

Tidings

And the Archangel Gabriel came into Myra's cubicle on the second Friday of the pay period as she was filling out her time and attendance card. And Myra was not particularly afraid. She'd seen it all. Besides, she had nothing to feel guilty about, for she was scrupulous in recording her hours and, indeed, hadn't put in for all of the overtime to which she was entitled. Still, she didn't feel especially virtuous, so she was skeptical when the archangel cleared his throat with great portent and announced, "You have found favor in the eyes of the Lord."

Thinking he was referring to her attendance record, Myra said, "Well, I can see how I might have found favor in the eyes of management, but God?" She raised her brows in that abrupt way she had. The motion made her tortoise shell bifocals jump on her nose, and Gabriel fluttered his wings, startled. Myra readjusted her glasses and squinted. "Of course, I suppose God *is* management, but it's depressing to think of Him that way."

The archangel tilted his head and peered at her with one eye. She was a spare, efficient-looking woman of indeterminate age, dressed in a gray seersucker suit to match the industrial carpeting. Her off-white blouse was made of some vaguely glossy material that was not silk.

Myra, for her part, was disappointed to see that the archangel's wings were not wondrous and scintillating, as she might have expected. They resembled more the drab wings of the mourning doves that pecked at the spilled millet beneath her feeder. This was clearly a Protestant angel, the type likely to be associated with one of those bare-bones, plug-ugly churches the Baptists built. His wing feathers were smooth and putty-colored, but when the

light hit at a certain angle, they flashed a pearly iridescence. She noted that Gabriel's nose was long and sharp, and his eyes liquid and quick.

“You know why I'm here?” the angel said.

It was a question, but Gabriel looked as if he fully expected her to know the answer. Myra hated being put on the spot like that. She hadn't even finished her first cup of coffee. Why would the Archangel Gabriel show up at a government office at 9:15 on a Friday morning? It crossed Myra's mind that Saint Peter, if anyone, would choose to come at the end of the pay period. What with the quill pen and list making, he seemed to her more the bureaucratic type.

Of course. He would come to deliver official notice that her time had expired, perhaps handing her one of those tissue-thin envelopes perforated on three sides. Dying at the end of the pay period, now wouldn't that simplify things for Admin? Myra would have liked to think that death, at least, defied bureaucracy, but for all she knew they could have wiring diagrams up there: God, First Deputy God, First Deputy Assistant God. Oh God.

Was she dead? But this was Gabriel and not Saint Peter. She knew this because he was wearing a name tag with “Gabriel” hand-copied in a loopy, childish script. The letters were hesitant and labored--especially the oversized ‘G’--as if the scribe had little practice with the Roman alphabet. Then she looked again and saw that the tag actually said “Garbiel.”

“Garbiel?” she asked, pointing.

The Angel looked down, twisting his head and pulling out the front of his robe so he could see the tag better. “Gabriel. It should be Gabriel. I do that all the time.”

Myra thought it odd that heaven wouldn't have a computer program that would print out name tags automatically. Even her underfunded office had that.

Myra told herself again that she shouldn't be worried about this angel, because Gabriel was known for bringing glad tidings. Right? It had been some time since she had abandoned

church services--all that uplifting talk that never lifted her up. Sometimes the services even got to sounding like staff meetings with all the emphasis on self improvement and such. She now slept in on Sundays, snuggling under her polyfill comforter and thinking, *Praise God, it's not Monday.* She was rusty on her angels. She was pretty sure, however, that Gabriel brought glad tidings. He was the one who told Mary that she was going to bear Jesus, right? But that kind of news wouldn't be glad tidings for Myra at this stage of her life.

"Have you heard of perimenopause?" Myra asked the angel.

Gabriel blinked and twisted his head upward and to the left, as if looking to the fluorescent lights for an answer.

I'm not the type to get glad tidings, Myra thought. *I must be dead.* She regretted bitterly having died in her cubicle, but then remembered that when she had her last physical, both her cholesterol and her blood pressure had been low. What would have killed her? She'd always said bureaucracy would be the death of her, but she'd never considered exactly how this might come about. Myra pinched her wrist until it hurt and examined the pattern of red crescents left by her nails, like some ancient script she couldn't decipher. She noted that the ache in her lumbar region hadn't subsided, and she felt the need to tug on her bra. If heaven couldn't provide a comfortable underwire, what good was it? She wasn't dead. She sniffed and smelled toner fluid from the copier and Frank Lippi's microwave pizza. Pepperoni. Every day the same pepperoni. Then a new and terrifying thought occurred to her. Suppose death was indistinguishable from life? A cold lump clotted in her stomach. Her eyeglasses jumped again as she shot an anxious look at the archangel. Maybe he was a fallen angel.

"I'm in Hell, aren't I?"

"Perhaps," Gabriel said. He had pushed aside her inbox and perched patiently on her desk, munching M&Ms from a glass bowl. His head beat a rapid staccato on his open palm as he

gobbled the last few candies. He swiped his mouth over a wing and shrugged. The wing brushed a few yellow sticky notes from the side of the computer monitor. Pale as dried petals, they fluttered down. Each had its scribbled task: call insurance company, straighten out Pontormo invoice, schedule interview.

Myra pointed to the sticky notes and asked, “Do I still have to do these things, or do they no longer matter?”

“If you think you have to do them, you have to do them,” Gabriel said.

Myra wondered whether the angel could read minds. Immediately and against her will she began to think about sex, even though she hadn’t thought about it in some time.

Irritated with herself and the archangel, Myra bent down and grabbed a yellow sticky note that had floated to the floor. This gave her an excuse to look at Gabriel’s feet, about which she was curious. She half expected talons rather than toes. They were toes, but rather thin ones. The toenails were long, horn-like, and curled. The skin had an orange cast.

Myra sat up. She straightened a photograph the angel had knocked askew. It showed a Japanese girl, about five, wearing cateye sunglasses and a pink tutu over a red kimono. She had an ecstatic smile. Myra briefly smiled back, then she frowned and turned her attention to what was written on the note: call Bob B. before noon. The secretary had scribbled “very important” at the bottom of the note and underlined it twice. Bob Botticelli was her supervisor. *Feckless, overbearing asshole*, Myra thought and she quickly looked to see if Gabriel frowned. She saw no change of expression, but, nevertheless, she glared at him with defiance. If she had to return Bob-the-asshole’s call in the next half hour, she’d best not waste too much time with this busybody angel. Myra noticed a slight glow around the angel’s head. She hit the “save” key on her computer, in case angelic emanations interfered with Microsoft Windows.

“I have a lot to do,” Myra said.

Gabriel looked disappointed. “This is a divine experience. You shouldn’t be thinking of all the things you need to do.”

Myra smiled wryly. “I’ve been accused of that before.”

Gabriel looked even more confused and worried. Again he cocked his head to the side as he examined the walls of her cubicle, where family photos were pinned haphazard. They were not photos of Myra’s family. She had found them in a box bought at a flea market. Since the divorce, she had sought out and collected such photos. Every few weeks she would swap out the ones on her wall for a whole new family. Sometimes the families were African American or Asian or Hispanic, but no one in the office seemed to notice, or else they thought it would be culturally insensitive to comment. It was Myra’s quiet, running joke on her coworkers.

Gabriel squinted at the photos. All of the subjects were Japanese. Gabriel’s halo, which bore a curious resemblance to a glow-in-the-dark frisbee, flickered. His bowl-cropped hair was gold, but it had a vaguely synthetic sheen, as if it belonged on a vinyl doll. Myra was disappointed to note that the radiance about Gabriel’s head was tinged with green and no brighter than her computer screen. He should be bright enough to make her shield her eyes, but staring at him just made them feel dry and itchy. She reached for her eye drops, took off her bifocals, and tilted back her head. Myra blinked to spread the eye drops and replaced her bifocals. She raised glistening, magnified eyes to Gabriel.

“Why are you here?”

“I’m seeking the pure of heart.”

“You mean a virgin?” Myra snorted. “If that’s what you’re looking for, I have to say I wish you the best of luck in this little Peyton Place.” Only the week before Belinda, Bob’s secretary, had hurled an old metal Swingline stapler and hit Bob in the forehead, because he had asked her to arrange the engagement party for Brian, who had dumped Belinda for this fiancé.

And now Belinda was supposed to go out and buy a gallon bag of frozen meatballs and warm it in a crock pot with equal amounts of chili sauce and grape jelly. Myra had felt so bad for Belinda, she offered to do it herself. Now she wondered whether she still had to make those disgusting meatballs or whether it no longer mattered.

A phosphorescent blush lit Gabriel's cheek. "Purity is more than virginity." His wings slumped and the tips of the feathers bent against the dirty gray carpeting. He appeared at a loss. Tentatively, as if he were afraid of the words, he said, "You know you're somewhat ... older ... than I expected."

"Well, you're not what I expected either."

"I'm not?" Gabriel's brows shot up and his halo jumped, much like Myra's glasses had earlier. "I'm supposed to be *exactly* what you expected, Mary. It's the only way I can be."

"Mary? My name's not Mary, it's Myra. You must be looking for the Intern Mary. She's in cube 86."

A roseate glow pulsed on and off in the Archangel's cheek like some sort of heavenly check engine light. "The last time I was here, it was so much easier to find people." He stood up, knocking her monitor askew. A few pale yellow notes stuck to his double-knit robe. He peeled them off and handed them to Myra. "I suppose you had better do these things."

The archangel turned and walked a few yards down the aisle between cubicles. He had a funny, hesitant gait, thrusting out his head like a mourning dove. He quickly lost his sense of direction and began to turn in place, his long feet stomping a slow, awkward circle. Gabriel stopped and looked helplessly toward Myra. She pointed.

"It's the third cubicle to your right. The one with all of the inspirational posters. You know, misty woods, footprints in the sand, that sort of shi ... stuff."

"Thank you," said the Archangel Gabriel. He disappeared between the partitions.

Seconds later, Myra heard a gasp, a piercing scream, and a crash. The Intern Mary had evidently fallen to the floor in a spasm of ecstasy.

“Oh, the ... Joy!” Mary shouted.

A few heads popped out above cubicle partitions, but no one bothered to get up and see what was going on. When they heard no further cries, they tucked back their heads back turtles.

Myra looked down at the yellow notes in her hands. No, she was not even going to sigh. Should she be envious? No. In a way, she felt sorry for the Intern Mary, because her angel was such a shabby one. Gabriel said he was supposed to be exactly what Mary expected. Couldn't she have imagined something more beautiful?

But then who was Myra to judge? Nothing wondrous or scintillating about her life. Not even any interesting sins to give her a delicious pang of guilt in the presence of an angel. Myra felt a numbness that flowed from beneath her breastbone and traveled to her fingers and toes. Just to see if her rubbery hands still worked, she slowly stuck the yellow notes back to her monitor. She felt as if she were watching someone else's hands. The nerves that connected them to her brain had gone dead. Without her volition, the left hand picked up the phone, and the right began to dial Bob Botticelli's number. Then as the index finger hovered above the third '6', a tear rolled down Myra's cheek.

Panic showed in her eyes as she looked around at the sticky notes, the Japanese family pinned to her cubicle walls, the gray carpet tiles, the inbox full of invoices. A pinky-green glow, now emanating from cube 86, illuminated her surroundings and gave them the air of something ephemeral, like the walls of a bubble that would burst if she blew the slightest puff of air. Suddenly she wanted to huff and puff and blow like the wolf in the fairy tale. Instead, Myra got hold of herself and finished dialing the number.

Bob picked up. “Hello.”

“Bob, I have tidings for you,” she said.

“Myra? What the tidings? What are you talking about? Never mind. I have something important I want to talk to you about.” There was a pause evidently intended to underscore the importance of what Bob was about to say. “The process for recording invoices. I’ve worked out something new. You’ll be astounded. As my kid says, ‘It’ll rock your world.’”

Myra emitted a tiny, vinegary huff.

“Wait ‘til you see it, Myra. If I say so myself, it’s a beautiful process. I’m very, very proud of it.”

“Death is a process, too,” Myra said. “So is bowel movement.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry, Bob, I won’t leave you with a body or a bowel movement for you to dispose of. I know that the cleaning lady has left for the day.”

“We need to address the invoice issue ASAP.”

“The invoices don’t matter, Bob.”

“Are you sick?”

“No, I just saw the Archangel Gabriel.”

For a few seconds the line was quiet except for the sound of pages being thumbed. Myra guessed Bob was searching desperately through the big binder from his latest training course, “Managing Diversity, Dynamic Change, and Difficult Personnel.”

“Myra, do you need to speak to a counselor? If we get approval from Human Resources, the Department will pick up sixty percent of the cost.”

“Good-bye, Bob.”

Myra hung up. There was nothing from her desk she wanted to pack and take home. She wished she could make a fire to burn all of those pesky yellow notes, but it would be almost as

satisfying to leave them here, along with the photographs of the Japanese family. Leave it to someone else to sort through. Then she hesitated and picked up the photo of the little girl in the tutu with her ecstatic smile. That one she slipped into her purse. Myra gathered up several of the yellow notes and tossed them in the air. *I'm never going to do those things*, she said to herself, and her mind began to feel wonderfully clear.

Myra slipped off her suit jacket, draped it over her monitor as if she were covering a corpse, and picked up her purse. She didn't say goodbye to anyone on her way out, but she nodded to the Intern Mary as she passed cube 86. Mary didn't notice her. She was on the floor next to her overturned chair, leaning up on one elbow. Against all regulation and sense of office decency, she was smoking a cigarette, eyes closed. A putty-colored feather was stuck behind her ear.

Myra smiled as she made her way outside to her car. It didn't matter where she was going or what she was going to do. She drove west. She made a point of looking at the face of every driver she passed. They were sour, clench-jawed, insensible faces that barely saw what was ahead of them. They frightened Myra into pressing her foot down harder on the accelerator. Before long, she was twenty-five miles out of town and doing ninety, a speed her Honda Civic had never before attained. She was no longer looking at the other drivers, but focusing instead on the blue mountains in the distance.

Then, in the median strip ahead, her eye caught the lush orange-red of poppies. The state had planted a long rectangular field of poppies and bachelor buttons and cosmos. Myra thirsted for color. Without bothering to slow down, she abruptly swerved into the median. The Civic bucked wildly through a ditch, flailing her body against all of its hard and semi-hard and soft interior surfaces. The wheel tore from her hand. The tortoise shell glasses jumped and flew away. Myra thought of death and a childhood Tilt-a-Wheel ride at the Kentucky State Fair. In

that split second, she decided that this was okay, this was better than dying in her cubicle. She was not particularly afraid.

But the Civic didn't overturn or crash into anything, it merely slowed and came to rest in the very center of the flowers. Myra cut the motor and got out, stumbling a few steps on rubbery legs, before the world began to right itself and cease to wobble. A few cars slowed, but accelerated again when they saw no carnage. Wild laughter spilled out of Myra's mouth as she felt the touch of sunshine and smelled the green living scent of grass. She slipped off her pumps and threw them at a passing potato chip truck. Despite two arthroscopic surgeries, she began to skip through the blossoms, lifting her knees high enough to show her pale pink slip. Then she flung herself down on her back and unbuttoned the off-white blouse that was not silk. She closed her eyes against the brightness and breathed deep.

What would her angel look like? Different. She wanted a different angel altogether. Hers would be a woman, because she was fed up with guys who thought they were divine. Her angel would be good-hearted and knowing, like Kitty, the saloonkeeper from the old Gunsmoke series. But she would dress flashier. Flashy like Elton John in the early days. Big cat-eye sunglasses and lots of Swarovski crystals and a fair stretch of cleavage. Maybe a bleeding heart tattoo. Huge wings. Enormous wings covered with flower petals like a float from the Rose Bowl. Her angel would smell like heliotrope and mimosa blossoms and coconut rum. She would be funny and not hung up on some odd combination of purity and fertility. She would laugh at that and blush at nothing.