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Opening Extract from...

The Guardian Angel's Journal

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PIATKUS

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I placed my hand on her forearm and felt several small holes. I looked closer. Clustered around her elbow, ten purple circles, smaller than pennies. Needle marks. Another contraction. She rose up on her knees and panted deeply. The T-shirt rode up to her hips. More needle marks on her thin white thighs. I scanned the room quickly. Teaspoons and saucers on the dresser. Two syringes poking out from under the bed. Either she was a diabetic tea-lover or a heroin junkie.

The pool of water around her knees was growing bigger. Her eyelids were flickering now, the moaning growing quieter instead of louder. I recognised that she was losing consciousness. Her head rolled to one side, her small wet mouth drooping open. 'Hey,' I said loudly. No response. 'Hey!' Nothing.

I stood up and paced the room. Every so often the girl's body would jerk forward and from side to side. She just sat on her knees, her pale face turned to me, her thin arms straight by her sides, wrists rubbing the filthy, flea-ridden carpet. I'd a friend once who had a booming business as a self-employed junkie reviver. He spent long hours on our couch giving blow-by-blow accounts of celebrities he'd rescued from the brink of death, reaching into Hell with the long arm of his adrenalin syringe and dragging them off Satan's lap. Of course, I couldn't quite remember what the procedure was. I doubt my friend had ever rescued junkies during childbirth. And certainly not while he was dead.

Suddenly the girl slid off the bed and on to her side, her arms bunched together as if handcuffed. I could see blood

seeping from her now. I bent down quickly and pushed her knees apart. An unmistakable crown of dark hair between her legs. For the first time, I felt the water streaming from my back, cold and sensitive as two extra limbs, alert to everything in the room – the smell of sweat and ash and blood, the palpable sadness, the sound of the girl’s heartbeat growing slower and slower, the galloping heartbeat of the child . . .

I pulled her legs firmly towards me, planting her feet on the ground. I dragged a pillow off the bed, then yanked the cleanest bedsheet off the mattress and spread it under her thighs. I squatted between her legs and cupped my hands by her buttocks, trying not to think too hard about it. Any other time I would have run a mile from this kind of thing. My breathing was fast, I felt dizzy and yet incredibly focused, curiously determined to save this little life.

I could see the child’s eyebrows and the bridge of the nose. I reached up and pressed against the top of the girl’s womb. More water drenched the pillow under her buttocks. And then quickly, like a fish, the whole baby slithered out of her, so fast I had to catch it – the damp dark head, the scrunched face, the tiny blue body covered in chalky vernix. A girl. I wrapped her in the bedsheet and kept one hand on the thick blue cord, conscious that in a few minutes I’d have to pull again and guide out the placenta.

The baby was mewling in my arm, the small mouth puckered like a beak, open, searching. In a minute I’d put her to her mother’s breast. But first, I had business to attend to. The

business of keeping her mother's sorry soul in that battered body.

The umbilical cord was loosening in my grip. I give it a quick tug. I could feel the large sac at the other end. It felt like fishing. Another tug, a slight twitch. Slowly and firmly, I pulled the whole thing out, until at the entrance it plumped out in a thick bloody mass on to the pillow. It had been almost twenty years since I did this thing. What was it the midwife had done? Cut the cord close to the navel. I looked around for something sharp. I spotted a switchblade on the dresser. That'll do the trick. But wait. Something else. The midwife had inspected the placenta. I remembered her showing us that it had been delivered perfectly, that no parts of it had been left inside, at which Toby had bent into the nearest basin and repeated his lunch.

This girl's placenta was not the rich red brain-like substance I recalled. This one was small and thin, like roadkill. There was still a lot of blood seeping from her. Her breathing was shallow, her pulse faint. I would have to go and find someone.

I stood up and set the baby on the bed, but when I looked down I saw that she was blue. Blue as a vein. Her small mouth was no longer searching. Her handsome little doll's face was falling into sleep. The waterfalls flowing from my back like long wings felt like they were weeping now, as if every drop was plummeting from deep within me. They were telling me she was dying.

I picked the baby up and gathered the long folds of my dress – white, exactly like Nan's, as if Heaven has only one

tailor – around her small body. She was pitifully thin. Less than five pounds in weight. Her small hands, held close to her chest in tight fists, started to loosen, like petals unfurling from the stem. I leaned down and put my lips around her mouth, exhaling sharply. Once. Twice. Her little abdomen inflated like a tiny mattress. I pressed an ear against her chest and tapped lightly. Nothing. I tried again. Once. Twice. Three times. And then, the sensation of intuition. Instinct. Guidance. *Place your hand over her heart.*

I picked her up and lay her along my arm, spreading my palm across her chest. And slowly, amazingly, I could feel the small heart as if it was in my own chest, stumbling and faltering to work, rattling around like a sputtering engine, a boat flailing in chopping waves. From my hand, a small amount of light. I did a double take. There, in the dark orange haze of that disgusting room, a white light sandwiched between my hand and the child's chest.

I could feel her heart stirring, anxious to awaken. I closed my eyes tight and thought of every good thing I'd ever done in my whole life, and every wrong thing I'd ever done I forced myself to feel bad about, a kind of prayer, a quick self-qualification to be the kind of guardian angel this child needed right now, to be worthy of bringing her back to life by whatever force my body possessed.

The light grew stronger until it seemed to fill the room. The little heart stumbled over its paces like a calf running on shaky legs across a paddock. And then it pounded in my own chest, it thumped hard and forcefully, so loud in my ears I

actually laughed out loud, and when I looked down, I saw the whole tiny chest heave in and out, in and out, the lips pink again, puckering as each breath moved in and out of the small mouth.

The light died down. I wrapped her in the sheet and lay her on the bed. The mother was lying in a pool of blood, her blonde hair now pink, her white cheeks streaked red. In between her loose breasts, I searched for a heartbeat. Nothing. I closed my eyes and willed the light to happen. Her chest was cold. The baby was starting to whimper. She's hungry, I thought. I lifted the mother's T-shirt and held the child to the breast for a minute, and with her eyes still closed she leaned into the nipple and drank and drank.

After a few minutes I placed her back on the bed. Quickly I placed my palm against the mother's chest. Nothing. *Come on!* I yelled. I put my lips to hers and breathed, but the breath puffed up her cheeks and slid out of her empty mouth again, redundant.

'Leave her,' a voice said.

I turned around. By the window, another woman. Another woman in white. Clearly a common thing in these parts.

'Leave her,' the woman said again, softly this time. An angel. She looked similar to the woman lying dead on the floor, same thick, butter-blond hair, same bee-stung mouth. Maybe a relative, I thought, come to take her home.

The angel scooped up the woman and headed for the door, carrying the limp body in her arms, though when I looked back at the floor, the body was still there. The angel

BECOMING RUTH

looked at me and smiled. Then she glanced at the baby. 'Her name's Margot,' she said. 'Look after her well.'

'But,' I said. Within the word was a knot of questions. When I looked up, the angel was gone.