

— *An Excerpt from* —

## One Night Two Souls Went Walking

“Did you ever see pictures of angels, in books, or in churches or museums?”

A few nights ago, the teller asked this question to the aide who was changing her bedclothes. The aide had nodded yes; everyone knows what angels look like.

“Do you know why angels have arms in all the pictures?”

“I’ll go find your chaplain,” the aide had answered.

But that night, when I reached her side, the teller didn’t speak to me of angels. There was only the usual greeting, my usual sitting. I was new to working the night shift, but it hadn’t taken me long to understand that in the medical center, many patients did not sleep through the hours.

The teller was nearing the end of her life. Her alone-ness was all around her like an extra layer of air. She had been ill so long, it was hard to get a sense of who she was before she was sick. Or where she was inside herself, beneath the rough and brittle shell her illness had turned her body into.

She was being kept as comfortable as possible. She was now in a zone of the dusky space between staying and leaving, the waiting area of a passing.

“I’m here,” I said, bending toward her, laying a hand on her arm.

For the first time, there was no response. She wasn’t lying there saying, “Hi. I’m your teller.”

She was in late middle age but looked elderly. Soon after she finished high school, she went to work in a local savings bank as a trainee at the counter, and for almost forty years she remained there, sometimes running the drive-up window,

sometimes filling in for a front receptionist on vacation. The bank was folded into a national one early on in her employment. She had spoken to a nurse, in a rare conversation, of her old fear she'd lose her job in the takeover, as if there were no other banks she could go to, no other job she could consider.

It was known that she'd been married, but it had ended in divorce. Her next of kin was listed as a brother, who for some reason was unable to come see her. Day shifters had noted in her file that she hadn't once had a visitor.

Her religious affiliation was given as "I left my church for personal reasons." But she had indicated she would welcome visits from a chaplain.

Her nights had been restless, as she was no longer aware of day and night. She was admitted to the medical center after someone who worked in management of her apartment building went to see her, for not having paid her rent.

It turned out that she had been treated previously at another hospital, where they had released her in the belief she'd enter hospice care at home. But no arrangements were ever made for that—no visiting nurses, no supervision of medications, no aide, no anything. An ambulance had been called, and here she was.

The teller was never interested in talking with me, not even at those times, at four or five in the morning, she was fully a stranger to sleep. So I had tried a different approach.

I created a delusion for us. I told this woman that the bank where she worked was my own. I belong to a credit union.

"You used to be my teller," I had said. "It's okay you don't remember me. I can't imagine how many customers you faced all those years. But I certainly remember you."

After that, I would enter the room and receive a smile.

"Hi. I'm your teller. It's nice to see you again."

We had looked at each other in a silence that never felt wrong or awkward. Maybe it was all those years in the bank, side by side with her work mates, speaking always quietly, only sharing bits of small talk in a lull, or saying nothing at all.

Or it was all those years of going home to a place where if you spoke out loud, no one was there to hear you.

“Bye from your teller,” she used to say, when a visit from her chaplain had come to an end.

And now she was entering her last moments. I was in the chair beside her. A nurse had just come in, checking her. Not long now. I nodded, knowing.

As the minutes ticked by, I was busy with trying to think of what to say. Should I ask if she wanted prayers? Would the teller want to speak of her soul? Of her life, of what had meaning to her, of what was holy to her?

Then all of a sudden, she wanted to talk.

Lying there, she was bone-thin. She weighed barely more than a child. But not in her own mind.

Her voice was strangely clear, although its tone was a little muffled. She was obviously anxious, worried.

She was telling me that the angel who just entered the room was all wrong, and please, being her chaplain, would I do something about that? It seemed that the angel had been refusing to do what the teller wanted: go away and send in the right one.

The problem, I learned, was a problem with size. It was too little.

I also learned that the angel was neither male nor female, not particularly, not so you could tell. It was very, very slender. And would I take note of its height? How could an angel be so short?

Basically, a great mistake had been made. This angel was unsuitable for the job of carrying the teller off the earth, and then across all the distance to God.

To make things worse, it was standing there scowling and looking angry, as if the teller was busy in her bed with thinking up new ways to insult it. Obviously, the angel had no experience being criticized, never mind rejected.

And would I look at those arms? Those arms were *scrawny*.

The teller was afraid of being dropped. She didn't want an angel who might not even have the strength to lift her out of bed.

I listened to her. Her voice was growing whispery and hoarse and raspy. Long pauses took place between many of her words. But she was getting her words out. She could have been back at work, talking about a customer who wanted her to cash a check against an account that did not have the right amount of money, and the customer was refusing to believe her. I could have been a supervisor called over to handle the fuss.

Hesitating, trying to make up my mind which course of action to take, I bowed my head. The teller was watching me carefully, trusting me. Should I talk to the angel from my chair? Should I stand and approach it, speaking directly into its ear, in whispers, privately?

There were three other beds in this room, all occupied. Nurses and aides came and went. The teller's roommates were newly post-surgical and required much attention.

The curtains around her bed had been partially drawn, so that she was shielded for privacy from the beds opposite and beside hers. There was not much room between the foot of the bed and the curtain the angel was inside of. If I went over to the foot, I would need to figure out a way to position myself. I would need to stand in a space that was not already taken.

I could not allow it to happen that I bumped into the angel—or worse, accidentally knocked it over. And what tone of voice should I use, even in whispers? Should I be forceful, bossy? Should I be kind and respectful, so the teller wouldn't worry I'd ruffle feathers that were not already ruffled?

Or, should I explain to her that the size and strength of her angel were just right, because her body was so small now, so light?

I felt a tightening of the fingers of the hand I was holding. The teller was raising her head, about an inch or so off her pillow. Her eyes were looking toward the foot of the bed. She was blinking very rapidly. I saw that those eyes were filling with tears.

And I knew they weren't tears because of anything being wrong. When the teller spoke again, she didn't mention size or strong arms. She had forgotten all about me, but she seemed to feel that her chaplain had come through for her. The little angel had just grown tremendously, and suddenly developed some muscles—or it had disappeared, and the one in its place was a giant, perhaps with a head almost touching the ceiling.

"It's so bright," said the teller, mumbly, softly, in a tone of voice that was very matter of fact.

But when she repeated it, as her last thing to say, it came in the voice of someone being taken by surprise, like she could not believe her own eyes.

"It's so *bright!*"

I sat there. I listened to the new sound of silence. I looked at the nurse who was noting the time of the departure. I didn't know how much the nurse heard of what the teller had said, but she was glancing around, almost as if she hoped to hear some sound in the air that had not been there before.

