

Author Unknown: Angel Wings

Imagine, if you will, emerging from the best sleep of your life and finding yourself in a strange land, surrounded by light and peace. Realizing that you have arrived at the gates of Heaven, you look around and note that there are other people here with you...hmm, must've been a bad day on Earth for so many folks to be moving in at the same time. But there is also overwhelming relief in knowing that you've worked your last grave, and you wait patiently at St. Peter's desk while he searches for your records, anticipating joyful reunions with long-departed loved ones.

After a couple of minutes, he pulls up the file, briefly clicks through the pages, and pauses. "So, you were a dispatcher," he chuckles knowingly. He beckons to you as he smiles and says, "Come with me...I have a few people for you to meet before I take you up to the Big House."

Curious, you follow as you're told, marveling that your feet no longer hurt and your back has stopped its ceaseless groaning. St. Peter then calls to a shadowy figure in the dance: "Mrs. Perkins, look who's come to join us." Suddenly she materializes right in front of you and greets you warmly; you instantly recognize the sweet elderly woman who called you each night reporting a prowler. She was blind, lived alone and was very scared when she heard the noises outside. She had treated everyone with kindness and never even complained when you had to get off the phone. You'd had to excuse yourself and cry in the bathroom when she finally passed; it's good to learn that her prayers to "go home" were answered.

The next person you meet is the 42 year-old male---a husband and father of two little girls---who called in on a sunny Tuesday morning reporting that his family had just been in an accident. You've never forgotten his pleading voice; or how he went from being coherent and speaking clear, to gasping for air, then silent. He had begged you to send help just before he lost consciousness. So you never quite got over feeling as though you'd failed him somehow, despite knowing that the battle was lost before it began. Now he stands before you, pink and freckled again, and he reaches for your hand and tells you, "I know you did everything you could," he says. "Thank you for trying---as you can see, it worked out for the best."

You can practically feel the old wound heal instantaneously as you are guided to the third person, a 3 year-old boy who was killed when his father ran over him. This was the call that almost made you quit. The mother called you in well-deserved hysterics. You did everything that you could possibly do over the phone and radio; but in the end, all you could be was a calm voice on the line, providing care and sympathy to a grieving mother. You attended the boy's funeral and received thank you's from the family; but at the end of the day, it was one of the worst calls in your entire life as a dispatcher. Yet here he is, happy and whole. His voice is strong now as he says "Thank you, for helping my mommy get through that moment".

The fourth person you meet is somewhat of a surprise: she's the caller you thought was from the "Bad Place". She'd come to your community as a child under protest, and to make her anger known, she berated law enforcement for any reason and no reason, refused help and then complained that she was refused help. She reported everyone for even the smallest infraction of what she thought should be the rules. In fact, she was generally so rude and nasty that half of the center dodged her calls and the other half usually came out of it in tears. But somehow you managed to slay the dragon with a combination of skill, active listening, and old-fashioned emotional intelligence...and while she never warmed up to anyone, she now kisses your cheek and expresses her appreciation. "No matter how badly I behaved, I always knew you cared about me," she says with the first smile you've ever seen on her face. "You made me feel safe."

But it's the sight of the fifth person that blows your Sunday-school concept of Heaven to smithereens and makes you question, just for a moment, where you've landed...for this one is the alcoholic, meth-addicted, HIV-positive frequent flyer who was holding a gun to his head when he called you. The one who bit one of your officers and drew blood while they were trying to help him after something like his eighth suicide attempt in two years. What a nightmare THAT had been...the frequent blood tests, the waiting, the sheer fear that your officer brother might come down with that dreaded disease. And for what? So this loser could go out, drink and drug himself nearly to death, and come back in (on the public dime, no less) for treatment he didn't want and threaten others with exposure to a deadly illness?

Strangely, he took looks amazingly well for someone who'd been such a shambles the last time you saw him on Earth. He is clean-shaven and sober; his shoes and socks are no longer on; and you notice he is actually quite handsome.

Still, you can't help reacting; and the words "What are YOU doing here?" fly out of your mouth before you have the chance to stifle them. He grins shyly, ducks his head and blushes a little, and then begins his narrative.

"Well, it's a long story, Ma'am," he says. "When I was in on the phone that last time—when I bit your friend—I hit bottom. My mom came in to see me after I got detoxed and told me she was done with me... like everyone else in my life. She said that she couldn't deal with a son who'd try to give HIV to someone who was helping him---it was like attempted murder, she said. So I guess God or somebody—maybe it was you? Told me to let the social worker get me into a rehab; and I did."

He pauses briefly while you stand there, astounded at what you're hearing. "Long story short, Ma'am, that changed my life. I cleaned up, went back to school, found a job. I even got married and had a couple of kids before I went into full-blown AIDS. Those were some tough times, but I never drank or used again...thanks to you."

"Me?!" you sputter, nonplussed. "You gave me the scare of my life! I helped you because it was my job, not because I wanted to. In fact, I used to curse whenever I saw your name on the caller ID, or heard you were coming to the jail. I couldn't let YOU know it, but...."

"And that's just it," he interrupts, softly but firmly, "You treated me like a person, even after I bit your friend. You never stood over me and judged me....I figured if someone like you could show me respect, even with everything I'd done, then I should at least respect myself that much. That's the only reason I made it."

His words fill you with gratitude as you shake hands, and the thought occurs that maybe, just maybe, you DID do something right as a dispatcher... and as a human being. And as St. Peter guides you toward your ultimate destination, you finally come to understand what it really means to make a *difference*. Not just in the Johnson & Johnson commercial way, but in real life, for real people. And for that, you can rest easy knowing you've truly **earned** those angel wings.