, you look well. Take a seat and tell me how you are doing.”

“Things are getting better, Father. I’m working as a temporary accountant with a small manufacturer and it could lead to a permanent position. I have a week until I get my second check and I can move out of St. Mary’s shelter and get my own apartment.”

“That’s wonderful news.” The priest dropped into the worn leather chair next to him.

“Father. I have another reason for visiting. You see, there is...well was, a woman that works here during the Saturday breakfasts. Her name is Dorthea. She.... She is the reason I made it back on my feet. I want to thank her for saving me, but I’ve been to the Parish Hall the past two Saturdays and can’t find her.”

“What did you say her name was?”

“Dorthea.”

“Jason, I know the volunteers. There is no Dorthea. What did she look like?”

“She’s blond, she looks young, but I got the feeling she was a little older than that. She always wore a dress.” Jason stood and paced the room.

“Jason, all of our volunteers are seniors. They are all older women and none are blond.”

“I know what I saw Father.” There was a sharp edge to his voice. “I talked to her. She was my encouragement to live again. I need to find her.”

“I’ll call Mrs. Grey and ask if we had a volunteer I didn’t know about.” He picked up the phone and punched at the buttons. Jason stopped pacing and turned his attention to the row of pictures that covered the wall as the priest whispered into the telephone. Something in a black and white photo caught his eye. It was a light-haired woman with a familiar flipped hairstyle. The eyes. The smile.

“Jason, I’m sorry--.

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“Father. This woman.” He tapped on the glass. “Who is this woman?”

“Let’s see.” Father Joe counted the rows and then lifted the large frame from the wall and looked at a list taped to the back. “It looks like her name is Dottie Cavelli.” His eyebrow lifted at the name. “A relative?”

“My mother’s name was Dottie.”