

# WAITING FOR ANGELS

*By Chip Cassano*

“Tell the angel story,” his daughter, Rachel, says over the telephone, and Tom Gellman smiles. He doesn’t ask, anymore, why this is the only story she wants to hear. It is a simple request, easily granted, and he is grateful for it. His wife’s voice in the background is clipped, louder than necessary. He is supposed to hear her.

“Come on, Rachel,” she says, “it’s time for bed.”

Gellman closes his eyes. Here it is again.

“Let me talk to Mommy,” he says. The teakettle on the stove gives out a tentative bleat, and he tilts his head to trap the telephone against his shoulder. He switches off the gas burner in the tiny kitchen, takes down a teacup, blows a smudge of dust from inside, wipes it on his shirt. He pours hot water and stirs in a teaspoon of cream for his stomach. His wife’s voice startles him.

“It’s almost ten o’clock here, Tom. She has school tomorrow.”

Gellman balances the teacup on his palm, bites his lip. She is not his wife anymore, not really. It’s been three years since they sold the house in Albany and she took the children and moved to California, near to her parents. She isn’t coming back. He suspects that she is, in fact, seeing someone else. His signature is all she needs to finalize the divorce.

“Loren, please,” he says, “she wanted a bedtime story. I thought . . .”

“Tom, why can’t you call at a reasonable time? You know she has school.”

What to say? That sometimes he calls only to reassure himself that there are other people alive and awake in the world?

“I had to work late, Loren, and I promised Rachel . . .”

“Work was never that important to you.”

“You heard,” he says, and, when she doesn’t respond, he feels his anger building. “It’s true, okay? I lost the marketing job—that marvelous job that you got me with all your connections. I’m back working in the bookstore. But this is not about me, Loren, about us. I am her father.” He pauses, squeezes his hand into a fist.

"Tom, I don't want to have this conversation now," she says quietly. "Is Christian home?"

Gellman shakes his head. She is a lawyer—the Brown half of Brown & Salter—and every now and again she surprises him by just how good she is. It used to bother him that she chose to keep her own name.

"I was shouting," he says. "I'm sorry. But you already know."

"I'm not playing a game," Loren says. "Is he there?"

"He'll be home soon. He's out with his friends,"

Gellman says, hoping that this is true.

"It's past midnight there."

"Loren, what can I do? I mean, if he just goes . . ."

"Tom, it's just, you know—that's how it started here. First he was staying out late, nothing more than that, and then the police were here."

"I know," Gellman says, suddenly desperate, "Loren, I know." And he wants to say to her—so many things. That he is baffled by his son and how to approach him. That he never meant for life to happen as it has—what man does? That he never meant to be so unsettled, so unsure, at forty-six years of age. Perhaps more than anything he wants to ask which part of it, if any, is his fault. There were so many things they could have done differently, but which were important?

He says nothing, of course. He closes his eyes and makes his voice level. "Can I please just talk to Rachel?" he asks. "Please." He rests his head against the doorjamb and waits.

"Tell the rest of the angel story," his daughter says immediately. Her voice sounds small and far away, and he imagines her curled in her bed, face to the wall, the telephone buried among her blankets and stuffed toys.

"I'll tell it," Gellman says, "but then you'll have to promise to go right to sleep."

"I promise."

He returns to the front room, balances the teacup on a stack of old magazines on the end table, switches on a lamp, and settles into the fraying recliner. It belonged to his father, and it is the only piece of furniture Gellman kept after he and Loren sold the house in Albany.

"It happened when I was little," he begins, "younger than you, and your Aunt Carol was only four years old." He hears his daughter sigh contentedly and he marvels, as always, at how different she is from her brother, her mother—even from him.

"Is it dark there?" Rachel asks.

"It's dark," Gellman says.

The story is a simple one. From time to time in retelling it, Gellman has stirred an old memory and wonders if he might not even have created new ones. He has heard that this is possible, but he doesn't suspect that he is guilty of outright invention. In many ways he feels that it would be easier for him if he were.

Gellman's mother died the summer he turned six. She was a warm and calmly purposeful woman, and her death left Gellman's father despairing and adrift. He lost his job at the local feed store, and turned to doing odd jobs to support the family.

"Grandpa was lonely," Gellman says, knowing that this is enough explanation for his daughter. The yard went over to dandelions and crabgrass, and their house—a huge, decaying, lemon-yellow Victorian—fell into disrepair. The foundation had cracked and shifted, and doors swung crazily in the canted frames. The windows leaked, the sills were dark with mildew, and the walls below them were water-streaked and yellow. At night, Gellman could track the movements of Mirabella, the upstairs boarder, by the tortured creak of the floors.

For some months, it seemed that the presence of Mirabella was all that held the household together. She moved in shortly after Gellman's mother died, and agreed to cook and clean in exchange for lowered rent. Soon, though, she was ironing the children's clothes, cutting their hair, and overseeing their evening prayers. She even accompanied them to church, oblivious to the stir she caused with her prayer beads and florid makeup.

At home, she murmured sympathetically whenever she saw Gellman's father.



"Pray," she told Gellman, in her accented English. "Your papa has a good heart. Pray the Virgin gives him peace. Pray for a miracle."

"So I prayed," Gellman says to his daughter. That is how he always tells the story. His life would challenge him, of course—the fallacy of post hoc reasoning. But

Sunday paper, spread across his lap, slid to the floor. Mirabella stood up, unperturbed, gathered her mass of black hair before her, twisted the water from it, flung it back across her shoulder, and stepped from the bath. Water ran from her in streams and pooled in her footprints. She walked to the hall staircase and opened the

door. She did not look back at Gellman's father, and he continued to stare for several moments after she was gone.

"Grandpa fell in love with Grandma Mirabella not long after that," Gellman says. He knows that someday his daughter will understand this story differently, and hopes she forgives him this little euphemism. The two were married in the fall. It caused something of a scandal in the Adventist community, of course. Gellman's father was removed from his position as head elder of the church, but he was unperturbed. The two were married more than

thirty years, and even on his deathbed, he called Mirabella "my angel."

"Rachel?" Gellman says, but she is already asleep. She almost always is by the time the story ends. He can hear the sigh of her breath. Rather than hang up the telephone, he pushes back the chair and closes his eyes.

The small apartment is silent, and he listens to the tick of the mantel clock beside him and the whisper of his sleeping daughter's breath, a full continent away. He waits patiently, as he has for years, but there is no sign, no heavenly messenger to tell him whether this is his birthright.

It is past 1 a.m. when a key finally turns in the lock and the door swings open. Gellman sits up, covers the mouthpiece of the telephone with his hand.

"Chris?" he says, quietly. "I'm in here, son."

The boy comes cautiously into the room.

"Everything all right?" Gellman asks.

"I guess." Gellman waits to see if he will say more. Nothing.

"I didn't know where you were. Your mother was worried," Gellman says, motioning to the telephone.

MIRABELLA WAS A VISION—A MONUMENT OF WOMANHOOD, HER BODY BROWN AND CURVED AND POWERFUL—AND SHE CAME DOWN THROUGH THE CEILING WITH A LITTLE SHOUT, STILL SITTING IN HER BATH.

would it be more honest to explain it otherwise? His father was lonely and sad and adrift, for reasons more complex than Gellman could grasp, and Gellman himself was frightened. So he prayed—to Jesus, as he had been taught—but still he asked for a miracle.

He prayed at church on Saturday. On Sunday morning, Mirabella was upstairs readying her bath, preparing for mass. The soft maple of the floor, swollen by water and riddled with decay, creaked and shifted. Some balance was overreached, a threshold crossed. A tiny popping noise from the living room ceiling heralded her arrival. A wisp of plaster dust trickled down, then the ceiling in the living room gave way with a crashing roar.

Mirabella was a vision—a monument of womanhood, her body brown and curved and powerful—and she came down through the ceiling with a little shout, still sitting in her bath. The heavy, enameled bathtub smashed down into the hardwood of the living room floor and stuck fast. Plaster dust hung in the air, and a thin stream of water played over her from above where the fixtures had torn away.

Gellman's father rose slowly, transfixed. It was easy to forget that he was a young man still. The

"Were you?" the boy asks.

"I—of course," Gellman says, startled. "Of course I was." His son is watching him narrowly. In the dim light of the table lamp, the boy's hair, bleached blonde, looks almost as Gellman remembers it—a soft, caramel brown. The shadows soften the angles of his face, and his oversized clothes make him seem younger, somehow, more fragile.

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"WERE YOU?" THE BOY ASKS.  
"I—OF COURSE," GELLMAN SAYS, STARTLED.

"Well, don't be," he says. "I'm okay." He steps to the kitchen, pulls open the refrigerator door, shuts it. "Hey ho," he says. "I'm beat."

"Take the bed if you want," Gellman says. "I'll be up a while."

The boy hesitates. "Thanks."

Gellman watches as his son disappears into the bedroom.

"Sleep well," Gellman says. There is a lump in his throat. He leans back in the recliner again, the telephone still wedged against his ear. He scrubs his face with his hand, lets his gaze wander across the room. There are pictures of Christian and Rachel, of course, and a small one of Gellman and Loren with the children between them.

Above them all, on the false mantel, Gellman's father and Mirabella, side by side, their heads almost touching, smile gently, bravely, into the dim light of the apartment. Luck or providence? With so much depending on the answer, even they could not have told him. But Gellman knows that it is not evidence that he has been searching for all these years; it is courage.

His wife's voice calls him back from his reverie.

"She's asleep," Loren says.

"Yes. Well."

"I don't know how you do it," she says. He doesn't respond. He has never told his wife the angel story. Now he wonders if it would explain anything at all.

"Chris is home," he says, finally. "I—I'm going to talk to him."

"I tried," she says, "but he's not—or something's not . . ."

"I know."

"I know it's not your

fault, Tom, the way he is. I know that."

"It's okay."

"You'll try with him, though, won't you?"

"I will," he says. "Whatever I can."

"Tom—," she says, and hesitates. "Thank you."

It is as much as he can expect and, right now, more than he has asked for. He doesn't realize that she is gone until he hears the buzz of the dial tone.

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