

THE
GUARDIAN
ANGEL'S
JOURNAL

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BECOMING RUTH

I don't remember hitting the water. I don't remember dragging myself out the other end of the lake. But what happened during that brief baptism into the spiritual world was an immersion in knowledge. I can't explain how it happened, but when I found myself in a badly lit corridor, dripping on cracked tiles, the understanding of who I was and what my purpose was poured through me as clearly as sunlight through branches. Ruth. My name is Ruth. Margot is dead.

I was back on Earth. Belfast, Northern Ireland. I knew the place from my formative years, and by the sorely inimitable sound of the Orange Order bands practising at night. I was guessing it was the month of July, but had no clue what year.

Footsteps from behind. I spun round. Nandita, iridescent in the darkness, the sheen of her dress untainted by the sickly

glare of the streetlight opposite. She leaned towards me, her dark face filled with concern.

‘There are four rules,’ she said, holding up four ringed fingers. ‘First, you are a witness to everything she does, everything she feels, everything she experiences.’

‘You mean, everything *I* experienced,’ I said.

Immediately she waved her hand in the air, as if my interjection was a speech bubble she was swiping away.

‘This is not like watching a movie,’ she corrected. ‘The life you remember was only a little piece of the jigsaw. Now, you get to see the whole picture. And some of the pieces you get to fit. But you must be very careful. Now, let me continue with the rules.’

I nodded in apology. She took a breath.

‘The second rule is that you protect her. There are many forces which will attempt to interfere with the choices she makes. Protect her from these, this is vital.’

‘Wait right there,’ I said, holding up my hand. ‘What exactly do you mean by “interfere”? I already made all my choices, you know? That’s how I wound up right here . . .’

‘Haven’t you been listening?’

‘Yes, but—’

‘Nothing is fixed, not even when you go back in time. You can’t understand this now, but . . .’

She hesitated, unsure as to whether I was smart enough to get what she was saying. Or tough enough to deal with it.

‘Go on,’ I said.

‘Even this, right now, you and me – this has already

happened. But you're not in the past the way that you remember what a past felt like. Time no longer exists. You are present here, and your view of the future is still clouded. So you will experience many, many *new* things, and you must consider the consequences very carefully.'

My head hurt. 'OK,' I said. 'What's the third rule?'

Nan pointed at the liquid oozing from behind my back. My wings, you might say.

'Third rule is, you keep a record: a journal, if you like, of all that happens.'

'You want me to write down everything that happens?'

'No, much easier than that. If you keep to the first two rules you don't have to do anything. Your wings do it all for you.'

I was afraid to ask what the fourth rule was.

'Lastly,' she said, her smile returning. 'Love Margot. Love Margot.'

She kissed the tips of her fingers and pressed them against my forehead, then closed her eyes and muttered a prayer in what I guessed was Hindi. I shifted my feet and bowed my head awkwardly. At last, she finished. When she opened her eyes, the darkness of her pupils was replaced by white light.

'I'll be visiting you again,' she said. 'Remember, you're an angel now. You have no need to fear.'

The white light in her eyes spread throughout her face, in her mouth, down her neck and arms, until, in a great burst of light, she was gone.

I looked around. There was a low moan at the end of the

corridor to my right. Tenement flats. Bare brick interior walls, occasional graffiti. A narrow front door that lay open on to the street, and beside it a grid of flat intercoms covered in a sticky film of Guinness. A drunk curled up at the bottom of a stairwell.

I stood for a moment, considering my surroundings. First impulse: walk out into the street and far away from this place. But then the urge came over me to follow that sound, the grunting at the end of the corridor. When I say an urge, I don't mean curiosity, or suspicion – I mean somewhere between the sort of intuition that prompts a mother to inspect a toddler that's been too quiet for too long and finds him on the verge of tumble-drying the family cat, and the sort of deep-seated gut instinct that tells you when you've left the door unlocked at home, when you're about to get fired, when you're pregnant.

You know the one?

So I found myself padding along the corridor, past the drunk and up three steps to a landing. Along the corridor: five doors, two on either side, one at the end. All painted black. The noise – a deep, animalistic growl – was closer now. I took another step. A cry out. A name. A woman's voice, whimpering. I made my way towards the door and paused.

Next thing, I was inside. A living room. No lights on, mid-night-dark. I could make out a sofa and the small cube shape of an old television. A window was open, the curtain flapping against the windowsill and then against the table inside, uncertain as to whether it wanted to be in or out. A long,

agonising howl. *How is no one else hearing this?* I thought. *Why aren't the neighbours hammering the door down?* Then I realised. This is east Belfast during marching season. They're all out swinging to The Sash.

A riot had started outside. Police sirens wound up in several directions. Bottles smashed. Shouting, feet pounding pavement. I made my way through the living room towards the woman's screams.

A bedroom, lit by a flickering lamp on a bedside table. Peeling lilac wallpaper, marks of mould and damp spotting the far wall like flicked soot. A messy bed. A young blonde woman in a long blue T-shirt, alone, kneeling beside the bed as if in prayer, panting. Both arms thin as flagpoles and badly bruised, like she'd been in a fight. Suddenly she sat up on her knees, her eyes squeezed tight, face arched to the ceiling, jaw clenched. I saw she was heavily pregnant. Around her ankles and knees was a puddle of red water.

You have got to be kidding, I thought. *What am I meant to do, deliver the baby? Raise the alarm? I'm dead. Ain't nothing I can do but watch this poor girl pound the bed with her fists.*

The contraction let her out of its grip for a moment. She sagged forward and leaned her forehead against the bed, her eyes half-shut and rolled back into her head. I knelt beside her and, very tentatively, put my hand on her shoulder. No response. She was panting, the next contraction building and building until she arched back and screamed for a full minute, and then the scream withered into relief, and she was back to panting again.

I placed my hand on her forearm and felt several small holes. I looked closer. Clustered around her elbow, ten purple circles, smaller than pennies. Needle marks. Another contraction. She rose up on her knees and panted deeply. The T-shirt rode up to her hips. More needle marks on her thin white thighs. I scanned the room quickly. Teaspoons and saucers on the dresser. Two syringes poking out from under the bed. Either she was a diabetic tea-lover or a heroin junkie.

The pool of water around her knees was growing bigger. Her eyelids were flickering now, the moaning growing quieter instead of louder. I recognised that she was losing consciousness. Her head rolled to one side, her small wet mouth drooping open. 'Hey,' I said loudly. No response. 'Hey!' Nothing.

I stood up and paced the room. Every so often the girl's body would jerk forward and from side to side. She just sat on her knees, her pale face turned to me, her thin arms straight by her sides, wrists rubbing the filthy, flea-ridden carpet. I'd a friend once who had a booming business as a self-employed junkie reviver. He spent long hours on our couch giving blow-by-blow accounts of celebrities he'd rescued from the brink of death, reaching into Hell with the long arm of his adrenalin syringe and dragging them off Satan's lap. Of course, I couldn't quite remember what the procedure was. I doubt my friend had ever rescued junkies during childbirth. And certainly not while he was dead.

Suddenly the girl slid off the bed and on to her side, her arms bunched together as if handcuffed. I could see blood

seeping from her now. I bent down quickly and pushed her knees apart. An unmistakable crown of dark hair between her legs. For the first time, I felt the water streaming from my back, cold and sensitive as two extra limbs, alert to everything in the room – the smell of sweat and ash and blood, the palpable sadness, the sound of the girl’s heartbeat growing slower and slower, the galloping heartbeat of the child . . .

I pulled her legs firmly towards me, planting her feet on the ground. I dragged a pillow off the bed, then yanked the cleanest bedsheet off the mattress and spread it under her thighs. I squatted between her legs and cupped my hands by her buttocks, trying not to think too hard about it. Any other time I would have run a mile from this kind of thing. My breathing was fast, I felt dizzy and yet incredibly focused, curiously determined to save this little life.

I could see the child’s eyebrows and the bridge of the nose. I reached up and pressed against the top of the girl’s womb. More water drenched the pillow under her buttocks. And then quickly, like a fish, the whole baby slithered out of her, so fast I had to catch it – the damp dark head, the scrunched face, the tiny blue body covered in chalky vernix. A girl. I wrapped her in the bedsheet and kept one hand on the thick blue cord, conscious that in a few minutes I’d have to pull again and guide out the placenta.

The baby was mewling in my arm, the small mouth puckered like a beak, open, searching. In a minute I’d put her to her mother’s breast. But first, I had business to attend to. The

business of keeping her mother's sorry soul in that battered body.

The umbilical cord was loosening in my grip. I give it a quick tug. I could feel the large sac at the other end. It felt like fishing. Another tug, a slight twitch. Slowly and firmly, I pulled the whole thing out, until at the entrance it plumped out in a thick bloody mass on to the pillow. It had been almost twenty years since I did this thing. What was it the midwife had done? Cut the cord close to the navel. I looked around for something sharp. I spotted a switchblade on the dresser. That'll do the trick. But wait. Something else. The midwife had inspected the placenta. I remembered her showing us that it had been delivered perfectly, that no parts of it had been left inside, at which Toby had bent into the nearest basin and repeated his lunch.

This girl's placenta was not the rich red brain-like substance I recalled. This one was small and thin, like roadkill. There was still a lot of blood seeping from her. Her breathing was shallow, her pulse faint. I would have to go and find someone.

I stood up and set the baby on the bed, but when I looked down I saw that she was blue. Blue as a vein. Her small mouth was no longer searching. Her handsome little doll's face was falling into sleep. The waterfalls flowing from my back like long wings felt like they were weeping now, as if every drop was plummeting from deep within me. They were telling me she was dying.

I picked the baby up and gathered the long folds of my dress – white, exactly like Nan's, as if Heaven has only one

tailor – around her small body. She was pitifully thin. Less than five pounds in weight. Her small hands, held close to her chest in tight fists, started to loosen, like petals unfurling from the stem. I leaned down and put my lips around her mouth, exhaling sharply. Once. Twice. Her little abdomen inflated like a tiny mattress. I pressed an ear against her chest and tapped lightly. Nothing. I tried again. Once. Twice. Three times. And then, the sensation of intuition. Instinct. Guidance. *Place your hand over her heart.*

I picked her up and lay her along my arm, spreading my palm across her chest. And slowly, amazingly, I could feel the small heart as if it was in my own chest, stumbling and faltering to work, rattling around like a sputtering engine, a boat flailing in chopping waves. From my hand, a small amount of light. I did a double take. There, in the dark orange haze of that disgusting room, a white light sandwiched between my hand and the child's chest.

I could feel her heart stirring, anxious to awaken. I closed my eyes tight and thought of every good thing I'd ever done in my whole life, and every wrong thing I'd ever done I forced myself to feel bad about, a kind of prayer, a quick self-qualification to be the kind of guardian angel this child needed right now, to be worthy of bringing her back to life by whatever force my body possessed.

The light grew stronger until it seemed to fill the room. The little heart stumbled over its paces like a calf running on shaky legs across a paddock. And then it pounded in my own chest, it thumped hard and forcefully, so loud in my ears I

actually laughed out loud, and when I looked down, I saw the whole tiny chest heave in and out, in and out, the lips pink again, puckering as each breath moved in and out of the small mouth.

The light died down. I wrapped her in the sheet and lay her on the bed. The mother was lying in a pool of blood, her blonde hair now pink, her white cheeks streaked red. In between her loose breasts, I searched for a heartbeat. Nothing. I closed my eyes and willed the light to happen. Her chest was cold. The baby was starting to whimper. She's hungry, I thought. I lifted the mother's T-shirt and held the child to the breast for a minute, and with her eyes still closed she leaned into the nipple and drank and drank.

After a few minutes I placed her back on the bed. Quickly I placed my palm against the mother's chest. Nothing. *Come on!* I yelled. I put my lips to hers and breathed, but the breath puffed up her cheeks and slid out of her empty mouth again, redundant.

'Leave her,' a voice said.

I turned around. By the window, another woman. Another woman in white. Clearly a common thing in these parts.

'Leave her,' the woman said again, softly this time. An angel. She looked similar to the woman lying dead on the floor, same thick, butter-blonde hair, same bee-stung mouth. Maybe a relative, I thought, come to take her home.

The angel scooped up the woman and headed for the door, carrying the limp body in her arms, though when I looked back at the floor, the body was still there. The angel

looked at me and smiled. Then she glanced at the baby. 'Her name's Margot,' she said. 'Look after her well.'

'But,' I said. Within the word was a knot of questions. When I looked up, the angel was gone.