

## Angels Dancing

By Jerry Mauro

It was a time when our fears were indeed more tangible than fear itself. The country was between wars, pestilence had destroyed the tobacco crop, and life was a struggle against famine and death. While my father worked three jobs to sustain us in proud poverty, my mother fought the terrible affliction that had taken over her body.

My mother was old when she married, and her hair was already gray when I was born. The face that had witnessed many summers was lined with the deep furrows of winter's retribution. Although age and sickness had distorted her countenance, she was beautiful to me, as all mothers are to their children. Her name was Sarah, but she was so pleased to be called Momma that my father addressed her that way as well. She said she fell in love again on the day I was born, and for eleven years, she nurtured me with affection. So, I was startled on that cold October day when I found all of my possessions packed into one tattered suitcase. I was being sent away; no mention was made of my returning.

Before I left, I held her frail, white, effete hand in mine. We compressed emotions we would never share and words we would never speak into long minutes of eloquent silence. As I looked into her bright blue eyes, our souls touched. She shared the emotion because she turned her head away, acknowledging that some intimacy had taken place that neither of us could understand. A part of me died when I kissed her one last time. I walked away on leaden feet and heard her whisper, "I'll always be with you."

I was sent to live with an aunt and uncle. Childless, they made room for me in their small cottage. My aunt was a generous soul and tried many times to lift my spirit, but darkness consumed me. Winter passed. In springtime, when I learned my mother had left us, I wrote to my father, begging to join him. When the letter was returned because he had moved, I realized I had been abandoned.

I wallowed in an abyss of self-pity. Alive but not living, I denied my mother's death by perpetuating her presence. Her voice lived in the rustle of the trees, her touch graced the wind on my face. In the morning, the mourning dove would lament her requiem; in the evening, her shadow would afflict my restless sleep. In my deepest moments of despair, I would go into the recesses of my heart and withdraw memories of her - the smell of her sachet, the crispness of her apron, and the strength of her love. With my depression assuaged, I would place the memory back and struggle to survive.

I tried to deny my depression. After school, I assisted my uncle at his farm supply store. We worked hard and remained poor. He extended credit to his customers, and we never had much on our table at night. One day, shortly after the bank failed, he walked to the bridge, took off his overcoat, neatly folded it on the railing, and jumped into the roiling water. My aunt took over the business, and I continued to work at the store, remaining to myself.

One hot, sultry Sunday, I heard the front gate squeak. Moments later a young person of my age appeared at the screen door. A large straw hat covered a plain face. Bamboo fishing poles were slung over a too big cotton shirt that stopped at the knees. Two bare feet extended from a pair of rolled up cuffs.

“Wanna go fishing?” the visitor inquired. I viscerally shook my head no. After I moved away from the door, I changed my mind, but when I looked back, the stranger had left.

Nothingness reclaimed my life. I regretted I had been so hasty in turning down the offer. A few days later, the front gate again squeaked; the stranger had returned, straw hat and all. A shoulder was shrugged to raise the poles in invitation.

This time I was quick to accept the request, and, latching the gate closed, I followed down the road. Live oaks with gnarled branches formed arches over the dusty country lane. Bursts of wildflowers dotted the eerie dark woods with bouquets of color. In the distance the sylvan setting revealed a still pond. The sun shimmered on the water and dragonflies flew in truculent patterns over the surface. As I stopped to catch my breath, I caught a glimpse of black-eyed-susans struggling to stay free from encroaching weeds. My mother had always favored them, and I thought of her.

The stranger saw my disconsolate look, and the face under the big straw hat regarded me with a pained look of sympathy. The look was an ineffable statement of shared grief that could only be made by someone who had also lost a loved one. Rather than use words to memorialize this common bond – we did not know each other well enough to exchange intimate details of our lives – we stowed the gear into a catboat and began to row.

Stopping in the shade, the oars were raised. Then my friend turned and removed the straw hat. Freed from its constraint, long flaxen hair tumbled down the too big shirt.

“You’re a girl!” I exclaimed. Although she had done nothing to deceive me, I was petulant that I had somehow been tricked. Glancing at her timorously, I could not place her from town, yet she seemed familiar. I continued to stare at her hoping to produce a discomfort that would return us to shore.

She reached into the gearbox. “You like baloney?”

I nodded my head yes; she handed me half a sandwich. I would take her food, baloney was my favorite, but was still intransigent about talking to her. We ate in silence. Later, we baited our hooks and fished.

After long hours of silence, I again glanced at her. She looked up, and I suddenly became ashamed of my puerile behavior. “I thought you were a boy,” I shyly confided. “In fact you reminded me of Huckleberry Finn.”

She smiled and said, “I thought you couldn’t talk.”

It was my turn to grin. With the ice broken, we talked. I told Huck of my loss and abandonment; I told her of feelings that I had inside me, distant voices struggling to be heard. She appeared startled when I mentioned that while I loved my mother, I hated her for dying. She never said much but listened sagaciously. We stayed until the frogs began to croak and the mosquitoes drove us off. She walked me to the squeaky gate and continued down the road.

The rest of the summer was spent in splendid misery. After work, I would wait by the road for hours, and if Huck did not appear, I was inconsolable. On the best days, I would see the tops of the fishing poles over the curve in the road. Then, the straw hat would appear, and my life would begin again. When I had a day off, we would go to the pond and spend the long idyllic day together, fortified by orange Nehi and baloney sandwiches. When night fell and the fireflies cast a spectral glow over the water, we would unhappily give up the pond and slowly trudge back, unwilling to have the day end.

My grief ameliorated, and when it left, hope flourished. We talked about my future; Huck thought I would make a fine writer. "You have things inside of you that should be heard," she said. "Use your words to help others." When she said that, I remember shuddering. She was young, yet she had a wisdom that could only come from years of living.

Late in summer, on a cool day that was the precursor of autumn, Huck arrived without her fishing poles. Nervously swinging the squeaky gate back and forth, her blue eyes puffy with tears, she told me she would not be back for a while. I was always aware of the impermanence of our relationship, but recognition is not reality, and I was not prepared for another loss. She left and melancholy returned. Denying her departure, I spent hours by the squeaky gate looking down the dusty road for a glimpse of the straw hat. When weeks turned into months, I gave up hope of seeing her again.

I took creative writing classes at school. I wrote about the abandonment of hope and the emptiness of despair. Writing about my misery seemed to take away its sharp edge, and, if only to exorcise my demons, I continued to write. After graduation, with no friends to covet my time, I spent countless hours of countless days hand writing page after page of short stories. When my fingers rebelled against my manic efforts, I would put the pencil down and begin to read, carefully observing the style of others.

Shortly after I reached my majority, my aunt passed away. When her affairs were settled, I was mildly surprised that she had left me the cottage. I sold the business, found a job at the library, and let writing define my life. Separated from the outside world, I clearly heard a voice inside me. It was muted at first, but I was a good listener and began committing its sound to paper. My efforts began to receive sufficient literary and commercial recognition to allow me to leave my day job. I was proud of my status as a writer and in awe of the omnipotence that it gave me over a blank page: the power to manipulate human drama and transform it into words that resonated in the hearts and minds of others. I accepted success but did not welcome the celebrity that accompanied it. Shy and a bit distrustful of urban living, I steadfastly refused to take an apartment in the city and remained alone at the cottage.

My limited success did not fill the hole in my life. Late one evening, as I sat on the front porch swing, I realized the extent of my isolation. My mother was dead, and my father had rejected me. I had no siblings and no living relatives. I was as alone as one can be.

On a spring day so fine that it left me temporarily estranged from my Muse, I abandoned my typewriter and went to town for food and supplies. My journey was interrupted by a white pickup truck stalled on the road ahead. Steam billowed from the obstinate vehicle, partially shrouding a woman beating her fists on its hood. Driven by the same curiosity that tempted Odysseus, I pulled off the road and approached the mist-covered siren.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"No. Yes. Oh!" The woman seemed embarrassed by her emotional display and, wanting to detach herself from it, looked at her hands as if they had a life of their own. She pointed at me. "You're the writer fellow."

I raised my hands in surrender. "I plead guilty."

She stared at me, but I ignored her and raised the hood of the moribund vehicle. I saw that a radiator hose had burst and offered to take her to town for a replacement. Her

name was Dora. Once in my car, she wasted no time in telling me that she did not like my books.

I squinted at her in mock recognition. It did not take me long to answer, "You must be the critic who dismissed my last novel as 'Vastly overrated.'"

Laughing, she revealed that she was a widowed artist whose studio was next to my cottage. She had just left her son at school and was going to her gallery in town when her pickup broke down.

Her gratitude for my rescuing her soon turned to displeasure. She coldly told me, "I've lived next to you for six months and never saw you." Although she repeated that remonstrance several times that morning, she was an otherwise pleasant companion. By the time I finished replacing the defective hose, I was reluctant to say goodbye.

The event would have faded from memory, but a few weeks later, a flat tire conspired to leave her pickup blocking my entrance to the state road. Dora did not have a jack, but the one in my car proved eminently suitable. Her son Jason, a tow-headed boy of six or seven summers, had accompanied her, and as I worked, he watched my movements with devoted attention. When I finished, some imprecise emotion made me take a copy of my latest book from the back of my car. I handed it to Dora. "Here, tell me what you don't like at dinner on Saturday."

She was flustered. "I can't leave my son."

"Then I'll bring dinner to your house, and you can critique my book for dessert."

After a long silence, she finally accepted my offer, and that Saturday young Jason greeted me at the door. He took the carton I was carrying and soon tripped, scattering eggs on the floor. He looked at me for some sign of censure; instead, I put my finger to my lips and went to my car for some rags. Working together, we formed a nascent friendship as we erased all traces of the accident. Later, he helped me prepare the Caesar salad and was pleased to have a legitimate reason to crack eggs.

Dora had refurbished an old barn into an artist's studio and living area. Its comfortable, eclectic warmth made my bachelor cottage seem stygian in comparison. After dinner, we settled into two comfortable armchairs, and she picked up my novel and thoughtfully considered the pages. "Do you cook like this all the time?"

"No," I admitted, "only as often as you come up with non sequiturs." I looked at her; then sheepishly went on. "I had some help. After I invited you...invited myself over...and you accepted, I realized that I had no cooking skill, none at all." She was amused. "I called my agent and described my predicament. She sent recipes for a meal that she swore an idiot couldn't ruin." I paused; then I continued. "She even sent the ingredients; one box had dry ice, another had a carton of eggs. I can't blame her for that; I'm not sure whether eggs come from chickens or from stores."

She smiled. "Why did you invite me...invite yourself...to dinner?"

I thought long and hard. "Because you seemed nice."

"Nice!" she erupted. "Nice?" She stopped, picked up my book, and read from the cover: "Lyrical style...poetic syntax." Pausing, she added, "And I'm *nice*."

She was toying with me and enjoying my discomfort. I carefully considered my reply. "Those reviews were written by my publisher, who is not objective. Seriously, I do use words with insouciance, and upon consideration, I do admit 'nice' might be considered a homely word...by some." I raised my finger as a warning, "However, if

these same people considered the paucity of things to which the word can be applied, they would conclude that 'nice' is indeed a meritorious form of flattery."

She considered my rejoinder, then bowed her head and raised her hands. "Indeed, sir, your prolix power of persuasion has convinced me that I am a nice person." Now flattered, she laughed. "Nice, indeed!"

"And," my voice trailed off as I continued, "I did enjoy your company a few weeks ago."

She was startled by my remark. "Well, next time I'll invite you over, and I'll do the cooking. Before I was married, my roommate was a sous-chef at a four-star restaurant, and she taught me the difference between a roux and a risotto."

As we continued talking, she stirred unfamiliar emotions, but I was reluctant to surrender to them. She had a disquieting ability to see inside of me and bring out things from private places I had hidden from myself. This frightened me, and at the same time, made me feel like a little boy again. In real life, after my betrayal by my mother, I had no confidence with women and, remembering her son, even less confidence in my paternal skill.

Jason, however, did not have a similar reserve. After dinner, he took me to his room, withdrew a treasure box from under his bed, and proudly displayed its contents. Surrounded by wallpaper decorated with dancing cowboys and wild horses, he guilelessly proffered marbles, coins, and baseball cards with infectious enthusiasm and a proud smile. Later, freshly emerged from a bath, Jason curled up in my lap and fell asleep. He smelled like a field of clover after a warm summer rain. I looked down at him and realized his dependency evoked extraordinary feelings in me. After his bedtime, Dora and I continued to talk; we talked of my novel, of poetry, and of life, punctuating our words with long silences during which we sensed the inexorable forces, as old as time itself, that were drawing us together.

My visits to the barn continued. I helped Jason with his homework; his mind was incisive. He excelled in arithmetic and had a precocious understanding of the mathematics of life. He asked endless questions that often reversed the role of student and teacher.

One evening, after one of Dora's splendid little suppers, he timidly pulled my trouser. "Mommy said to ask you," he said.

"OK, Jason." I tousled his hair.

"Where does light go when it dies?"

I confessed that I did not know. I glanced at Dora; she moved her head from side-to-side in bemused wonder.

Dora was an excellent mother, but she readily ceded some parental responsibility to me, and I, in turn, enjoyed my growing paternal role in Jason's life. I spent endless hours watching him play soccer. The sport was establishing a tentative presence in the country, and Jason, a budding iconoclast, preferred it to the more popular football. I could not help noticing that once he took the field, all eyes were riveted on him, expecting him to do something heroic. He played to win, but accepted defeat graciously, sensing it was an aberration. I was proud to bask in his reflected glory, and after a game, I always felt privileged that he came over to me to have an arm put on his shoulder. We would walk home, always stopping to toast the day with oceans of milkshakes and mountains of ice cream.

On his birthday, and over his mother's objections, I presented him with a shiny new red bicycle. As he sat on the seat, I was concerned about his small size and questioned the wisdom of my choice. I looked down, and his white-knuckled grip on the handlebar showed that he perhaps shared my misgivings. All my doubts, however, were assuaged by the eager smile on his face. Slowly, with one hand on his belt and the other on the handlebars, I pushed him away from the curb into a world of independence.

The bicycle was a worthy foe. Reluctant to yield its secrets, it made Jason struggle for hours until it slowly began to balance. When Jason looked over his shoulder and said, "You can let go now," I did, and Jason zigzagged down the driveway, first cautiously, then with a growing confidence. He stayed out in the driveway until the shadows lengthened and Dora came out and began clapping for her hero. I moved closer to her and noticed there were tears in her eyes.

Jason grew up that day, and I did too. I became acutely aware of the push-pull nature of parenthood - that sometimes children must be pushed away for their own good. I remembered how I was forced from my home, and I was now confused; it was no longer so simple. Perhaps the hardest thing in life is knowing when to let go. The thought disturbed and consumed me. Wanting to find answers to long unanswered questions, I took leave of Dora and Jason and returned to my childhood home. Even though two decades had passed, enough people remembered my parents to create a creditable picture of their last days together.

Soon after I left, my mother went blind and my father stayed home to care for her. My mother did not want me to witness her suffering and had made my father agree to send me away. Her last days were hard on my father; people in town remembered him as a wizened old man with a sad look in his eyes. After my mother died, creditors seized what little he had, and he moved north to find work, hoping to send for me later.

I felt remorseful for empty years I had spent blaming my parents. During the long, tortuous trip home, I thought of them and felt unworthy and guilty. Love has many incarnations, and I was too imperfect to recognize their love for me made them send me away. My thoughts turned to Dora and Jason, and I was enveloped by a primal urge to protect them; it was an urge so strong that its perception astonished and humbled me far more than my capacity to understand or cope.

Soon after I returned home, Dora and I announced our engagement. When we were in town together, our love was so palpable that we would get furtive glances and approving smiles from those who remembered their own long-forgotten feelings.

The voice inside of me no longer spoke in muted tones. With love to inspire me, I completed a novel that sensitively combined belonging, love, and charity in such just proportions that it was critically acclaimed and perversely lingered on the best-seller list. Later, when it commanded an obscene amount for the movie rights, I bought Dora a station wagon to replace the aging white pickup that had brought us together. Jason helped me select it and cajoled his mother into accepting it as a birthday gift.

On a day in which the trees were budding with the promise of summer, Dora and I were married in the garden outside of her studio. We accepted the felicitations of our neighbors and friends, and then retired to the perfect days that would inevitably follow.

I moved into the barn and used the cottage as a writer's studio. Each day was a celebration of life and love. Before, without love, I was merely trespassing on the human condition; now, with love, I was learning to walk in an unfamiliar world.

The first Christmas after our marriage, Dora and I wanted to buy Jason a puppy. Realizing that a dog's short life had a too-soon sad consequence, he refused our offer. "It's too sad," he said. It was clear Jason was a rare treasure. I began to think of myself as less of a parent and more of a conservator.

Years passed. They were kind to us, and they were especially kind to Jason. He wore his age with indifference, seeming to be older, seeming to be graced by a perceptive wisdom that put him years ahead of his contemporaries. It was obvious that Jason had special gifts, but he had a noblesse oblige that diffused any jealousy. He was kind and inquisitive; he had a sincere interest in his contemporaries and a desire to help them. Dora and I knew that, in children, jealousy often metastasized into physical rancor. Jason sensed this too, but had the uncanny ability to fit in, even as he was set apart.

Jason had his own set of commandments and would manifest them in different ways. When he was twelve or thirteen, he once returned from school with his clothes torn, cuts on his face, and scrapes on his knuckles. It was evident that he had been fighting, and as this was such an aberration from his true nature, Dora and I eagerly awaited an explanation.

While Dora washed his cuts and applied iodine to his abrasions, he explained that he was walking home, heard sounds, and saw three boys attacking a schoolmate. The feral nature of their attack alarmed him, and he quickly entered the fray. He was neither a boxer nor wrestler, but his athleticism allowed him to mete out enough retaliation that the boys soon grew tired and went away. Dora told me later that she was proud of Jason, but, apparently, that day her maternal instinct was stronger and she chided him for putting himself in danger.

"You didn't know if they had a knife," she said. "You could have been badly hurt."

I remember the insouciant way Jason shrugged his shoulders. He dismissed her censure, "I had to help. It wasn't right. It just wasn't right." Dora and I looked at each other, understanding that living with him was an extraordinary experience given to very ordinary people.

One summer day too fine for work, I packed a picnic basket and, together with Jason, spirited Dora away from her studio. Hand in hand, we tramped down country roads to the same hidden pond that I had last visited with Huck. Jason picked forget-me-nots and, smiling at the ponderous symbolism, I placed them in Dora's hair. As gossamer clouds hovered over the coruscating water, I reflected happiness. We watched the sun walk across the pond and then, as heat lightning flared in the summer night, walked home, consigning the day to that place in the soul where perfect memories are stored.

When Jason entered high school, he was a close friend of nearly every book in my library. He had memorized many of the sonnets of Shakespeare, plodded through the darkness of Dostoyevsky, and thoughtfully rejected the agonizing negativism of Nietzsche. Books were his friends, and he read voraciously as if searching to find answers to unasked questions.

He knew language and used it to capitalize on his puckish sense of humor. After he called a neighbor a zeppelin too many times to be ignored, I asked him why he persisted in using this sobriquet as the party in question was not overweight. "No," he replied, "but he's full of hot air."

His love of reading encouraged him to write, and his introspection made it seem too easy. Superiority was an element in all of his endeavors, and he wrote brilliant little stories, tightly constructed, in which the unsaid often suggested delicious possibilities. Striking metaphors and similes exploded like grenades on the otherwise sparse text. For two years he was editor of the high school literary magazine, and he would fill dead space with splendid little aphorisms. I remember one because it defined him so well: "Problems are the grist of opportunity." It was evident that he regarded life as an endless succession of infinite opportunities, all with an undeniably positive resolution.

Dora and I would frequently ask him about his future interests, but he was curiously noncommittal. Although he was an excellent student, near the top of his class, he was aware, and I sensed, that his true intellectual skills did not lie in the absorption of disparate facts. Rather, he had intuitive skills that cannot be taught, gifts that were somehow diminished when put on paper. Once, he was asked to write about "tyranny" for his government class; he defined it as love, claiming it was the ultimate tyranny as it forever subjugated one person to another. I thought it was refreshingly original – and admired the way he developed it – but never learned if his teacher shared my opinion.

My refusal to pander to his age sometimes caused trouble. On a cold winter morning in which he and his mother were arguing about his wearing a heavier jacket to school, he pointed to me and said, "He never treats me like a kid." I was pleased that he appreciated our relationship, even if his pointing it out to his mother was less than judicious.

Wanting to expand the envelope of his existence, he began to read books on sailing, and for his sixteenth birthday, Dora and I bought him a little sloop that he would take into the ocean and sail with abandon. There is something primordial about the wind, and Jason took great delight in its companionship. He would point the sailboat into a gust, fighting the heeling forces by placing his body over the gunwale, taking great delight in the rhythmic rise and fall of the swelling sea. He spent that summer sailing, always delighting in pushing the boat to its limit. His bronzed good looks invariably attracted a number of young ladies. He would frequently take them out sailing, and they would walk back home with him at the end of the day. He was respectful to girls, it was not his nature to be otherwise, but was thankfully oblivious to their flirtatious nature.

The élan with which he attacked life infected others. I often felt I was Icarus, soaring above the earth on giant wings. I watched the world from my lofty sinecure, arrogantly believing that I was divorced from worldly concerns, until a phone call forever changed my life. It was the marina. Jason had taken his sailboat out that morning and had not returned. The Coast Guard was dispatched on an exhaustive search, but when darkness fell, we knew our lives had been forever diminished. Ultimately, his body was found, and we said imperfect good-byes, and laid him to rest.

Death is never a welcome companion, but it is obscene when it takes someone who is not yet dry of the dew of youth. For months, Dora and I tried to accommodate life but were pathetic impostors. I would frequently see tears coming from her eyes, and would look the other way, embarrassed that I had invaded her privacy. Our lives had been built around Jason - he was the center of our universe - and when he died, that universe collapsed and our lives were filled with darkness.

On Sundays, we would visit the cemetery, pick our way through the headstones, and sit on the cold, damp grass for hours, reflecting on the denied possibilities of his life.

Months of melancholy turned into years. I stopped writing. Dora and I took long trips but only returned to our inevitable sadness. One late fall afternoon, we returned to the cemetery, and, as I watched Dora pick a stray leaf from the ground, I realized how wrong we were to remember Jason this way. His life was more important than his death; his legacy should not be a headstone.

Slowly, tentatively, I began writing again. My fingers were clumsy, but my mind was adroit. I wrote short, poignant stories that celebrated Jason's life. I wrote for months, reaching an apotheosis. Each day angels danced on the keys of my typewriter, and voices from hidden places whispered complex secrets that suddenly became simple. Each night, I would put my head on my pillow, close my eyes, and often see the face of God.

When I was done, I knew if I lived for more years than I had ever lived, I would never be able to write as well again. I gave the crudely bound pages to Dora. She spent the night reading, and, when she finished early the next morning, she closed her eyes and silently sobbed.

The tension that dominated our lives began to ameliorate. We found the courage to enter his room. One evening after dinner, Dora went there and came out with his treasure box. She managed a wan smile as she placed it on the table. Pain and pleasure vied for attention as I remembered that first night at the barn. Dora shook the box, and I smiled wistfully at the familiar sound of the marbles inside. We looked at it for a long time, reluctant to let its contents pierce our heart. Eventually, Dora opened the box and we took turns extracting each item, thoughtfully savoring the memory it represented. At the bottom of the box, I noticed an old photograph, hoary with age and seemingly out of place. I turned it over. Dressed in an oversize straw hat, a too big cotton shirt, and with two fishing poles on her shoulder, a girl had her arm around Jason and smiled at the camera, seemingly eager to begin an adventure that would transcend that day and life itself.

After a long silence during which Dora looked at me quizzically, I went over and hugged her. The smile on my face did not reflect the joy in my heart. I knew Jason was in a better place. He had cared for us enough to say, "You can let go now."

I do not understand where the miasma of reality begins and how far it extends. I have questioned many things; empty answers have convinced me there are things in this world that mortals cannot comprehend. I often look at the yellow photograph and realize that, in a universe of uncertainty, anything is possible.

I do understand that Huck will return. In my bed, on a street, or in the garden, I will hear the sound of the squeaky gate and see her smiling face. Unafraid, I will take her hand and walk down dusty lanes to the quiet pond with the indigo water. Another passenger will be waiting at the boat. We will leave the shore together knowing that time will not intrude on our reunion.