

ANGEL

Three times I've worn these black shoes and this dark suit. Each time for a funeral. Today's was the worst.

Sitting on the side of the bed with my suit jacket and black tie tossed haphazardly behind me, I untie the black shoes and pull them off, letting each one fall to the floor with a rug-muted "clunk." I raise one leg and rest it on its opposite knee, but the simple task of taking off a black sock seems suddenly impossible. The raised leg falls to the floor, and I lean forward with my head down, forearms resting on my thighs, hands clasped loosely between my knees. I stare absently at the castaway shoes, but my mind can only conjure the smiling face of my beautiful granddaughter Christine. The black shoes and dark suit have been for her, dead at eight years old. Struck by a car.

Heartbroken and confused, I sit hunched on the side of the bed, torn between rage and despair, but without the energy to act out either of these. Parents should never have to bury their children. To bury a grandchild is unthinkable. Tears blur my vision, so when I sense movement in the room, I must rub them away in order to focus. But then, as my surroundings gradually come into focus, I involuntarily recoil in disbelief. Sitting on the side of the bed, I am directly in front of a closet door with a full-length mirror on it. As I look at the reflection in that mirror, I can see Christine sitting next to me on the bed. Reflexively, I give my head a little shake and squeeze my eyes shut tightly, but when I open them, the image is still there: Chrissy and I sitting next to each other on the side of the bed. I look away from the mirror and down next to me where the reflection shows Chrissy should be, but I see nothing there. Then I look back at the mirror,

and there she is, sitting next to me and smiling. As if I were trying to catch someone sneaking up on me, I snap my head back and forth between the bed and the mirror, but always with the same results: Chrissy in the mirror. No Chrissy on the bed.

With equal parts of fear and fascination, I push myself up from the bed and start walking toward the mirror, but as I watch, I see that Chrissy's reflection doesn't move when I do. In the mirror, she's still sitting on the bed smiling at me, but when I look back at the bed itself, she's still not there. Then I start fooling around, standing in front of the mirror, dancing around, waving my arms, and making faces, but all I see is Chrissy sitting on the bed watching my antics and giggling that achingly familiar giggle of hers.

Slightly winded from all my jumping around, I walk back and sit down on the bed again, facing the mirror. And there she is once more in the reflection, sitting next to me, this time as close as she can get, and hugging my arm with both of hers. I feel nothing.

"What in the world...?" I say out loud.

"Hi, Grampy." Chrissy's voice says back to me.

"Chrissy?" And I get up again and walk toward the mirror, but just as before, her reflection stays on the bed. "Chrissy? Is that you?" I reach the mirror and actually touch it, thinking illogically that I can somehow reach in and make physical contact with her. Logically, however, my hand bumps the mirror, reasserting itself as a solid piece of human construction and not some magical fairy tale portal.

"Well... Yes, it's me. Sort of."

Dumfounded, I edge backwards toward the bed and sit down on it as her reflection slides over to make room for me. All I can muster now is a bewildered, "I... I don't understand."

“You’re not really supposed to, Grampy, and even I’m not really sure how this all works, but...guess what?”

“What?”

“I get to be your Guardian Angel!”

“Guardian what?”

“Angel, Grampy. For the rest of your life, I’m going to be your Guardian Angel!”

I am silent for a long moment, trying to make some sense out of what I’m seeing and hearing. Chrissy’s image smiles back at me, and I’m about to speak again when she suddenly disappears without warning.

“Who in the world are you talking to in here?” My wife has come silently into the room in curious response to the sound of my voice.

The truth would be too incredible for both of us, so I reply evenly, “No one. I wasn’t talking to anyone. I guess I’m so upset about this whole thing that I’m just wondering out loud. Talking to myself. Trying to get some answers.”

When I say this, she comes over and sits down on the bed next to me and puts a comforting arm around my shoulder. “There are no answers. You know that. We’ve been over all of this so many times.” She leans towards me and gives me a chaste kiss on the cheek. “And remember, you need to be strong for the children,” she cautions me. “Think of what they’re going through.”

Off the bed now and walking toward the door, she says over her shoulder, “Now hurry up and finish getting changed. We need to get over to their house as soon as we can.”

The instant she's gone from the room, Chrissy's image is back, sitting next to me on the bed where a moment ago my wife had sat. "Part of the deal," she says, "is that nobody but you can see me, and a lot of times even you can't see me. Only in this mirror when no one else is around, I think."

"And...and what are you supposed to do as my...Guardian Angel?"

"Well, the way I understand it, it's sort of up to me to keep you safe and happy and to make sure you don't mess up any more than possible."

"But how can that work? Look what happened to you. Where was your angel?"

"I didn't have one yet. Mommies and Daddies are supposed to be angels for their kids, but sometimes things happen that they can't stop."

I actually can't believe I'm having this conversation with a reflected vision of my dead granddaughter, but something seems to compel me to stay on the bed and keep talking. "So then why aren't you with your mommy or your daddy? Why me?"

"The only thing I know is that when little kids die, they get to be Guardian Angels for someone who they loved a lot and who loved them a lot back. Maybe you're the one who loved me the most. And that's why I get to be your angel"

"Are little kids the only Guardian Angels?"

"I really don't know. I just know about me."

"Does everybody get a Guardian Angel sometime?"

"Grampy!" It isn't irritation in her voice. It's more like a mother's patient voice to her small child. "I just said that I really don't know and that I just know about me...and you!"

"I'm still confused. How do you know all of this stuff? Who told you?"

Chrissy's image in the mirror smiles and then laughs that wonderful laugh again.

"Grampy! It's not like it is over there. You just know things. That's all. You don't wonder or worry or try to decide. You just do what you know."

"So what do you do? And what am I supposed to do?"

"You just go on and live you're normal life, and I'll be around to watch out for you."

"It's that simple?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Will I see you?"

"Like I said, only in this mirror when you're all alone. And only if you call me."

I can't resist asking, "So how long will you be with me? I mean, how many years do I have left?"

Chrissy's reflection smiles at me, and she says, "I don't know, Grampy. I'll only know that when the time comes."

"And then we'll be together?"

"No, Grampy. When you die, then I get to go be a Guardian Angel for someone else. That's my job forever now."

"And me? What happens to me?"

"I don't know that either, so I guess you'll have to wait and see. But I think it will be nice...But I don't know." With that, her image in the mirror stands up and looks at me. "Now finish getting dressed and go help mommy and daddy. You'll make them feel better, I know."

And then she is gone from the mirror just as quickly as before.

I do finish getting changed, and we hurry over to Chrissy's mom and dad's house, and later, when we are about to leave, both my daughter and my son-in-law take me aside separately and tell me how much better they feel knowing we're around. I assure them that we will be visiting often, and then we go home where I hurry to the bedroom, sit on the side of the bed facing the mirror and call out quietly, "Chrissy?". Instantly she appears in the mirror, sitting next to me on the bed. "You were right about us making your mom and dad feel better."

"Well, of course I was. Remember, mommy is still your kid. So what do you expect? You still need to watch over her sometimes too, you know." And she smiles and waves. "Have a peaceful night." And then she is gone.

It's been over three years now since Chrissy took over as my Guardian Angel, and I have to confess that I'm mildly disappointed that my life hasn't seemed to be much different than before. Somehow, I suppose, I expected her to make me richer and healthier and smarter, but none of those happened. I didn't win the lottery; I still caught my share of colds and flu; and I still needed help with investments and tax returns. So one day when I was alone in the house, I decided to talk to Chrissy about my disappointment. As I had done many times before, I took up my spot on the side of the bed and called her name. And as always, she was there in the mirror instantly. "Hi, Grampy. What's up?"

Hesitantly, I told her that I was wondering why my life hadn't changed as I had assumed it would when she became my Guardian Angel. She listened attentively until I finally wound down closing with, "So am I wrong to feel this way?"

She looked at me for a long moment and then smiled as sweetly as anything I've ever seen. "I love you, Grampy," she said with obvious affection and understanding. "But, yes, you really are wrong to feel the way you do."

A little frustrated now, I asked, "Well, can you help me understand a little better what you've actually been doing then?"

Still smiling. "The best way I can describe it," she began, "is to tell you that Guardian Angels are not around to make your life *different*; they're just supposed to make it more peaceful and safe and, most of all, make sure you're happy with who you are and what you have in life."

"But being richer and healthier and smarter would make me feel all of those things . . . especially happy." I grinned when I said the last part, and she grinned back at me.

"I know you think that. Just like everybody else over there. But it isn't true."

"Then what do you do for me?"

She looked at me for a moment and then cocked her head slightly as if she were trying to find the words to help her explain. "What I do, Grampy, is I take the life you have, but I don't change it; I'm just supposed to try to make what it is goodand . . .and to make sure you have the chance to appreciate what you have instead of giving you more. That's what I'm here for."

"So how do you do that? I never notice anything that happens that really makes me happier or more content. Things just . . . happen."

"Maybe it's what you don't do rather than what you do that I help with. Think back to the time when I got to be your angel, okay? You're life's been free of any big problems since then, right? And little things haven't bothered you as much as they used to; Grammy and you are

healthy and happy together. Mommy and daddy are doing fine. If you think about it, you've had a pretty nice, peaceful, uncomplicated life these last few years."

I couldn't argue with her on that, but I pushed it a little further. "I still don't understand how that involves you."

There was that patient smile again. "O.K. Let me give you some examples."

"Sure." And I put my hands, palms down, on the bed behind me and leaned back smugly.

"Remember about six months ago when you were driving one night on the Interstate to Uncle George's house and you started to fall asleep"

I thought for a moment. "Not really."

"Well I do. And guess who woke you up before you had an accident?"

"You?"

"That's right, Grampy. It was me."

"Whoa...I don't even remember that. So you saved me from having an accident?"

"Yes, Grampy."

"Anything else?"

"Well I don't know if you'll remember this either, but maybe a year or more ago, you and Grammy were having an argument one night. It was about whether the two of you should move to some retirement place or stay here to be near mommy and daddy. The argument got really bad, and you were about to lose your temper and were ready to tell Grammy that you'd had all you could take of her stubbornness and that forty-one years of being married to her was enough. You were going to move and she could stay where she was as long as she wanted. Do

you remember that?”

“I guess I do. But I don’t remember saying those things.”

“You didn’t. You wanted to. You were going to say them. But then at the last minute, something made you stop and calm down. And then you laughed and told her you were sorry and that you both needed to talk about it some more when the two of you were less emotional.”

“And you were there to make that happen. Or not happen, as you say.”

“Yes, I was. And aren’t you glad? You know you could never be happy without Grammy, and you were about to say some things that would have really upset her.”

I thought about that for a moment and then said, “So what you really do is to save me from myself, right?”

“I suppose you could call it that.”

Well, since that day, I’ve been much more aware that Chrissy is around in the subtle ways she told me about, and every time I think to myself, *I dodged a bullet on that one!* or *Somebody up there must be watching out for me*, I always smile and acknowledge my Angel with a whispered “Thanks, Chrissy.”

A few minutes ago, while my wife was in the kitchen, and I was starting to get dressed, something different happened. Without me calling her or even looking in the mirror, I suddenly heard Chrissy’s voice saying, “Good morning, Grampy.”

I hurried over to the mirror, and sure enough she was standing there looking as beautiful and angelic as I had ever seen her. “Hi, Chrissy.” I said with obvious surprise. “How come you’re here without me calling you?”

“I love you, Grampy,” she said, and then her image began to fade little by little.

I was saying, “I love you too, Chrissy.” as she was fading away like that, so I didn’t really hear the last far off word she spoke just before she disappeared entirely. I was pretty sure, though, that she had said, “Bye.”

That was about twenty minutes ago, and I’m still sitting on the side of the bed, looking into the mirror. I’ve tried several times to call Chrissy back, but always to no avail. As I’m sitting here, my wife comes in and tells me she’s leaving for town and seems surprised that I’m still in just my white boxers and T-shirt. After a perfunctory, “Are you all right?” and an admonition to “Get dressed get going.” she leaves the room. I hear the front door close and then her car start, and she is gone. “Bye.” I whisper.

I sit quietly for a moment and then push myself up from the bed and walk to my bureau, open a drawer, and take out my black socks. Next, I go to the closet with the mirror, open it, and take a white, long-sleeved shirt from its hanger. Back on the bed, I pull on the socks and then stand to slip into the shirt, being careful to button the top button as well as both cuffs. I am very still for a moment but then take a deep breath, return to the closet and remove the dark suit along with the black tie from the tie rack fastened to the closet wall. While I’m there, I reach up and bring down the still-shiny black shoes from the shelf above me. I walk back to the bed, put the shoes onto the floor and the suit and tie onto the bed. Then slowly but resolutely, I put on the suit pants, tuck in the shirt, and then buckle the already-strung black belt. The shoes are next, and then the tie, carefully knotted and perfectly even at the bottom. Slipping on the suit jacket and buttoning its top button, I walk to the closet and push closed the door and look into the mirror. Standing there, I try one last time. “Chrissy? Are you there?” I wait, but there is still no reply,

so now I focus on my own image, straightening my tie a bit, pulling at the bottom of my suit coat, and patting down a few stray hairs.

It takes only a moment to walk through our single story country home and out onto the front wrap-around porch. *What a glorious morning*, I think to myself, for it is a spectacularly clear morning; everything is sharply green and blue and white, the ground dotted with swatches of flowering color. Sounds seem crisp. The breeze is cool and perfect and carries with it the smell of new mown grass mixed with the fragrance of those islands of flowers. I stand at the top of the porch steps like a captain on the bridge of his ship and breathe deeply, looking at the incredible panorama in front of me as if I were seeing it for the first time.

Time has become irrelevant now, so I stand this way for a long while before turning slowly and walking to a nearby rocking chair. Sitting down carefully, I straighten my dark suit and black tie, cross one leg over its opposite knee, and begin to rock slowly and evenly. I am at peace now. I feel satisfied. A smile creases my face, and I whisper softly, "Bye, Chrissy. And thanks." as I continue my slow, rhythmic rocking.

After a little while I become aware that the sounds around me have begun to fade and that the sharpness of the world has started to blur. But I am content and feel complete; Chrissy has seen to that, so I smile without fear, knowing that there is nothing more for me now. Nothing more except to sit quietly . . . and to wait.