

Angel at the Automat

Brian Joseph

He sat down in his favorite living room chair and looked at her peacefully asleep on the couch. It had been a long day. It had started early, with a Mother's Day breakfast in bed. He had just put the children to sleep. He picked up the remote control, lowered the volume on the TV and then shut it off. He did it this way so as not to awaken her with instant silence. He stared at her and drifted off into a night time daydream of how they had met seventeen years before.

She had been a waitress in a small diner in New York City. He would occasionally go there to eat with street people. He had been in the diner six or seven times with different people. One day he stopped in by himself. She had given him a menu and said, "No friends today?" He looked up at her and said, "No just me." When she came to the table with his food her curious nature prompted a question, "Are you a minister or something like that?" He was a bit taken aback. Nobody had ever asked him about this thing that he did, eating with street people many of whom were homeless. It was sort of a private thing, almost like a hobby. He was conscious of the fact that to most people it might seem to be a strange thing to do. He stammered, "I just, uh.... eat with people who appreciate a good meal." She looked at him as if this was an insufficient answer and said, "Oh." When she returned with the check she looked at him and said, "I appreciate a good meal. Maybe we could eat together some time." Her boldness startled him. He was not accustomed to assertive women and even more unaccustomed to someone asking him for a date. In fact it had never happened before.

A few days later they had dinner in a small Italian restaurant. At first they engaged in small talk, bits of information about themselves. She was twenty-four; one year younger than him. Both lived alone. She had come to the city from Montana, hoping to act in plays. In two years she had had three small parts. He was an artist who sold some of his paintings through small art galleries. Conversation drifted around to his hobby. She was curious about it. Why did he eat with street people? How long had he been doing it? She was anything but shy and seemed to ask whatever question popped into her head.

He had told her of how it had started six years before. It was two months after his mother had died in a plane crash while on her first visit to her sister in Florida. He was walking down the street on his way to a bookstore when he passed an old woman who was saying, "Change for food?" He had walked past her but then stopped and turned around. He

walked up to her and invited her to eat with him. She had looked at him and said, "I don't do no tricks." After assuring her that he simply wanted to buy her a meal they went to a fast food place and ate together. That was how it had started. A couple of times week he would find someone panhandling and have a meal with them.

After telling her about this first time he said, "I guess it seems an odd thing to do. I've done it over five hundred times. Met a lot of interesting people. The most it ever costs is twenty-five dollars a week, less than a lot of other hobbies." She asked more questions and he wondered if she was just pretending to be interested or maybe humoring what she saw as some sort of craziness or strangeness. He told her how he learned from them and how each had their own story. "A lot of people are one twist of fate or circumstance away from being in the same type of situation." They talked and laughed and joked. To him there was a magic about her innocent assertiveness. It made him laugh in an 'I can't believe this' sort of way. There seemed to be no restrictions on what she might say or ask next.

A week later they went out again. On the way to the restaurant they came upon an old man who was asking passers by for spare change. She stopped and looked at him and they invited the old man to join them. He smelled of cheap wine and body odor. After dinner they said good-byes to their guest and walked through the theater district. They were talking about plays when she changed to subject by asking, "Do you have tea?" He wasn't quite sure what she meant. "Not on me" She giggled and said that she felt like a cup of tea. He giggled back, "You don't look like a cup of tea." She ended up inviting herself to his place for tea. He was a bit stunned, in part by her forwardness and in part because she didn't seem to be disturbed by the eccentricity of his hobby.

He had lived in a small studio apartment. It was as neat as a pin and decorated in a manner that caused her to say, "I guess you sell quite a few paintings." It was then that he told her that he on average only one a month and that he mostly lived on the money from the flight insurance that his mother had purchased at an airport vending machine. He had received 200,000 dollars but that had been six years before and he knew that sooner or later he would need to have more gainful employment.

She had commented on his paintings and statues of angels by saying, "I guess you like angels." She sipped at her tea, "cookies would go great with this." He fetched a tin of cookies and set it on the table in front of the couch that doubled as a bed. They sat talked and laughed as they dunked cookies into tea. Her eyes darted about the room, "why angels?" He smiled at the question, "I just like them I guess." She got up and walked around

the room looking closer at the paintings and figurines. "Do you think that angels are real?" He gave it a moment's thought before he answered, "Yes, I know they are."

She sat back down on the couch and asked how he knew. He told her of how he had come to believe that angels are real. When he was six years old his mother had gotten him a used bicycle. It was a bit too big for him and he was having a hard time learning to ride it. He just couldn't do it. Every time mom let go of the bike he would fall down. He would try every day after school and many times over each weekend. He had the bike for a month and was no further along than when he had first gotten it. Then one Saturday after falling three times he and his mother went in for lunch. A few hours later he asked mom if she was up for another try. When they went outside there were tiny pieces of white sprinkled on the bicycle seat and on the ground beneath it. "What's this?", he had asked. Mom picked one up and looked at it closely. "Feathers." He looked up towards the sky, "From birds?" Mom looked around and said, "They could be angel feathers." Then she told him that she had heard that when an angel helps someone they shed tiny pieces of their feathers. "Maybe an angel came to help you learn to ride your bike." He got on his bike and rode it like it was something he had known how to do for a long time.

When he had related this story to her she did not quite know what to make of it. She had giggled and said, "Angel, huh?" He knew that she found him strange but that was okay because she found her strange too. "So does this angel thing have anything to do with your hobby?" That was when he had told her about the angel at the Automat.

It had been a few weeks after the incident of the feathers on his bicycle. The Automat was in the heart of the city on East 42nd street. It was a coin operated restaurant. A cashier exchanged paper money for coins. It was lunchroom cafeteria style. You slid your tray along and stopped at something you wanted, put coins in the slot, and turned a knob. A little glass door would open so you could take out the food. He was too small to reach to put the coins in but mom lifted him and he got to take a piece of pie out. On the other side of the "machines" was a kitchen and people who put food in the display boxes. After mom had loaded a tray they sat down next to each other in a booth. He was eating a sandwich when he first noticed her. She was a poor old woman who was walking around looking at tables. She sat down at one and began to eat what someone else had not finished.

He looked at mom. She had been watching the woman too. Mom whispered, "Wait here, I'll be right back." Mom got a tray and went to the 'machines'. She put a sandwich, pie and milk on the tray and placed it on

the table where the old woman was sitting. They spoke to each other briefly but he could not hear what they were saying. Mom came back and sat down next to him and they continued with their meal. He watched the old woman wrap the sandwich in napkins and put it in her coat pocket. She ate the cake and drank the milk quickly. When she got up to leave she walked over to their table. She looked at Mom and thanked her by name. The old woman looked at him and then back at mom. "God blesses your heart." Then she turned and walked away. He looked at mom and noticed a tear trickling down each of her cheeks. "Do you know her?" Mom was silent for a moment and then she said, "sort of." "Who is she?" he had asked. Mom smiled and said, "One of God's children." Then she leaned down and whispered in his ear, "She might even be an angel."

When they got outside he asked mom, "If she was an angel, where were her wings?" It was then that mom had told him that she had heard that angels could make their wings small, even tiny and hide them in any part of their body that they wanted to. "Why would they want to hide their wings?", he had asked. Mom told him that sometimes angels were in disguise so they could help people, sort of like undercover detectives.

His night time daydream was interrupted by movement on the couch. She rolled over facing towards him. Her eyes stayed shut. He drifted back into his night time daydream. After he had told her of the angel at the Automat she had looked at him and was silent for a moment. Later she was to tell him that something came over her and she was touched in a way that she had never been before. In part it was a tinge of guilt. She had thought lightly of what she had considered his certain oddity. She had even poked fun of it in the tone of the questions she had asked. She was also touched by the simplistic childlike innocence of a grown man talking about angels as if they were real. She felt sorry for him. People must think him crazy. She was overwhelmed by a wave of sensitivity that she had not known before. A tear trickled down her cheek. He reached out and wiped it with the side of his index finger. She smiled and whispered, "That's beautiful, an angel disguised as a poor old woman." He gazed into her eyes and softly said, "She was not disguised as a poor old woman." He looked down at the wetness on his finger and whispered, "Angel feathers."

They had talked until night turned into day. Doors to hearts opened and souls greeted each other as if old friends. Closeness grew quickly. They had been together since then. He thought of how his meeting her was in some way connected to that day at the Automat. That experience led to his hobby and that had led to meeting her.

There was movement on the couch again. This time she opened her eyes, stared at him for a second and said, "How come you're not hugging me right now?"

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