GUARDIAN

 Whether you realize it or not -- from the moment of your conception in the womb to the instant of your last exhaled breath – you are being lovingly watched over and protected by a unique and powerful spiritual being. Some faiths refer to this entity as your ‘guardian angel’. It helps you choose between right and wrong, and acts as your ‘inner voice’ -- your conscience. This spirit has been represented in artworks from many cultures across the ages. Sometimes the angel has wings, but like the halo in related religious imagery, the wings don’t actually exist. They are just a symbol for identification.

 What follows is my personal testimony of this curious phenomenon. Naturally, you are free to believe it or not…

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 My first, clearly remembered event related to my guardian angel happened in the autumn of 1966 when I still lived in Chicago. I was waiting to take my regular weekday CTA bus to my high school, which was located about ten miles away. I was a sophomore that year. The day was blustery, and in my haste, I tripped over a street curb and dropped a pile of homework papers. As I tried to recover them, one flew between two parked trucks and went sailing across the middle of the street near the 82nd and Exchange Avenue bus stop.

 I went in a careless rush between the two trucks and was ready to cross the busy street to capture the paper, which had by now traveled completely across the street. I could see it, and my focus was totally trained on it. I foolishly neglected to look either left or right. As I went forward, I distinctly heard my first name called aloud, and a warning female voice saying “*STOP*!” Instinctively, I froze in place. Just then, another truck roared past down the street, mere inches from me! I felt the strong gust of its wake as I stood stock still. I realized immediately that had I not stopped, I would have been instantly hit by the moving truck and killed. The realization of my near demise terrified me, and I began to shake from fear. The invisible voice – whatever it was – had saved my life. And there was no one else anywhere near me to have spoken my name or warned me. I was so much in shock that I even forgot to retrieve the errant homework paper. Eventually, I calmed down, and walked slowly to the bus stop, where I caught my regular CTA ride to school. That night in bed, I replayed the potentially deadly scene over and over in my mind. Where had my warning come from? I was mystified. I never told anyone about this strange occurrence until years later.

 The next ‘intervening’ event was even more dramatic. It was October 30, 1972 – a date I will never forget. It was an early Monday morning, chilly and foggy. I was temporarily living back at home between college semesters. That particular day, I needed to go downtown on business to the Cook County Courthouse by 9:00 a.m. I was dressed up in a sport coat, dress shirt and tie. I was all set to leave home and catch the IC #720 commuter express train at 6:42 a.m. at my nearby 83rd Street station. By taking this early morning ride, I would have plenty of time to get downtown and have a nice breakfast, and still make my 9:00 a.m. appointment. Suddenly, just as I was about to leave the house, I heard a soothing but commanding female voice say, "*Don't go*. *Take another train*. *Trust me*.” I looked around the room but saw no one. Eerie and unsettling, to say the least. My gut instinct said to believe the warning. I immediately recalled the voice from six years earlier also warning me. So I heeded it, and had breakfast at home instead, and planned on taking the 7:52 as an alternative, which would bring me downtown to the Randolph Street station at 8:31. The courthouse was a brisk fifteen-minute walk from there, so I would easily still be on time.

 It takes just ten minutes to walk from my house to arrive at the 83rd Street station, so I leisurely watched the morning news on TV while I ate. I planned on leaving the house at 7:40. Just a few minutes before that time, a news bulletin flashed across the screen: two IC trains were reported to have collided at the 27th Street station!

 I was stunned. All rail traffic was suspended due to this emergency, so I was not going downtown anytime soon that day. I watched in horror as the details of the disaster unfolded. By noon, it had been determined that 45 people had died, and that 332 had been injured. This was to be the worst train accident in Chicago history. IC train #416 – one of the new bi-level Highliners -- had slowly backed up after overshooting the 27th Street platform (an allowed action for the engineer, after he had received permission from the conductor), but this unfortunate action had unknowingly cleared the automatic block signals so that an express commuter train was mistakenly allowed to proceed on the same track. The conductor had tragically neglected to exit the train as it reversed and wave his prescribed warning hand flags on the tracks for any other approaching trains. The express rammed the Highliner at high speed. The rear of the Highliner was crushed, as was the front of the express train -- both crumpled like flattened accordions, killing and maiming the hapless passengers inside.

 The express train, as you probably guessed, was IC #720 – my original choice to ride that morning.

 Once again I had been saved. But by whom? And why?

 I had attended a Catholic grammar school and high school, so I remembered seeing holy cards with colorful illustrations of winged guardian angels watching over sleeping babies, or protecting children from assorted dangers. When our daughter was born in 1993, I looked in vain for such a guardian by her crib as she slept. But her angel must have been invisible. Or so I thought – until I saw my own for the first time in 2009.

 I was visiting England for a history project (without my wife, who was assisting her elderly mother at her home) for a fortnight that summer, and had just attended an emotionally moving Sunday service at Canterbury Cathedral. It was a drizzly and windy day, so after the crowds and clergy emptied out, I stayed alone under the amazing vaulted ceiling, waiting for the weather to subside a bit before heading back to London. After a stirring Anglican sermon and with the beautiful voices of the choir still in my memory, I felt I was temporarily bathed in a rare, humbling state of grace, for lack of a better description.

 I walked past the altar memorial to St. Thomas Becket, who had been murdered (by four knights devoted to King Henry II) in this very cathedral on December 29, 1170. I went to a remote corner of the cathedral and sat in a polished wooden pew to contemplate the stained glass windows and meditate.

 Suddenly, I thought I saw a young woman dressed in all-white. I happened to glance over my right shoulder when I smelled the faint whiff of jasmine blossoms. The mysterious personage was hovering above the ground. Her eyes were an intense but loving blue-green, and she emitted a subtle aura around her body of the same vibrant blue-green color. Her soft, honey-colored hair was flowing and dancing in an invisible wind of sorts. She was warmly smiling. Her face was oval-shaped and indescribably beautiful and peaceful, and her skin had the timeless luster of perfect health. The only other part of her body that was uncovered was her hands, with her fingers long and tapered. This vision (or hallucination?) lasted for but a few moments. I thought I saw her mouth say one word: “*Aurora*” -- which I heard not with my ears but silently inside my mind instead. Then she vanished.

 Back at my B & B in Kensington that night, I replayed the vision over and over in my mind. She was the epitome of everything I found attractive in a woman, an ideal as if from a dream. Then there were the uncanny components of compatibility: it just so happened that I adored the scent of jasmine; that blue-green was my favorite color; and that the very word “aurora” fascinated me ever since childhood, when I first saw the mysterious -- even heavenly -- swirling color images of the northern polar aurora borealis in a World Book encyclopedia.

 Seeing as I had a few more days left in London before returning home, I decided to visit the British Library and research more about the theory of guardian angels. I learned that males would be assigned a female angel, and that females would get a male angel. You were also matched with your specific race – African, Asian, etc. The angels were invisibly ‘present’ 24/7, and stayed close near one’s right shoulder. Their job was to guide, to protect, and to warn. In a rare, more intimate ‘visitation,’ a person might even detect the faint odor of flowers, especially roses, or even smell the pleasing scent of vanilla when one’s guardian angel was especially close by. Sometimes, a pure white feather would appear and be left as if by magic. If a guardian angel spoke, it was directly into one’s mind. And no one could ever see another person’s angel. Humans were specially endowed with sparks of divinity by the Creator. He aided His children by using His legions of guardian angels to shield us from dangers and temptations. There is an eternal struggle between Good and Evil, and the Forces of Darkness continuously try to capture our souls during our brief time in physical form on earth. Our angels help us thwart that demise.

 Another curious incident of a possible ‘celestial intervention’ occurred in 2011. I was pruning some stray branches on one of the nine Italian cypress trees that act as a border on the western side of our house property. I was using an extendable pole saw while standing on a tall, tripod-legged wooden orchardist’s ladder. This particular ladder was very old – given to us many years ago by my wife’s father, who raised acres of Bartlett pears in San Jose, California at one time. As I was reaching high with the pole saw, one of the top ladder steps broke beneath me. I started to fall sideways. As I teetered, I reflexively pushed the pole saw away from me so as not to get cut by its sharp teeth when I fell. Suddenly, I felt something like a strong hand on my upper back pushing me forward -- back towards the sides of the ladder, which I quickly grasped as I recovered my balance and steadiness. I slowly lowered myself down off the broken ladder to the ground and to safety. I assumed Aurora had helped me once again!

 Finally, I’ll share an episode whereby my angel helped me save the life of another person. The date was May 17, 2013, near Emporia, Kansas. I was heading to give a Friday evening history lecture at the State University there, driving southwest on I-35 from the airport in Kansas City.

 The emergency weather bulletin on the car radio warned of the probability of an approaching band of severe tornadoes. It was about two o’clock in the afternoon. The sky grew dark, and took on the sickly greenish-yellow and gray color I recognized from experiencing such storms in Illinois. The winds picked up and the temperature dropped. I slowed down my driving speed as I felt my rental car being buffeted to and fro by the gusts. Then I spotted not one but three twisters as they touched the ground. I heard warning sirens wailing in the distance. The tornadoes were heading in my direction, and fast! I looked for an overpass to provide some protection, but there were none in sight -- just flat farmland, freshly plowed, on both sides of the concrete highway. I thought about pulling over and stopping, and crawling under my car. But then I saw a lone farmhouse just off the exit to the little town of Lebo, itself located two miles away. I made the instant decision to go right to the farmhouse.

 By now the winds were howling like a roaring freight train, with two angry funnels a mere mile away and barreling towards me. I could see two adults and two small children from the farmhouse running through tossed debris and flying dirt to get to their underground storm shelter near their side yard. The front screen door of the house was torn off and was cart-wheeling across the ground. A clothesline with hung laundry had collapsed. Folding lawn chairs were flipping up and down and all around.

 I stopped my car close to the storm shelter and jumped out. The people yelled to me above the noise to get underground with them. A barking border collie was grabbed, then lifted up by the father, while the wife held the hands of her crying two girls, her apron flapping and her hair blowing every which way. When our faces were close to each other, the mother screamed as she realized something: “Oh my God…where is Tyler? Wade, is he still in the house?” The father immediately dropped the dog and ran toward the house, dodging loosened roof shingles and broken tree branches. The sky was black, the pressure differential from the winds were exploding the windows of the farmhouse from within, and the large elm on the front lawn was half uprooted and teetering. The deadly tornadoes were absolutely unstoppable.

 It was then that I heard a familiar voice, calm yet direct. “*The boy is frightened and hiding in the barn*. *Go get him*. *You will both be safe*. *God will protect you*. *Hurry*.”

 I obeyed the command without hesitation. The large red barn was close by. I yelled to the mother over the roaring, ”I’ll check the barn!”

 I ran there in seconds and, once inside, I saw two panicked horses trapped in their stalls. I let them run out and they galloped away in fear. Then I called out to Tyler. Sure enough, there he was – hiding, frozen behind some stacked hay bales. His face was white with terror. I scooped him up and carried him, running, back to the storm shelter. The father came back and met us, and the mother cradled her boy, and we all went down underground as the father bolted the shelter door shut behind us. Then we waited.

 The ground shook and the air moaned. We heard terrible crashes and loud explosion-type noises along with the distant warning sirens. The border collie, “Max”, whimpered, then paced in the compact dirt-floor space, but the three young children had settled down, their parents coolly reassuring them. Time crawled by – probably just a few minutes in reality, but it sure seemed longer. Looking around, I noticed that the shelter also acted as a kind of root cellar, hence I saw some wooden side shelves with various cans and Mason jars of stored food. I gave the family (the “Carpenters”) my name and thanked them for sharing their shelter. “It’s me that should be thanking you, friend. You saved my boy’s life,” Wade replied. His wife, Sylvia, with moist eyes, hugged me.

 The sun returned after the terrible storm passed, its rays peeking through the slats of the shelter door. We were alive! But when we exited the shelter, we saw the full horror of the tornado’s destruction. The Carpenter’s farmhouse and barn were obliterated, and their pick-up was turned upside down. Wade was stunned. “We’ve got insurance, but it can’t cover all of this,” he murmured. I told him I would go on-line when I got to Emporia and set up a GoFundMe page for him and his fine family. They gave me their contact information and the name of their bank. Miraculously, my rental car survived – suffering just a shattered back window and one side window and several body dents. So I drove the five Carpenters to town with me, passing several flashing emergency vehicles, police cars, and fire trucks on their way to help other unfortunates. Luckily, Sylvia’s parents lived in Emporia, so the family could stay with them for the time being. I dropped them off and we said an emotional goodbye. Emporia itself had been unharmed, such is the hit or miss nature of a rogue tornado’s path. When I reported to the State University, they told me that my lecture had been cancelled, due to all able-bodied students and staff volunteering to help with the storm’s clean-up and offer relief to its victims. I checked into a local motel, emailed my wife that I was O.K., then set up the GoFundMe page for the Carpenters on the internet as I promised. Saturday’s newspaper the next day reported two dead and seventeen injured from the attacking tornadoes. The main tornado had torn a swath, southwest to northeast, twenty-six miles long and a half-mile wide. On Sunday, I went to church with the rest of the Emporia community, and prayed. And of course I gave heartfelt thanks once again to my loving guardian angel, before driving back to Kansas City (after swapping for another rental car) and flying home.

 I often wonder how many other times my guardian angel helped me without my even realizing it. I figure it was more than one would think.

 It is said that when we die, our special angel will meet us as a faithful, familiar friend, gently take our hand, and lead us beyond to the next spiritual dimension. Although I hope that inevitable time is still far in the future, it will be joyous to see Aurora again someday -- she of the serene, blue-green eyes and glowing face of perfect, selfless peace – my miracle helper, God’s amazing gift…

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 July 26, 2018