

Angel of Redemption

The Assignment

Anna the Angel (in training) sat in a simple but somehow simultaneously fancy gold chair. She awaited St. Peter. Unless you counted the cloud on which she and the fancy-but-not-fancy chair rested, there was no other furniture. How do you drum your fingers nervously on the boss's desk when there's no desk?

She peered into the profound nothingness. She figured there must be some way to see if he's on his way ...

St. Peter appeared out of nowhere and she shrieked.

"So sorry!" he said. A table and chair materialized and he sat down. "Anna! Good to see you."

"Hi boss."

"So, what's on for this year?" A file folder materialized and St. Peter started flipping through it.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Anna asked.

"Of course it's a good idea! What could go wrong?"

"Uh, there was that woman I scared so badly she ran in front of a car."

"Could have happened to anyone."

"The woman who spent a year in a coma after I made her face the reality of the abuse she suffered as a child?"

"No way to predict that," said St. Peter.

"The woman who decided to become the lover of a jailed murderer?"

St. Peter stared at Anna. "Am I detecting pessimism? You must be patient. How long have you been working towards earning your wings?"

"35 years."

"Heavens! That's nothing."

"Well, boss, this process of earning my wings ... I just don't see any progress."

"Ah, but the universe is young."

"I hate that joke."

"Too bad, back when I was alive, all we had were camel jokes."

"Yeah. Don't go there," said Anna, "I don't want to hear the word 'hump' come out of your mouth."

St. Peter became serious. "You know why you have to keep trying, yes?"

Anna pouted. "Because you'll declare my death self-inflicted and then I take a tour of duty with the eternal brimstone and thumb-screws crowd."

"And with that," said St. Peter with his more normal smile, "we turn to your subject, Harvard Khan."

A dossier identical to what St. Peter was holding appeared in her hands. Anna started leafing through it. "So ... apart from him being a totally curmudgeonly, lonely, 21st century white collar worker, what do you want me to do? Cheer him up?"

"The problem is the lost potential," said St. Peter. "There's a narrow window of time for him to engage with those around him and to influence the future. He has the capability, but lacks the realization that, despite it all, he can make a difference."

"That's the vaguest assignment ever," Anna said.

"No it's not."

"Well, it is for me. I've had to inspire mothers to take better care of their kids. Influence suicidal, depressed people."

"Yes," said St. Peter. "But all of those assignments were not entirely - at all really - successful, were they?"

"Come on, you said yourself that God's plan is mysterious to all but God. Frankly I'm not sure He has a full grip on the situation. I mean, just the size of it all -- and that Heisenberg Uncertainty Principal thingy."

"I'm thinking," said St. Peter, "that you don't want to go because you think you'll mess up again. I think you're chicken."

"I am not chicken. 'Circumspect' I believe is the word."

"You must be fully engaged and want to go. Want to help this fellow see the world as more than his morose and myopic senses allow."

Anna paused and looked at the cloud around her.

"Gosh," said St. Peter. "Is that the noise of thumb screws I hear?"

"OK. I'm in. But you have to give me something more than 'lost potential'."

"Sure," said St. Peter. "Harvard Khan has lost his sense that the universe is absurd. He needs to embrace the world and the people around them despite the flaws and because of the beauty."

"OK!" said Anna. "Absurd I can do. I mean, just look at the American election. What are the ground rules for this one?"

"Disembodied. Invisible to all but him."

"Check."

"Light telekinesis - you may manipulate objects with low mass."

"Check."

"No touching people."

"Darn."

"However, you will be permitted two full manifestation events. 15 minutes where everyone can see and touch you."

"Check. Can I teleport this Harvard guy with me?"

"Yes, but no dangerous locations."

"Check."

"Localized mind reading," said St. Peter.

"Check."

"You can modify your appearance, but no monsters or scary things."

"Check. Time travel?"

"No. You have to have your wings first."

"Dang. When do I start?"

"Now."

Reconnaissance

Anna shadowed Harvard Khan, resident of Toronto. She was invisible and silent while he undertook his daily routine.

He possessed a total of three breakfast cereals. He used organic milk. He brushed his teeth after breakfast. There was nothing more toxic in his medicine cabinet than generic extra strength acetaminophen.

On the way to the subway train, he stopped at Starbucks. He used the preorder phone app not to, she suspected, save time but to avoid people in the line.

On the subway, no one spoke. It seemed to suit him. He listened to classic rock albums on his phone. Both ear plugs in.

Once downtown, Harvard headed to his office building and, once in the lobby, it was as if he emitted a stench because people avoided contact with him, particularly eye contact.

He made it to his desk, passing a dozen people without so much as a nod. He booted up his computer and deleted all the emails relating to company and industry events.

Holy crap, thought Anna. How does he sit there with such a giant stick up his ass?

Anna wished she could have fallen asleep while watching Harvard work. She had never thought it possible for someone to work so proficiently and have so little human contact. He had brought lunch and ate at his desk. He took very short breaks and left exactly at 7.5 hours after signing in at his desk.

On the way home, he went to his gym. Anna was vexed by the fact she was hesitating following him into the change room. It's not as if anyone would see her. She realized that this was the first assignment involving a man.

Ah, what the hell, she thought. She entered the men's change room. She laughed to herself remembering a childhood expression, "this is where all the dicks hang out."

It took only four minutes for her to find out that there was not much to see in the men's change room and for Harvard Khan to change. He then undertook a minimalist mixed cardio/weights routine of thirty-five minutes. He showered and changed again in ten minutes and carried on home.

He turned on the evening news on the TV and at his desk he fired up a computer and enjoyed online porn for exactly 15 minutes. Anna observed and admired his focus being dedicated to very specific "artists".

Holy shit, she thought, this guy can't even whack off properly.

He ate dinner, which was bland, and watched a variety of TV shows, some pre-recorded on his PVR. He watched the 10 PM news and went to bed. Anna sat, invisibly, beside him and wondered how St. Peter even knew this guy existed. Were Harvard Khan any more under the radar, he'd have hit the ground.

Initiation

Harvard awoke to his alarm and went into the bathroom. To his amazement there was a blonde white woman, with enormous wings, topless, applying make up.

"Hi," she said.

He closed the door, waited 5 seconds, and opened it again.

"I'm still here!"

"Who are you? How did you get in here? Please put on clothes."

"I'm Anna," she said. "I'm your guardian angel."

"So, you're not real."

"Sure I am."

Harvard was looking down while talking to her.

"I'll change. Look now."

Her wings were gone and she was wearing yoga pants and sports top.

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"I'd shake your hand, but I'm disembodied. You are Harvard Khan. Can I call you Harv?"

"No."

"How about Khan? I'm thinking Shatner in Star Trek II. Khhhhhhaaaaaannnnn!!"

"No."

"What about Harvey?"

"No. Stop it. If you aren't real, you can go away."

"I'm real."

"Can I go to the bathroom now? Alone?"

She was sitting on his couch when he came out of the bathroom in a housecoat. He had showered and shaved.

"What are you?" he asked. "A hallucination? Brain injury?"

"I told you. I'm your guardian angel assigned to you."

Harvard walked toward her and reached out gently to touch her shoulder. His hand passed through. He walked away, went into his room to change into work clothes. He grabbed his iPhone and typed "brain injuries that cause hallucination" into Google. The results were not helpful. It would take a heavy blow from something like a car crash to create even a "banal confabulation" as one article put it.

"I am not a banal confabulation!" said Anna, who was unexpectedly standing beside him.

"Jeez," said Harvard.

"Careful with the language, sailor. That was a close one."

He silently stared at her. He then typed in "infectious diseases that cause hallucinations." He would need psychosis, schizophrenia, or brain lesions to give decent multi sensory hallucinations.

"It would be easier to accept that I was an angel."

I am going to ignore you and hope these symptoms pass, he thought.

"I can read minds, y'know."

"I ... don't ... care," said Harvard. With determination he went about his morning routine.

"Ignoring me is going to be very challenging," said Anna.

In the end it was challenging for her. She sang awful 1980s songs right beside him as he went to Starbucks on onto the subway platform. He found a seat and plugged in his earphones. She noticed it was a bit louder than the day before. There was a post in the subway car that you held onto for balance. It looked like a stripper pole to Anna, so she started a gyrating set of moves on the poll.

Of course no one else but Harvard could see her moves. She made it look like she was pulling up her yoga top. Everyone else on the subway was in winter clothes, which made her whole act seem more incongruous than sexy. Harvard frowned and tried to look away. Then she decided to sit on his lap in the style of a lap dancer.

"Get off me!" he said out loud, standing up abruptly, trying to push her away. He passed right through her and found himself standing in the middle of the subway car in front of fellow commuters. Anna could hear all their minds thinking, holy shit I hope this guy isn't having a psychotic episode.

"Excuse me," he said. And he sat quietly and calmly down in the seat.

"It would be easier," Anna said, "to accept that I'm an angel and avoid making everyone think you have a mental illness when you don't."

Can you hear my thoughts? asked Harvard silently.

"You bet," said Anna.

I do not want to play this game.

"Who said it was a game?"

As he walked into the lobby of his office building Anna was commenting on everyone she could see. "Corporate life is so much more casual that I remember." "Wow, I didn't think those tall F-Me boots would last into the 21st century." "Is that your boss? He looks serious." "It's amazing how many fewer smokers there are."

Once on his floor and at his desk Anna said, "Well, at least cubicles didn't go out of style."

She decided to let him work. But she was never out of his line of sight.

He was required to go to a meeting, but she made a point of paying attention to the people. Of the six people in the meeting, two noticed his even more tense than usual demeanor. What is it with him? they thought.

The lady running the meeting, Reena, was doing a good job of explaining a new process around obtaining approval for external contracts through the company's legal department. Of course drying paint was more interesting, but Reena was truly working to make her presentation engaging. It did not help that Harvard was sucking the energy out of the room.

At the end of the meeting, Anna made a mental note to recommend to St. Peter that Reena should be put forward for sainthood.

Back at his desk, Harvard allowed this thought: perhaps the fact she's shut up means this problem is starting to go away.

"In your dreams, pal," said Anna.

Harvard jumped.

"Look," he whispered. "I really need to go to the bathroom. Do you mind?"

"No, I don't mind," said Anna, "and they can hear you on the other side of the cubicle."

Damn it, he thought.

"Take your time. I'll just be here bored waiting for you to properly acknowledge my existence."

Harvard started walking in the direction of the bathroom.

"Enjoy the view! Don't talk to strangers! Wash your hands! Not that it bothers me; I'm just thinking about everyone else in the office, which you don't!"

And he was out of view.

Anna turned her attention to his computer. Her limited ability to move objects was just right for a computer keyboard. Electrons were so light. She opened up Outlook and looked through his sent log. She noted he had a very terse style of writing that was easy to mimic.

She typed the following "Hi Reena. Sorry I was so down today in the meeting. A strange day. I wanted to take a second to say I thought your presentation was clear and as entertaining as the subject matter would allow!"

She pressed Send.

Anna opened the Intranet and discovered the corporate events page. Tomorrow night was the company Christmas Party. She saw no indication he was going so she sent an email to the event coordinator. "Hey Charles. My plans changed and I'm wondering if I can jump in at the last minute for the Christmas Party. Thanks."

A couple of minutes later, Harvard returned and he sat at his computer and noticed a reply from Reena. It read, "Thanks Harvard for the kind words. It means a lot."

"What the hell?" said Harvard.

"They can still hear you."

You can type? he thought.

"Of course I can type," said Anna. "When I was alive - 55 words per minute. 65 when I was drunk."

Harvard's Outlook gave another email notification. Charles had written back. "Sure thing. Just bring \$10 cash to the door for a drink ticket."

Harvard grimaced. What else have you done?! he yelled in his head.
"Only those two emails. You pee fast," she said.

Sullen hardly described Harvard's mood as he took the subway to the gym. He did his routine but with a little bit of anger. He had to admit to himself that it was a better workout.

Once in the apartment he glumly and silently made himself dinner. He turned on the news.

Anna had not spoken since the office but now she said, "What. You're not going to look up your girlfriends on the computer?" She made an unlady-like gesture.

Harvard scowled.

He sat on the couch and Anna sat beside him.

She kept changing the channels. He could not focus on any given show and she always picked stuff that he could not stand. Nazi Megastructures, Murdoch Mysteries, the Punjabi station, the shopping channel for holiday ornaments, Toddlers and Tiaras.

"OK. That's it. I give up," said Harvard. "This kind of sustained hallucination is impossible and if I went to the doctor they'd give me so many drugs I'd shit pills. What do you want?"

Orientation

"You seem like a smart guy and you want to know the rules, the procedure and to manage the outcomes," said Anna. "My boss said that you are not living up to your potential and you have much to give so I, your Official Guardian Angel, am here to help."

Harvard stared at her. Blankly.

"Is there some sort of exam I can take? Reading?" asked Harvard. "Who's your boss anyway? I was raised such that I don't believe in angels or ghosts so this isn't flowing for me."

"St. Peter. Seriously, the gate keeper for Heaven. Never mind you aren't going to care, I can see that."

Anna paused. How direct should she be? "OK, you're an ass. You are the most distant, uncaring person I've seen in years and you seem to think that because you don't interact with the world you are somehow superior."

"People are generally idiots," he said. "I can't help them. I don't want to help them and I don't see that I'm doing any harm my simply minding my own business. I pay my taxes, I recycle, I donate to the Cancer Society. No one knows I exist beyond my paper trail and if that's not the definition of peaceful co-existence, I don't what is."

"And despite all that they elected a bunch of old, male, white whack jobs in the United States," she said.

"As I'm sure you noticed, I live in Canada," snapped Harvard. "How is this my problem?"

"Every woman and minority -- and you qualify mixed race boy -- should be a) shitting their pants and b) shouting demands for respect and equality from the rooftops."

"Oh. OK. Sure. You want me to get on Twitter right now and send a mean tweet to Mike Pence?"

"Oh, I think your movement toward a balanced view on life needs to start closer to home. Let's visit Reena."

"Reena from work?"

"Yes. That Reena."

"We can't just go to wherever she lives!" said Harvard.

"Pshaw, you are dealing in the supernatural world now. Lie down on your couch and breath evenly and close your eyes."

Harvard looked at her dubiously.

"Just do it."

Harvard lay down and tried to breath.

Anna placed her hands gently at his temple. "Prepare to be amazed."

Reena's Place

Suddenly they were flying over Toronto rooftops, Anna holding Harvard's hand.

"Whoa," he said.

In seconds they were in a medium-sized apartment.

"We are astral projections," said Anna. "No one here will see us."

Regardless, Harvard was so uncomfortable with being in someone's apartment without permission, he remained silent.

Reena was playing on the floor of the living room with her son, who appeared to be 4 years old. He was working with various building block toys and was intensely focused and talking, but not with his mother. His speech was mostly incoherent and spiked from soft to loud somewhat at random. Autism? wondered Harvard.

"That's the diagnosis Reena's working with," said Anna.

From another room in the apartment, there was a moan. Reena calmly stood and walked into the bedroom off the living room. Anna grabbed Harvard and they passed through the wall. In bed was a lady of advanced years. She was moaning in her sleep. Reena gently took her pulse and stroked her on her forehead, moving some hair from her eyes.

"Her mother, I assume?" asked Harvard.

"Yes. She's suffering from dementia and is waiting for a hospice space. She's here with Reena and her son for now."

"Let me guess," said Harvard. "No husband? Reena's siblings are not capable of helping?"

"Her husband is deceased. Lymphoma. Three years ago."

"Smoker?"

"No. Are you looking for somewhere to place blame?"

"I like a reason for things," he said.

"What if there's no reason?" asked Anna. "What if this pretty, friendly woman -- who is able to give good presentations on boring stuff despite a home life from hell -- is just plain unlucky?"

Harvard walked back through the wall into the living room. He didn't like the sound of Reena's mother's breathing.

"What do you want me to do about it?" he asked. "Ask her out? Donate to an autism charity?"

"Good grief, how about easy steps like actually paying attention? She was working where you work at the same time when her husband died."

"But I'm not connected to her," he said. "It wasn't common knowledge."

"Oh!" said Anna. "You are such an asshole. You don't have to be connected to her. Caring is not restricted to familial lines."

"What difference does me caring make? Nothing gets fixed." he asked.

"Duh," she said, "just because you can't fix the Syrian Civil War, doesn't mean you don't care, right?"

Harvard didn't respond. He watched Reena return to playing with her son.

"You must be shitting me," said Anna. "You are going to be so sorry." She grabbed him by the hand and slapped it hard.

"Ow."

Aleppo

The devastation from the bombing went as far as they could see.

St. Peter had said that she could manifest a body of her own for fifteen minutes and transport Harvard with her anywhere she liked.

"Wow, that's so cool. I grabbed your body off your couch, took us to Syria and manifested in one move!"

"Where the hell are we?"

"Aleppo, Syria."

"Are you fucking insane?"

"The jury is out."

They looked very odd -- she in her yoga outfit and he in jeans and a t-shirt. It was about 10:30 in the morning. The devastation was overwhelming. The images on the news were as feeble representing the situation as a pencil drawing of an IMAX 3D movie.

"We've got 15 minutes before we snap back home," said Anna.

From one of the ruined buildings a man and a woman were madly gesturing to them. They yelled "إرعال شامن الأخرج!"

"What are they yelling?" asked Harvard.

"It sounds like Arabic for 'get out of the street'."

Snipers, thought Harvard.

"Oh crap," said Anna, "I'm not supposed to take you anywhere dangerous."
Harvard started running for cover.
"Hey, wait for me!" yelled Anna.
The gunfire started when Harvard was about halfway to where the man and woman were hiding.

"!سرع اسرع" they yelled.
Anna took their advice, ran faster and caught up with Harvard as he cowered behind some fallen walls. Gunfire still was aimed at their position.

An older man and a young woman reached them. "مجنون؟ أذت هي".
"He's not crazy," responded Anna. "I'm an angel, in training, it's nice to meet you." Anna enjoyed shaking their hands. She didn't often have a chance to be alive again.
"English?" the man asked.
"Well ... Canadian," she said.
"Both?" They pointed at Harvard, who was curled up behind a fallen part of a building.
"Yes. His Dad is Pakistani and his Mom is anglo, which is why he kind of looks like you."
"Get us out of here," said Harvard to Anna.
"What? You aren't enjoying the scenery? This city predates the Bible. So cool."
The gunfire lessened, but occasional shots rang out.
"So, Harvard, did you see what happened here? These people here have been living with this horror for years and they still have the humanity to help out a couple of rubes in the middle of the street."

"I'm very grateful," said Harvard.
"You don't sound it. You don't think any of this is your problem."
"Do you have any supplies?" In halting English the older Syrian man continued. "How you have nothing with you? How get here?"
"Oh," said Anna. "I am so completely rude. I didn't bring anything." She suddenly sat down cross legged in the rubble and closed her eyes.
Harvard and the two Syrians looked at her with incomprehension. The gunfire started to increase. Abruptly, a platter of sandwiches appeared in her lap, all wrapped in plastic wrap.
"There," Anna said. "I kind of stole this from the fridge of a big downtown Toronto office." She handed it to the Syrians saying, "لمساعدت نا شكري في الطعام هذات تقبلوا أن أرجو." (Please accept this food in thanks for helping us.)
The Syrians opened the platter carefully. They were starving.
Gunfire picked up and one bullet ricocheted off some exposed rebar and hit Anna in the leg, shattering her femur.
"Holy shit!" yelled Harvard.
"Will you look at that?" said Anna.
The Syrians and Harvard dragged her further back out of the line of fire.
"Wow, that's new," said Anna. She was starting to turn white as a sheet.
"You can't die," said Harvard.
"Dude, I didn't know I could be injured. Why are those little birds flying around my head?"
The Syrians tried to perform first aid, but she waved them off. "Don't waste your supplies! We'll be gone soon."
"Can you take us out of here sooner?" asked Harvard.
"I've never tried to prematurely end my 15 minutes of being in a body," said Anna. "Just sit here and hold my hand. And don't get shot. That would be big trouble for me."
"Why?"
"Rules my friend. Rules."

Five minutes later, the two Syrians were left with a platter of sandwiches and a blood stain where two people had been sitting.

Retail Therapy

Back in Harvard's apartment, Anna said, "Wow, that was trippy." She was uninjured, clean and in ghost form.
Harvard was dusty, dirty and covered in her blood.
"Wow, you look terrible," she said.
Harvard looked at himself and held his hands in front of him. "Oh my god."

"Now, now, just head to the shower and everything will be OK." After he went into the bathroom she yelled, "I'd throw out those clothes if I were you!"

Thirty minutes later, Harvard reluctantly came back into the living room.

Anna was watching an episode of The Walking Dead. "You know," she said, "when I was young I let a bunch of boys convince me to go see the original Night of the Living Dead at a second run theatre on Bloor Street. I screamed my ass off. This is much nastier."

Harvard sat gently beside her, but not too close. He poked her in the shoulder to prove to himself she was ghostly. "How do you do those things? I have to assume that this short trip to Syria was real."

"I don't know how I do it. But, if it makes you feel better, I think I was shot to remind me that not doing what St. Peter said can be bad for me."

"How can you not know how you do this?" Harvard asked.

"Easy. You drive a car without any idea how a drive train in a gas or electric car works, right?"

"Yeah, but, I could figure it out."

"Let me put it another way," she said. "If you could talk to a school of fish, would you even bother asking how they know how to swim?"

Harvard sat listlessly. How do I get out of this?

"In answer to your question," said Anna, "you need to understand the value of doing things for people pretty much for no reason and with honest appreciation of their existence. Do you imagine that me bringing a plate of sandwiches was going to solve the problems in Aleppo? Of course not. But that doesn't mean it didn't give them a moment of comfort. Compassion for far away places is harder to muster when you don't have a sense of what's happening in your own backyard. Come on. Change into regular clothes. We're going shopping."

"What?"

"Just do it. I'll explain on the way. You also need a distraction before shell shock from our Syrian trip sinks in the wrong way."

As they drove a short distance to Centrepont Mall, Anna explained, "In order for you to understand people better, you need to interact with them. Since you have put your job together in a way that allows you to interact with almost no one, this festive season you will be an Unexpected Santa."

"What do you mean?"

"You are going to buy a festive Santa bag, fill it with random gifts and give them out at work tomorrow."

"Seriously. Why?"

"Yes seriously and because it's fun. And, because, everyone has an inner child, even you (although I think you misplaced it somewhere along the line) and gift-giving is the act of caring about someone. And, as we will prove tomorrow, the gift itself doesn't much matter."

At Centrepont, they started at the Canadian Tire where Anna pressured Harvard to fill up a cart with various Christmas baubles and ornaments as well as some random kitchen utensils.

In the mall itself they found some more childlike stores and bought things like POP Vinyl figures of various movie and TV characters.

Harvard was having more and more trouble paying as he made more and more purchases.

"Stop with the death grip on your credit card," said Anna. "We're almost done, you cheapskate."

When they were done, she said, "Now we have to wrap them. I noticed you have no wrapping paper at home."

"Seriously? There must be 45 things in this bag."

"Yes, seriously," she said, "Oh look! One of those charity wrapping stations."

Two bored teenaged girls, who were performing mandatory volunteer hours for their high school Socials course, were being supervised by a burly woman. She, from Harvard's perspective, was somewhere between 45 and 75 years of age and looked like she could spit acid.

You're kidding, he thought.

"Come on," she said, "you're about to make their evening."

"Hi," Harvard said reluctantly. "I, er, have a few things to wrap." He opened his bags onto their wrapping table.

"Oh my god," said one teenager.

"Tell them you'll give them \$200 and you'll help wrap," said Anna.

"What!?" said Harvard out loud.

"Excuse me?" said the acid-spitting burly matriarch.

"I'll pay you \$200 for the whole lot and I'll help wrap at this end of the table as far away as possible ... so as not to bother you. And to get out of here quicker."

"Deal. Girls, we got work to do!" The matriarch's mood improved abruptly.

Suddenly there was a giant wrapping party at Centrepont Mall and passers-by were particularly amused when a who-can-wrap-fastest contest broke out between Harvard and the teenagers. The matriarch was worried about quality, but Harvard explained that the gifts were for his ridiculous coworkers, none of whom were at all interested in quality control.

Anna smiled because she noticed that for the first time Harvard engaged in conversation spontaneously, i.e. she did not have to push him. Also, he seemed to take particular care in wrapping a POP Vinyl figure of The Flash.

On the drive home Anna said, "Wasn't that fun?"

"I feel like an idiot."

"Well, you are," she said. "But not for the reasons you think."

Unexpected Santa

The next morning Anna was bouncing off the walls with excitement. "We are going to have so much fun!"

Harvard was self-conscious on the subway as he carried his Santa bag. But it was Toronto at rush hour and anyone who found it sweet or silly wore a noncommittal expression.

At work Harvard asked Anna nicely for two hours to do some work so he would not fall behind. Because he'd asked nicely she relented. After two hours, she was relentless.

"Come on come on! We can tell so much about people as we do this."

Anna showed Harvard how to read expressions. As they handed things out, people were amazed to see Harvard anywhere but at his desk. As he handed gifts out, he said, "This is Unexpected Santa day. Enjoy."

Anna's commentary flowed along these lines:

- That guy thinks you're mental. He's embarrassed.
- She's shocked. She's going to cry later.
- Oh boy that guy's suspicious. Looking for the catch.
- Good grief another one who's going to blub even though the gift is a spatula.
- What's with the suspicious guys? Yikes.

Eventually they came to Reena's desk. Harvard had held back a specific gift for her.

"Hi Reena, I'm doing an Unexpected Santa gag and I have this for you, but I think your son might like it."

"Harvard. This seems out of character for you, if you don't mind me saying."

"I've been telling people that a demoness named Anna made me do it."

"Isn't the term for a female demon 'succubus'?" asked Reena.

"That term," said Harvard, "implies a sexual aspect to the demoness, which I assure you is not the case."

"Very funny," said Anna.

Reena tore open the gift and saw The Flash. "He'll love it," she said.

"You gotta go," said Anna, "She's gonna blub and she won't want you to see that."

"See you later Reena," and Harvard left to finish his gift giving.

The Party

After work, Anna and Harvard returned to his apartment.

"What are you going to wear tonight?" he asked.

"Do we really have to go to this?" asked Harvard.

"Yes," said Anna. "What are you going to wear?"

"A suit."

"Like you wear to work?"

"I'll wear a colourful tie."

"Well, you stay here and I'll go change."

"You're a ghost. Can't you look like anything?"

"Except monsters."

"Could have fooled me," he said.

"Ha ha. I'll be right back."

Harvard took a moment to ponder his situation. His original theory, in which he was suffering a prolonged hallucination, was not holding water and he had no other theory. But he did want this to stop. And he did not want to risk another incident like Aleppo. He reasoned that if this ghost or angel-in-training was an allegory, perhaps if he did somehow become more social, or less antisocial, then maybe she would go away.

At that moment she returned to the room wearing a little black dress with a shawl. The shawl had a holly and ivy print that worked well with matching earrings.

"Well," said Harvard, "I don't often say good things, but you and your outfit look great."

"Thank you!"

"It's a shame I'm the only one who'll see it."

"Oh, you never know. The night is young!"

Harvard felt a clenching sensation in his bowels.

Harvard, accompanied by the unseen Anna, arrived at the brew pub restaurant that the company had booked for the party. At the time they arrived, the party was well underway. Charles, the event coordinator, was at the door.

"Harvard," he said. "Good to see you. Glad you could make it. By the way, thanks for the measuring cups today. That was hilarious."

"My pleasure."

"Do you have a Plus 1 tonight?"

"Only my imaginary friend, I'm afraid."

Charles gave Harvard his drink ticket. Harvard had not been at a noisy party with dancing in ages. He headed to the bar and asked for the most expensive beer the ticket could provide.

Why am I here? he asked Anna silently.

"Drink, talk, make merry," she said.

They hung out at the bar where Anna told Harvard many things about his coworkers he didn't want to know. He did engage in some small talk. It turned out that most people were amused by his impromptu gift giving.

"What made you do it?" one coworker asked.

"An angel made me do it," he replied straight-faced. "You have to change things up sometime, eh?"

After a while Anna said, "This 21st century dance music isn't cutting it for me."

"Surely you can do something about that," Harvard said.

"That's a good idea." She floated toward the DJ and whispered in his ear.

She returned to the bar.

"Will you dance with me?" she asked.

"Won't I look like I'm dancing by myself? Hey, isn't that the title of an 80s song?"

"You won't be by yourself."

The bartender came by, saw Anna and said, "Hey. I didn't see you there before. Can I get you anything?"

"How could you miss me? But seriously, can you quickly put together a 'Sex on the Beach'?"

"Sure thing,"

Harvard's mouth was wide open. "You ... you're er, alive? Again?"

"For about 15 minutes."

"Anyone going to get shot?" he asked nervously.

"Nope. Like I said we should make merry, particularly for those who can't."

Harvard knew she meant the two Syrians.

The drink arrived and she pounded it back. "Ahhh," she said.

"Thirsty, hey?" said the bartender.

"Yes, he's paying by the way."

"As he should," said the bartender. Harvard handed the bartender his credit card to start a tab.

"Can you get us both tequila shots but don't go cheap, OK?" She winked.

"Never!" said the bartender.

The DJ started his (unplanned) 80s set with Talk Talk's It's my Life.

"Now we're talking," she said.

The tequilas arrived. "Liquid courage, my friend," said Anna. "Bottoms up!"

Harvard was gasping from the tequila as she led him onto the dance floor. Sadly with only about 13 minutes remaining, they could only dance through two 80s extended dance mixes. But all eyes were on them as Harvard, who most people at the party had never seen leave his desk, tried to keep up with the mysterious woman in black.

They returned to the bar.

"Is there time for me to buy you one more drink?" asked Harvard.

She asked for a Manhattan. But she was looking suddenly gloomy.

The drink arrived and she savored it.

"You seem unhappy," said Harvard.

"I'm going to fade away in a minute. Did I ever tell you how I died?"

"No. And I didn't think it was polite to ask."

"It never even occurred to you to ask."

"True."

"I died at a company party. I was sitting on edge of one of those party boats in Toronto Harbour. Drunk as skunk. Fell overboard and died. Someone made me laugh, I choked on my drink and fell over. I sank like a fucking stone."

"It must be hard to be here," said Harvard.

"I didn't even think of it until now," she said.

A coworker came by and said, "Hey who was that girl you were dancing with?" Anna was invisible again.

"That was Anna," said Harvard. "An old friend of mine from High School. She had to head out. Overcommitted."

"Wow," she sure didn't look like an old friend.

"I know no one better at hiding her age," said Harvard.

Anna had floated away from Harvard. He had a twinge. She had hardly ever been more than arm's length from him since she first appeared.

Other coworkers were peppering him with questions about her, why he didn't come out more and so forth.

For ten minutes he forgot about Anna. And for a second or two he allowed himself to be part of a community.

Then she was back. "Harvard, you have to come with me. There's a problem in the bathroom."

He excused himself from the conversation and headed with her.

"Hurry. There's a girl in the bathroom passed out. I can't tell what's wrong with her."

"Crap," said Harvard as he walked into the woman's bathroom. The word Fentanyl was in his mind. There were two rather drunk women weakly calling to a third woman in a stall. The stall door was locked so Harvard kicked it open. A woman he vaguely recognized from work -- Diane? Deirdre? -- was slumped over the toilet where she had vomited. He pulled her out of the stall, and laid her flat on the bathroom floor. She was not breathing. Harvard started chest compressions and yelled, "Call 911. Now!"

Two hours later, Harvard headed home. The unconscious woman, Deirdre was her name in fact, had been distressed to find a medium sized coworker atop of her, crushing her ribcage. She was even more distressed when he was replaced by two much larger paramedics. In the end a known medical condition of low blood pressure and far too much alcohol led to the near death episode.

"That was one hell of a party," said Anna.

As they entered his apartment, Harvard said, "I think I have to throw these clothes out too." He went to have a shower.

When he returned, she was watching TV. This time it was Saving Hope.

Harvard sat on the couch, switched off the TV and asked, "Did you know you saved that woman?"

"Nah. You did."

"I wouldn't have known she was there without you. The two girls she was with couldn't have performed first aid on a hand towel."

"Do you blame her?" asked Harvard.

"Her who?"

"Deirdre. Do you blame her for nearly dying?"

"No. What a question."

"Do you blame yourself for what happened to you? When you fell off that booze cruise."

"Uh, yeah. I do."

"Does that make sense? You are operating in a Christian context and therefore I think you've been forgiven, but you haven't forgiven yourself."

Anna started to cry.

"I have a theory," said Harvard. "There is no doubt that I desperately needed a kick in the ass. But I don't need to be saved. Deidre needed saving. And you need saving. Moreover, I believe you are an angel. But, feel free to tell St. Peter that if he needs my help, he can ask instead of setting up some elaborate scenario."

Anna wept harder.

"I am going to bed," he announced. "If you aren't here in the morning, I won't mind, but I will miss you."

Epilogue

Anna sat once again in the simple but somehow simultaneously fancy gold chair and, also once again, waited for St. Peter.

He arrived and she did not jump. Her heart was heavy with the sense of failure.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Don't be dense, you know. Miserable. I screwed up again."

"What would you say if I told you I thought your work with Harvard, and subsequently Deidre, was excellent?"

"I'd recommend drug testing and therapy."

"You believed him, right?" asked St. Peter. "About needing to forgive yourself."

"Yes ..."

"Good! Angels can't have crippling amounts of self doubt and self loathing." From a pocket, St. Peter pulled out a small velvet box.

"Tell me you're not proposing," said Anna.

St. Peter let out a hearty laugh. "No, no," look inside.

Anna opened the box and found two tiny moving wings -- angel wings. She looked at St. Peter; she had no words.

"They will grow on you," he said. "Quite literally. Congratulations!"