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The earth is like
a child that knows
poems by heart.”

RAINER MARIA RILKE

.....

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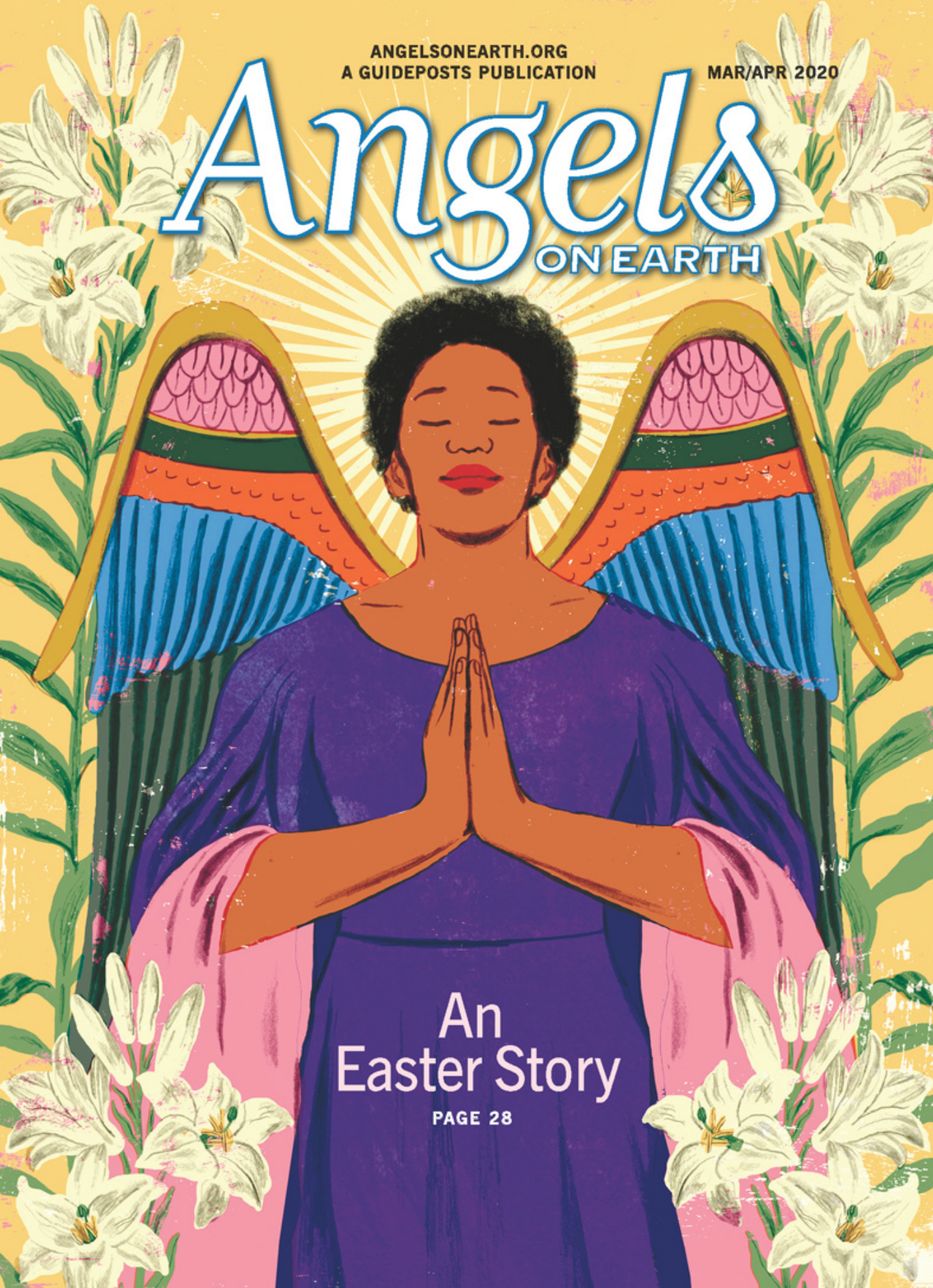
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MAR/APR 2020

Angels

ON EARTH



An
Easter Story

PAGE 28

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down to earth



I JUST WATCHED my 22-year-old daughter pull out of the driveway headed back to her boat-building internship in Maine. She stuck her arm through the open window in a wave as big as her smile, and I caught a glimpse of her new tattoo, still a bit red around the edges. *Shouldn't that be covered until it totally heals?* I wondered as her car disappeared up the road.

The worry door opened: Had she filled the tires? Checked the oil? Did she have cash on her for an emergency? I hightailed it up to her room to see if she'd forgotten the scarf she was three-quarters finished knitting. Sometimes knitting helped her fall asleep.

The scarf wasn't on her nightstand. *Whew.* I sat down on her bed, chastising myself for going to work on her last day at home instead of making sure all the loose ends were tied up. Of course I would have driven her nuts with my checklists and second-guessing, showing zero faith in her ability to take care of herself. She'd spent that last day running around with a high school friend who'd just returned from travels in Asia. They felt lucky to catch up face-to-face, visiting their old haunts in town and talking about their next adventures.

My next adventure would be to step up my game in mothering this young adult daughter of mine. It was about time. No more worrying over imaginary problems or those easily fixed. More faith in my strong and capable daughter and the angels who surround her. I'd simply be thankful the sun was shining for her six-hour drive and the podcasts that kept her company. I knew she'd call me as soon as she got there with angels in tow.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Colleen Hughes".

COLLEEN HUGHES, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Follow Colleen's blog at guideposts.org/colleenblog.



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WHAT'S NEW ONLINE

"And She Saw Two Angels"

Mary Magdalene was devastated when she found that Jesus' body was missing from the tomb. There, two messengers explained what happened. Watch our video on the angels' role in the Easter story at angelsonearth.org/easterangels.

Spring Is in the Air

The bees are buzzing, and the flowers are in bloom. Go to angelsonearth.org/springquotes2020 for inspiring quotes that celebrate our favorite season.

Lá Fhéile Pádraig Sona Duit!

In other words, Happy Saint Patrick's Day to you! Wear green, have some Irish soda bread and get to know the real Saint Patrick at angelsonearth.org/stpatrick.



A Visit Home

High in the tree
branches an
Easter surprise was waiting

BY PAULA TIMPSON, VENICE, FLORIDA

I BLINKED MYSELF awake, wondering what had woken me long before the April sun showed first light. I felt my husband tossing and turning next to me. So that was it.

Jimmy's work as a stock trader was stressful. He hunched over his computer screen all day, watching numbers spike and fall at the drop of a hat, so much on the line. I worried about him. It was no surprise that he wasn't getting a restful night's sleep.

"Honey, wake up." I nudged him. "You must be dreaming."

Jimmy stirred, slowly opening his eyes. "I was dreaming. About that big tree in our front yard in Fairfield."

He smiled. "Do you remember it?"

How could I forget? That beautiful 40-foot pine in Fairfield, Connecticut. Back in the good old days, when things were easy and safe. When Jimmy and I were so young and innocent, without a care in the world.

I had grown up in the same area and always admired Jimmy's courage climbing that tree. There was more farmland around Fairfield then, and trees were everywhere. Red maple. Sweet birch. Eastern white pine.

"I remember you telling me about the nest you found in that tree," I said. "We were just teenagers, having one of our first dates." In my mind's eye,



I once again saw seven-year-old Jimmy scaling the front yard pine. Climbing up, up, up. Each branch a new adventure. Hands sticky with sap. When he reached the top, he'd discovered a bird's nest. Four deli-



were all together on Christmas and topped off the day with the movie *Parental Guidance* and Paula's rhubarb pie. Paula confirms that after all this time, her husband's baby blue angels are on the job, guiding him and helping him grow. "I can see him becoming more patient," Paula says, "even when his job is stressful." Meanwhile, their son has also encountered guardian angels. "He found his own bird's egg nest," Paula says, "back when we lived on Long Island."

cate blue eggs were tucked inside.

"I wanted to hatch those baby birds so badly," he remembered. But his mom had called him inside before he touched them. She said the baby blue eggs were angels preparing to fly. I would never forget what an impression that had made on Jimmy.

Now, his soft outline glowed in the dark. It had meant so much when he'd shared that story with me all those years ago, already trusting me with something so personal. "Did you see the baby blue eggs in your dream tonight?"

Jimmy nodded. "What a perfect dream for Easter time," I said. We snuggled back under the covers.

My concern faded away. *Jimmy will be all right*, I thought. He had baby blue angels watching over him still. ■

Afterglow

Paula and her husband, Jimmy, enjoy warm winters in Florida with their son, 12-year-old Jimmy, and live not too far from Paula's parents. They

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lost & found

C HARLES “BOONIE” RUSSELL stood up in his seat and let out a whoop as the University of Alabama Crimson Tide scored another basket. It was hard to believe that four decades had passed since he’d been on the court himself.

Russell was at the Coleman Coliseum for an impromptu team reunion. He felt blessed to be a starter for the Crimson Tide in 1974 and thrilled when they won the Southeastern Conference championship. All the players were presented with rings personalized with their names and the words *Alabama Champions 1974* inscribed around a crimson stone. He had cherished that ring. Until he lost it.

A friend was having a tough time financially and asked Russell for help. He didn’t have much money, but he had his SEC ring. Their plan was to pawn the ring for some quick cash, then buy it back. But Russell got an offer to play basketball in South America and the friends lost touch. Russell spent the next 20 years playing basketball internationally. He occasionally thought about his ring, but eventually he just gave it up for lost.

The buzzer rang for halftime. Russell was catching up with his teammates when he felt a tap on his shoulder. A woman he’d never seen before looked up at him shyly. “I have something that belongs to you,” she said. He frowned and patted his pockets for his keys, his wallet. She pulled out his ring. Russell’s mouth fell open. “I bought it years ago, and I’ve been waiting for the chance to return it to you in person.”

Reunited with his teammates *and* his ring! A caring stranger had blessed Charles “Boonie” Russell all over again, like a champ.



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blessed be the horse

Her business:
equine therapy. Her
business style:
All things are possible

BY JILL MANSOR, PILESGROVE, NEW JERSEY

HORSES HAVE always been my passion, but I never thought I'd own a horse farm, one where I taught children and adults, many with special needs, to ride. God had made that possible. When I first started out, I felt like he and I were partners. He was on the farm with me as I fed and watered the animals, cleaned their stalls, talked with the riders. But over time the daily struggles of running a business made me feel as if I were on my own.

I felt the weight of my doubts on my shoulders the afternoon a 10-year-old student came to say goodbye at the end of her lesson. Before getting into her parents' car, she paused and looked around at the stables and pastures. "You know, Miss Jill, you have

a fence that goes all the way around your property."

"Well, without a fence the horses would wander off and might get hurt."

She shook her head. "Not that fence," she said. "It's a fence of peace."

"A fence of peace?" I said. "What does it look like?"

She frowned, as if choosing her words carefully. "You know how when it's hot and you can see a shimmer in the air over the pavement? It's like that. I can see it as soon as our car pulls up."

I watched her walk away, trying to see the shimmer she described. Could it be true that God was so present here still?

A few days later I worked with a little boy who was about eight years





Jill and her horse Miracles Are Real

old and had autism. We brought him over to one of the horses. Three employees and I laid our hands on the animal and said a prayer. “Lord, we ask you to give this horse love, patience, kindness and goodness.” The horse nickered, as if in answer. I helped the boy climb on the horse’s back. Another employee took the lead rope. I walked on one side, and two other employees walked on the other. “Here we go. That’s a good boy,” I encouraged the horse.

Our little rider looked around. He clearly enjoyed the sensation of being on the horse, although he couldn’t tell us himself. He didn’t easily speak, and I had never heard him utter a word. I hoped he was enjoying the

clear, sunny day, the gentle rocking of the horse, the smell of hay and leather as much as I was. Slowly and steadily we walked into the horse pen. In an instant the horse stumbled, lurching sharply to the side. He steadied himself quickly, but I was worried the boy had been frightened. “Are you okay, buddy?”

To my surprise, the boy wasn’t looking at the horse beneath him or at the ground where he had stumbled. He was looking up into the sky, as if admiring the clouds above. “Angels,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

“Angels,” the boy repeated, still gazing up at the sky.

The employee with the lead rope and I exchanged glances. Angels? I gazed into the sky. Did angels shimmer? Like heat rising from a hot pavement? If they were present, I couldn’t see them.

Days later I readied another horse. *It’s up to me to keep the children safe*, I reminded myself. *Especially during this lesson*. This particular student could be hard to control and regularly received low marks on the behavior chart her parents kept at home. I didn’t know how much we could help her. She’d told me flat out, in fact, that she didn’t like horses. But she did like Fuzzy, a particular horse I didn’t normally use for les-

sons. The student had begged and begged me to let her ride him, until one day I'd made an impulsive promise. "The day you get a hundred on your chart at home is the day you'll ride Fuzzy."

Well, that was all it took for her to get an A-plus. Today was the day. "A promise is a promise," I said when she hopped out of the car. Her parents agreed she'd more than earned the privilege.

I enlisted five other employees to walk with Fuzzy, just to be safe—two on each side, another holding the lead. All six of us prayed over Fuzzy before we started. *God, you know he isn't used to children and needs you with him today.*

Fuzzy was good as gold. So was my student. *Maybe God is watching the farm just that closely,* I thought as we walked around the back pasture. "Let's go down to the driveway," I said. Children loved the sound the horses hooves made as they clip-clopped on the pavement.

We walked over the grass and were just passing the oak tree in the backyard when Fuzzy suddenly reared up on his hind legs. "Hold on to his mane!" I shouted. "Hold on to his mane!" My voice was harsher than I ever used with the children, but I didn't want the rider to panic and pull the reins back. That would



Success is measured in smiles.

just make the horse rear higher. It felt like a full minute before Fuzzy's front hooves finally hit the grass again. I glared at him furiously for scaring us like that. Then I took a deep breath and turned to my student. "Honey, I'm sorry I raised my voice," I said.

The little girl looked down at me with a look of outright disdain. "Miss Jill," she said, as if my behavior was not only silly but downright rude. "There were angels all around me. I was fine."

The girl was ready to continue her ride, and all my doubts were lifted from my shoulders. My name might be the one on the deed to the farm, but God and I were running this business together. ■

the collector

“VROOM, VROOM!” My six-year-old son, Nathan, raced the bright blue sports car down a road of his playmat’s little pretend town. Nathan had been collecting Matchbox cars since he was two, and now he had more than 250, many inherited from his older brothers. “Where are we going?” I asked him. “To the hospital to visit Grandpa,” he said. “Beep, beep!”



That summer we visited Grandpa every day after his series of strokes. Nathan always brought some of his favorite cars to play with during the several hours we spent at the hospital. Today when we arrived, he took out the red Corvette. “Look, Grandpa!” he said as he drove it down the length of the bed. “It goes a hundred miles an hour!”

“Fastest car I’ve ever seen,” Grandpa said, chuckling. “And I like that garbage truck too.”

When we got back home, Nathan went straight for his playmat town again. “Where are we off to now?” I asked as he drove a blue truck down one of the tiny roads.

Nathan looked up at me with surprise. “We’re going to the church to pray for Grandpa, of course! Just like we do every day.”

At that moment I realized that racing his cars was more than just play for Nathan that summer. My son was making sense of the big changes in our lives, and he was moving forward on the right track. *Vroom, vroom*, indeed.

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Words from the Footprints in the Sand poem appear courtesy of Margaret Fishback Powers, author of the book Footprints: The True Story Behind the Poem that Inspired Millions.

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Heirloom *from an* Angel

I had plenty of stories about my family's roots.
What I didn't have was something tangible

BY GLORIA URIAN, HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA

ONE DAY I entered an antiques shop and saw the most enchanting bedroom on display. The white iron bed was heavy with pieced and appliquéd quilts. A bow tie pattern stitched in a palette of blues. Flowers created with vibrant pinks and greens. Patchwork quilts and quilts with girls in sunbonnets. Next to the bed was an open pie safe chest overflowing with bolts of fabric. Beautiful calico I could dye or print on. Polished cottons. Atop the cozy bed sat a wicker basket with spool after spool of bright threads. Hanging above it was a sign with the words BLESSED ARE THE PIECEMAKERS. The scene pulled me in like a good story; I wanted to live there.

My family had had beautiful quilts like these—once. I never knew my grandmother, but I knew all about

her quilts. Back in the day, people talked about those quilts for miles around. Her appliquéd and pieced works. Her artistic selection of fabrics. Her intricate, even stitches. She created those quilts in the way that she lived her very life, one loving detail at a time. Few things are more personal than handmade objects, and Grandma's quilts symbolized home itself—blankets wrap a body in warmth, but quilts wrap it in love. They would be cherished heirlooms...if only my family had held onto them.

The quilts had been gone for years. My grandmother had died in the Depression, when my mother was four and her sister, my aunt Joy, was five. Their mama got very sick, and one day she went to the hospital and never came home. That meant their daddy,





an electrician for the coal company, had two little girls to take care of all by himself.

Swallowing his pride, Granddaddy approached a neighbor named Mabel. He had an offer, or rather, a plea. “I’m desperate. I need someone who will love my daughters as a mother would,” he told her. “I don’t have money, but I could pay you in my late wife’s quilts if you’ll accept them.”

Mabel agreed and was a wonderful caretaker for my mother and her sister. “Aunt” Mabel became part of the family. Of course I was glad she had come to the rescue of those motherless children, but I couldn’t help but wish we hadn’t given her those quilts. Looking at the display in the antiques store, I felt the loss more keenly than ever.

The next day, I met my mother and Aunt Joy for lunch and told them all about it. “If we could just see those quilts again, my heart would be happy,” I said.

“Maybe we could even buy them back,” Aunt Joy said. “I’d love nothing more than to have something my mother made with her own hands. The last I heard, Mabel was working as a cook at a hospital. It couldn’t hurt to make a few calls.”



A memory Gloria can hold onto

We started there and followed every lead. We called the phone numbers we had for our old neighbors. When we couldn’t find them, we found their children and grandchildren, who gave us other numbers to try. Finally, after weeks

of searching, we found a close friend of Mabel’s who told us she was living in a nursing home, suffering from dementia. And he told us even more.

“Before Mabel fell ill, she told me about your family and those quilts. She always intended to give them back to you one day. I know right where they are. She took good care of them.”

Of course we saw that she had. They were in perfect condition. Aunt Joy’s husband fixed it so that she could hang one of the pieced quilts on her living room wall, like the one-of-a-kind art it was. My mother and sisters and I took home the wonderful appliquéd ones.

I keep my quilt on my guest room bed, and I tell my visitors my family’s story. That sign in the antiques store made the perfect biblical reference, *BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS*. For that’s what Aunt Mabel at long last brought to my heart. ■

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Our White





Light of Protection

The car brakes
couldn't save us. But
something else did.

BY JUNE SALVATO, LARGO, FLORIDA

MOM PULLED the big sedan onto the mountain road, scenic Blue Ridge Parkway. From my seat in the back I gazed up at the pines that towered over us. The cliffs seemed to go straight up, higher than I could even make out through the window. We had been driving for nearly three hours, heading back to Florida from a family camping trip in Williamsburg, Virginia.

I looked back at the pop-up trailer we were pulling behind us, our home for the past two weeks. It had been a tight fit for the six of us—my mom and dad, my teenage brother Alfred, me and my two young daughters, Dawn and Katrina. But we'd managed. The cozy confines had even brought us closer together. We were all experienced campers and hikers—even my girls—so

There was nothing visibly frightening about the two-lane

sleeping bags and cooking by an open fire came with the territory. I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

I put my arm around four-year-old Katrina and held her against me. Dawn, six, was next to her, and beside her was Alfred. The only disappointment had been that my husband wasn't able to make the trip. He was a firefighter and hadn't been able to take off work.

"What was your favorite thing we did?" I asked the kids.

"I liked seeing all the old-fashioned clothes," Dawn said. "And making s'mores on the fire."

"I liked the stockade," Alfred added. "Though I'm glad we weren't really arrested."

I laughed. My maiden name was Williams, and I liked imagining that our ancestors might have walked those same streets. I felt a kind of spiritual connection to the place that I could have never imagined. I'd always believed in God and angels, though they weren't exactly close by. But in Williamsburg there was a feeling I couldn't fully explain, of being a part of something way bigger than myself.

Mom took the turnoff to head to our campground for the night, near Vesuvius, Virginia. "Mommy, I don't want to go down this road," Dawn said.

"It will be okay," I said. We were

old hands at driving in the mountains, even towing the camper. Plus Dad was a stickler for getting the car checked out before we left. There was nothing visibly frightening about this two-lane road. Still, what was it she was sensing?

WE HEADED around a curve, and the road suddenly went sharply downhill. On our right was a steep, rocky cliff that pointed straight up. Across the left lane, a sheer drop-off, with no guard rail. And the car was picking up speed. Something was wrong.

"I don't have any brakes!" Mom yelled out, the road twisting and turning like a roller coaster. Instinctively I grabbed Katrina.

"Hold onto Dawn," I told Alfred. Dad sprang into action and pulled hard on the parking brake, which not only stalled the car but was also no help against the weight of the trailer pushing us ever faster. We wove between lanes as Mom fought to steer through the turns. If we went over the side, we would be goners. *God help us*, I prayed silently. *Send your angels*.

Immediately the car was flooded with a brilliant, sparkling white light.

"Hang on, Mom," I said, words spoken without thinking. "God is with us."

road, so what was my young daughter sensing?



June and Tom near the scene of the accident

We whipped around a sharp bend. “Look out for the boulder on the right,” Dad hollered.

Crash! My body jerked hard against the seat belt. There was a sickening, metallic scraping sound, as if the car was being torn apart. The next thing I knew I was upside down, my seat belt suspending me midair, the roof of the car against the road.

It took a moment to understand what had happened, that I was even alive. Where was Katrina? I looked everywhere before I spied her below me, sitting dazed on the inside of the roof, which was now the floor. She had a small cut on her forehead, but otherwise seemed fine.

“I got my door open,” Alfred said. Beside him was Dawn, not a scratch on her. In the front seat I heard Mom

and Dad groaning. We were all alive!

Alfred came around and managed to get my door open. The girls and I scrambled out. Mom and Dad crawled through the opening where the windshield had once been. We stood there in shock. The car had landed six feet from tumbling over the cliff.

“Did you see the white light?” I asked. No one had, but there was no doubting what I’d witnessed. Not one angel, but an entire heavenly host. In my mind I pictured them protecting each of us, guiding the car, shielding it from reaching the drop-off. God was closer than I’d ever realized. I knew that now.

Within minutes a couple on a motorcycle came by. After ensuring we were okay they rode off to get help. It wasn’t long before a state trooper pulled up and took us to the hospital. Our injuries consisted mainly of scrapes and bruises. Alfred had cracked a couple of ribs from holding Dawn so tightly. But it could have been so much worse.

Williamsburg was a vacation we’d never forget. There have been other difficult twists and turns in my life since. Those are the times when I think of that day in the car, flying through the air, helpless, and am reminded to put my trust in the one who is always there to see me through. ■

only human?

“**H**OLD ONTO THE RAILING and stand still,” I reminded my kids as we stepped onto the escalator. Going to the mall with my five-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son was never easy, but Easter was two weeks away. I needed to find the kids outfits for Sunday service. Just one more store to check...back down on the first floor.

We were halfway to the bottom when I saw my son, Daniel, stumble. Then he cried out. I watched in horror as his foot seemed to disappear.



Someone must have acted fast and pushed the emergency button. The escalator came to an abrupt stop. In a panic, I tugged hard on Daniel's arm. He yelped in pain. His right foot wedged between the stair and the railing. I couldn't get him out. Everyone stood frozen, unsure of how to help. I uttered a quick prayer.

Thud. Thud. Thud. A man pounded his way down the escalator. His long trench coat fluttered behind him. When he reached us, he crouched down and gently pulled Daniel's foot free from the mechanical trap. Our eyes met. Then, without saying a word, he descended the escalator and disappeared into the crowd.

Later, when the escalator was torn apart to see why it had malfunctioned, workers recovered Daniel's missing shoe. It was cut nearly in half, chewed up and destroyed. But Daniel's foot was uninjured. No bruises. Not even a scratch.

KRISTI SHERWOOD, CEDAR HILL, TEXAS

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Easter awakening

A mother asks, What in life is more realistic than faith?

BY DELORES BATES

I LEANED OVER the hospital bed in which my 18-year-old son, Art, lay in a comatose state that seemed like death. Tubes fed him through the nose; a machine breathed for him, breaking the stillness of the room with its mechanical gasps. I moved my lips close to Art's ear and whispered, "Honey, I had a dream last night, so beautiful it seemed real. Two magnificent angels stood by your bed. It means you'll be healed, I know it."

Did he hear me? Can the soul hear when the body is asleep? Art didn't move, didn't acknowledge my words. If only he would open his eyes! *Just that, Lord.*

Before the accident two nights earlier, this limp form had been a strapping high school senior, the star captain of his football team and the finest son a mother could ever want. Proud of the

body God had given him, Art didn't drink or smoke. He held strong values and went to church regularly. His dream was to play professional football and set a good example for other young people.

But now doctors held out little hope that he would walk or talk or do anything productive again. It was as if Art had gone on and left his broken body behind. Could that be true?

On the evening of January 1, 1989, Art had attended a dance with some friends. When his father and I went to bed that night, a cold rain beat at the windows. I'm usually a sound sleeper, but at about 1 A.M. I awoke with a start and shook my husband. "Arthur," I said, my heart racing, "I'm afraid something terrible has happened to our boy." Before I could get back to sleep, a call came from St. Vincent's



Doctors held out little hope Art would walk or talk again.

Hospital. Art had been driving his friends home when a pickup truck turned into the side of his car, slamming it into a tree. One of Art's passengers died. The others weren't badly hurt. But Art lay close to death in the emergency room.

I'LL NEVER FORGET the dread and sense of helplessness as my boy fought for life. Arthur and I raced in our car to St. Vincent's. Along with some friends and family members we had alerted, we prayed while doctors frantically worked on Art. The news from the operating room was grim; Art's windpipe and chest were nearly crushed. Most worrisome was the injury to his brain.

"All that's saved him so far," one doctor told us, "is his strong athlete's body. But the area around his brain stem is so severely damaged, he might never regain consciousness."

At about 5 A.M., Dr. Frank A. Redmond finally came to us and said Art's condition was stabilized and he would be moved into the intensive care unit. Dr. Redmond revealed that on at least one occasion that night Art had been clinically dead, but they

were able to revive him. "I did a lot of praying," he admitted. "Something kept your boy alive."

Eventually they let us go to Art in the ICU. To see him so still, the breathing tube in his trachea, his closed and swollen eyes, was devastating. I collapsed into my husband's arms and sobbed. "We can't give up," he whispered. "We have to keep praying for a miracle."

I wiped my eyes and turned back to Art. Would his eyes ever open again, his lips speak or his arms move voluntarily? Would he ever throw those muscled arms around my waist, kiss me and say, "Ma, I sure do love ya"?

The doctors didn't think so. "Even if he does wake up," one said, "he probably won't be able to walk. He won't have a memory or know who you are."

I refused to believe that my own son wouldn't know me. God is merciful. Asleep in a nearby room the hospital let me use that night, I was given a different prognosis. In a dream as vivid as life, I saw two colossal angels floating over Art's bed, one above his head and the other at his side. They were glowing, their streaming robes lighter than air. Their faces were indis-

tinct, but they had a golden brilliance that emanated compassion and healing. Then I saw Art sitting up in bed, talking with his friends. My heart beat with joy; he'd be healed! What else could this vision mean?

WAKING WITH the images still fresh in my mind, I rushed to Art's room, half expecting to see him sitting up in bed, laughing. But he was still in a coma, still near death. That's when I pressed my lips close and whispered my dream to him.

From then on I carried the picture of those two heavenly beauties in my mind's eye, and every day I reminded Art about them. I knew his spirit heard me. That's why we talked to him constantly—his father and I, our relatives and ministers, his friends from school, and the football team and his coaches—telling him how much we loved him, keeping a vigil.

Thirty days passed. I was at my son's side continually, talking, praying, playing tapes from his friends. I refused to believe he wouldn't get out of that bed or know his own mother. The doctors tried to temper my optimism, while we continued to pray.

What in life is more realistic than faith, more practical, really, than hope? Isn't that all I had? I knew my son would get well. I kept visualizing it and thanking the Lord, again and again.

But it was hard to keep believing as the weeks wore on. To see my boy fed by tubes when he used to feast on my cooking, my homemade lasagna and fried chicken.

Finally Art was transferred to St. Francis Hospital in Green Springs. Every time I came to visit him the nurses would shake their heads, knowing the question that was on my lips: Has there been a change? Anything?

Three months passed. Then I saw the angels again.

It was during Holy Week and Art's older sister, Rachael, and I had been talking about how much Art loved Easter. Again one night I dreamed I was at Art's bedside. Those same golden angels, seemingly both powerful and compassionate, looked over my son, who was awake, his eyes alert and bright. This time, however, the angels were both on Art's right. I took this as a reaffirmation of God's message.

Art's eyes opened on Good Friday. I had had a special feeling when I came to see him that afternoon. When I walked into his room those big, brown eyes were looking right at me. Could it really be? I slowly walked around the bed. Art's eyes followed. He was awake! He was tracking me! I fell to my knees at his bedside and gave thanks.

Doctors, however, were hesitant to

interpret this too optimistically. Then came Easter. As his father and I arrived for a visit after church, a nurse rushed up waving a piece of paper. In a handwriting I knew so well was our phone number, obviously written with great difficulty. “It was as if he wanted us to call you,” the nurse reported. “His memory is intact!” On the day of our Savior’s resurrection, part of Art had been resurrected too. He hadn’t forgotten us.

A month went by and nothing much changed. Art still hadn’t uttered a word. One day his grandmother accompanied me to the hospital. When we left Art’s room she confided in me, “Delores, I don’t think he’s ever going to talk again.”

I was about to respectfully disagree when a familiar voice jolted us: “Ma!”

We froze. It rang out again, loud and clear. “Ma!”

Art was talking. His first word now was the first word he had ever said as a baby: *Ma*. I *knew* the Lord would not let my son forget his mother.

Though his words were few and hesitant, the hospital immediately began speech therapy, followed quickly by physical therapy. His progress was slow initially, until a therapist used a little psychology and a mirror. The athlete in Art was proud of the body he had taken care of so well. When the therapist showed him how his phy-

sique had atrophied during the coma, Art strove tirelessly to regain his old physical form.

Finally Art was able to tell us what he recalled about the night of the accident. “I remember being on the operating table,” he said. “I saw the doctors working. Three times I tried to leave my body and three times the Holy Spirit made me go back because my family was praying and God would heal me.”

ART HAS HAD a long road back, and whenever his struggle is wearing him down, I remind him of the angels I saw in my dream. That seems to pick him up. His speech was slow for a long time, but now he speaks almost as well as he did before the accident. He walks with a cane but leans on it less and less. This June he’ll graduate from the University of Toledo with a marketing degree. Art wants to play football again one day, which some people might think is too optimistic. But he believes that with the power of many prayers behind him, anything is possible.

I know it’s a miracle when my son sneaks up behind me, slips his arms around my waist, kisses me and says, “Ma, I sure do love ya.” It’s the miracle we prayed for, the one the angels in my dream promised. It’s the miracle of my Art, alive today. ■

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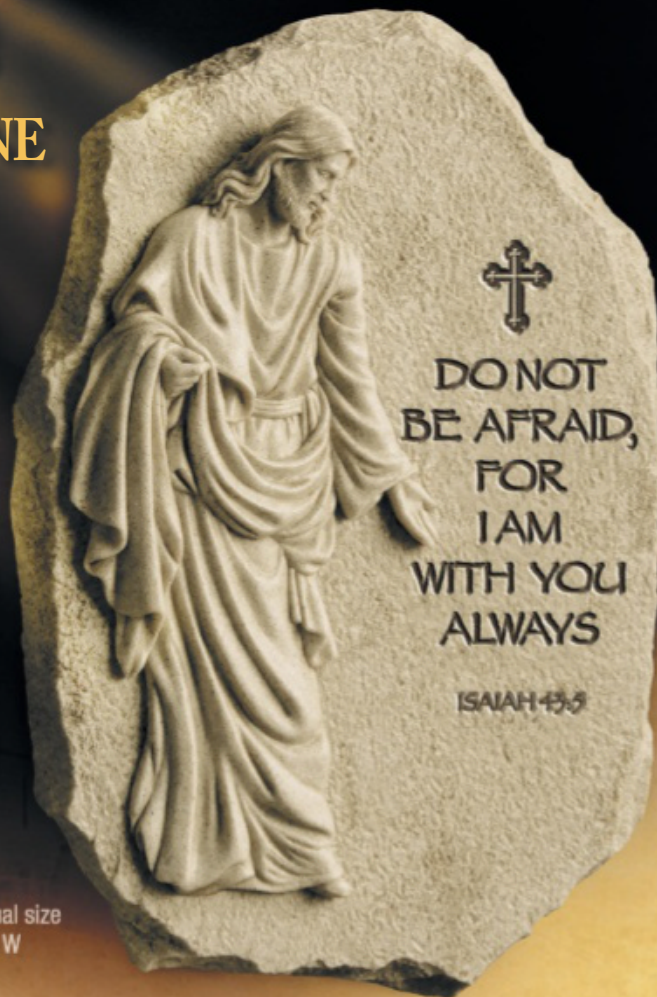
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hidden treasure

I'd held on to an old landscape painting of my late grandmother's only because I liked the frame

BY KELLY GALLAGHER, SCOTIA, NEW YORK

JUST A LITTLE further. Just a little further... I reached up to push the plastic box just one more centimeter to the left to reach something in my crafts closet. One centimeter too far, it turned out. Avalanche! Everything came crashing down—scrapbook paper, glue sticks, beads, unfinished projects, markers, yarn, all scattered across the hardwood floor.

My husband, Alan, came running in. "What happened?"

"I was getting something out of the crafts closet," I said. "I thought I needed a project to give me a lift."

Alan looked at the mess. "I guess you found one," he said. "Cleaning up."

"Ha ha," I said, but Alan had a point. Obviously the closet needed

organizing if I wanted to avoid more disasters like this one. Sometimes straightening up could soothe my spirits too. I started pulling things out: Boxes, bags, baskets...what was that in the back? Something made of wood? *Oh, yeah.*

I pulled out a large dusty painting. Normally I loved landscape paintings, but the forest in this one was too dark and solemn to go on my walls. The only reason I had it was because it had belonged to my grandmother.

It seemed like yesterday I was gathered with my family at her house after her funeral. "I know it would make sense to have a yard sale," my dad said as he looked around at all of Grandma's belongings. "But I'd feel better knowing her things are with



Hiding in plain sight: the painting of Kelly's grandparents on their wedding day

us. Everyone look around and see what you want to take.”

Surveying the house, I didn’t know where to start. When I was growing up, Grandma lived right next door. I saw these things—the matching cookie jars, the spoon rest—every day. They all held precious memories for me.

I moved toward the cookie jars, but my cousin Shannon got there first. “I love these,” she said, picking them up.

My cousin Domino took the rooster-shaped spoon rest. “This will go great in my kitchen.”

Grandma used to give me my favorite cookies out of that jar, I thought. I recall that spoon rest covered in oatmeal as she made breakfast for me. These things aren’t just knickknacks to decorate your house! But I didn’t want to fight over them. I knew that Grandma wouldn’t care for that. Besides, my cousins had as much right to her things as I did.

That’s what I told myself, but as I drifted from room to room I felt more and more unhappy. Each item claimed by someone else felt like a memory being stolen from me. Quietly I set aside a few things, like the glass goblets she filled with chocolate pudding and the green bird figurines I played with when I watched cartoons. But mostly I just stood by as things were claimed by my more assertive relatives.

“Take a look at these!” Shannon called from Grandma’s bedroom. “Perfume bottles!”

*Each item claimed by someone else felt
like a memory being stolen from me.*

I went to the bedroom to have a look. The bottles were beautiful, all different shapes with shiny brass tops. *Maybe we could each take one*, I thought. But I could tell from Shannon's face that she really liked them all, so I put down the bottle I was looking at and turned toward the bed.

"I'll take that," I said, pointing to the landscape over the headboard. I had no idea why I'd said it. Maybe I was so upset at everything I'd lost that I was ready to grab at anything.

Looking at the painting now, I wondered again why I'd done it. It had just been sitting in my closet all this time. The somber landscape didn't mean anything to me, unlike the goblets and the cookie jars. My cousins hadn't thought much of the painting either. "It doesn't speak to me," Domino had said when I took it off the wall.

But that day the painting must have said something to me. *Something* nudged me to schlep it home. Probably the frame, I'd decided. *I'll put another painting in it*, I told myself. I had wanted a project, after all. Organizing the closet could wait.

I went to the kitchen for a butter

knife to carefully pry out the nails that held in the picture. One by one they dropped to the floor, the backing slowly falling away from the frame until I could pull it and the landscape out in one swift motion to reveal...

"Oh, my gosh! Grandma!"

For the second time Alan came running in.

"Look at this!" I said.

Under the landscape was a second painting, this one of my grandparents on their wedding day in June 1941. I was looking right into Grandma's eyes. It was like receiving an unexpected visit from her. My spirit soared.

Alan admired the picture over my shoulder. "They look so young," he said. "It's like finding a buried treasure. I wonder why it was hidden."

"I don't know," I said. But I had a theory. If this portrait had been hanging out in the open in my Grandma's house, surely someone else would have claimed it while I looked on, feeling sorry for myself. Its concealment was the only reason I was holding it in my hands today. I hadn't wanted to fight over my grandmother's things, so someone—maybe an angel—had tucked aside something extra special just for me. ■





Angels in Bloom

Everything's coming up new again

May's Bouquet

“Okay, now we’re ready,” my mother said as we gathered up our bags and headed out to the car. After a morning of tending our flower garden—my pride and joy—we spent the afternoon at the local five-and-dime store, where we gathered up tissue paper, ribbons, note cards and all the discounted Easter baskets we could fit into the shopping cart.

“Ready for what?” I asked.

“May baskets, for the first day of May,” she said. “When we get home, we’ll cut the flowers that are blooming in the garden and fill these baskets so that tomorrow morning we can get up bright and early and deliver them to our neighbors. We’ll ring the bell and run away before anyone can see who made the delivery! Doesn’t that sound like fun?” Her blue eyes sparkled.

Was she kidding? I had waited all winter for the flowers to bloom. We had worked on the garden for months, ever since

we planted those first bulbs back in fall. It was our special mother-daughter project, and I had cherished the time we spent together. Now I wanted to cut the flowers for our own house, to put them in pretty vases and enjoy what we'd done together.

"Oh, Sweetie. Flowers are like kindness. They are meant to be shared. That's the real beauty of a garden. You'll see." I doubted this, but I knew I didn't have a choice.

Later that afternoon we snipped away our garden and arranged the bouquets. We tied each one together with ribbon, wrapped it in tissue paper, and put them all in the refrigerator to stay fresh overnight. I slept fitfully thinking about our empty garden.

In the morning, we loaded the bouquet-filled baskets and began our trek through the neighborhood. Mother handed me the first basket. "Now for the fun part!"

Holding hands, we ran to a front door, rang the doorbell and sprinted away. We crouched behind some shrubs and watched the door open and our neighbor look up and down the street. Her expression went from surprise to confusion to a delighted grin when she saw the May basket on her doorstep. "Thank you!" she called out to the street. She looked so happy, and it felt as if a whole beautiful garden bloomed inside of me.

Mother was right about the flowers. They were even prettier on someone else's doorstep.

SARA ETGEN-BAKER, ANNA, TEXAS



Peach Blossom Summer

Shortly after my mother died, my father made an announcement. "This year we're going to have peaches, I'm sure of it," he said. I wished I could be. Three years ago, Mom and I had gotten him a peach tree for Father's Day. He was delighted by the new addition to

his garden and tended it carefully all summer long. That first year it produced just a handful of peaches, but we were positive it would give us more in another year.

Sure enough, the tree was in full bloom one year later. All three of us were so excited we spent the whole summer researching recipes—only for the blossoms to fall off without ever becoming fruit. Same thing the summer after that.

“What makes you think things will be different this year?” I asked. Dad grinned.

“Your mom is going to pull some strings for us this year,” he said, pointing to the sky. “She has friends in high places.” Of course we both knew she was in heaven with the angels.

As spring progressed, the peach tree bloomed with light pink blossoms that seemed to glow in the sunlight. When spring became summer, the flowers gave way to tiny fuzzy green balls. Dad and I watched them grow larger and the fruit turn rosy pink and coral. By summer’s end, we had a tree full of juicy peaches. The branches hung low with sun-ripe fruit. A bounty, sent by God, after an angel whispered in his ear.

DEBORAH LAROSE, BALLSTON LAKE, NEW YORK

Well Planted

My daughter, Esther, was not looking forward to Mother’s Day. She was getting divorced and this would be her first year as a single mom. “I don’t know if I can bring myself to celebrate this year,” she told me on the phone. “I’m not feeling like the best mom.” My heart ached. There was only so much I could do from 450 miles away. I sent her money to help with expenses, and I prayed for God to send her comfort and encouragement, but I wished I could do something more. I hung up the phone and stood there feeling totally helpless.

Please, Lord, give me an idea. I



wasn't feeling like I was the best mom either.

A couple of days later I was at my computer doing some online shopping when I came upon the perfect thing: a mug decorated with roses and irises and the words, "Daughter, you are a beautiful flower." I ordered it for Esther immediately.

"Mom, I absolutely love the mug," she said in her next call. "I'm going to start each day hearing you say those words. Thank you."

The following spring I received a fat, squishy envelope. Tucked inside was a cross-stitch that Esther had designed herself. Bordered with pink roses, it read, "Mom, you are a beautiful flower." I had to admit, having the best daughter in the world made me feel like a pretty good mom that Mother's Day—and every day.

JEANETTE LEVELLIE, PARIS, ILLINOIS

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A Gardenia's Scent

I hadn't wanted to go to the pool. After a whole day walking around Disney World under the hot Florida sun, I was ready for a night in. I'd been sure that my wife, Molly, was too. She had a chronic illness and walking was difficult for her. Sometimes she had pain with each step. I had worried all day, scared she would overexert herself. So when the kids had asked to go to the pool, I'd been prepared to tell them no. Molly surprised me by insisting we go. "This is what a family vacation is all about, isn't it?" she'd said. I'd agreed, reluctantly.

"Time to get out, kids!" I called as the sun began to set. They grabbed their towels and began the short walk back to our hotel room. We stopped when we saw yellow maintenance signs blocking the path. Closed. We'd have to take the long way around. I looked at Molly, hoping she'd see how sorry I was for this inconvenience. She just smiled.

"Good thing it's such a beautiful night!" she said. As we started down the long path, I thought I detected the familiar limp in my wife's gait. I wished I could just carry her. The kids bounced along, still dripping wet in the warm night. "Slow down!" I shouted at them, stress getting the better of me. They didn't seem to hear me. I suddenly realized Molly was no longer next to me. Had she stopped to sit down? I turned around. Molly was on the side of the path by the shrubs, her nose buried in a white flower.

"Smell it," she said. "It's a gardenia!" I saw light in her eyes and knew what she meant: This was what a family vacation was all about. We would get back to the room slowly, stopping to smell the flowers along the way. Because there were always flowers.



VAL PENNINGTON, PITTSBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

someone's in the kitchen



MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER passed on two things to our family: her love of Cajun food and her recipe for crab jambalaya. After my wife and I got married, we moved away from the Gulf Coast. Crabmeat was too expensive, so we found a recipe for a smoked sausage and beef jambalaya. After some years of tweaking, I'm finally satisfied I've come up with a jambalaya that would make my great-grandmother proud.

SCOTT McCOWN, TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

Scott's Jambalaya

INGREDIENTS

- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 pound andouille sausage, sliced into bite-size pieces
- 1 cup chopped yellow onion
- ½ cup chopped green onion
- 1 cup chopped bell pepper
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 15-ounce cans of fire-roasted diced tomatoes with garlic
- 2 teaspoons Cajun seasoning
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1¼ cup long-grain rice
- 2½ cup beef broth
- 1 bay leaf

RECIPE

In a large skillet over medium-high heat, brown ground beef, 7 to 10 minutes; drain and set aside. In a large Dutch oven over medium heat, brown sausage, about 7 min-



A spicy, smoky down-home meal in a bowl

utes; drain and set aside. Add ground beef, yellow onion, green onion, bell pepper and garlic to the Dutch oven; cook over medium heat until vegetables are soft. Add tomatoes, sausage, Cajun seasoning and salt and pepper. Cover and simmer for 20 minutes. Add rice, beef broth and bay leaf to the meat-and-vegetable mixture; cover and cook over low heat for 25 minutes or until rice is tender. (For a less spicy option, substitute regular smoked sausage and diced stewed tomatoes and cut back on or eliminate Cajun seasoning.) Serves 8.



The recipes closest to your heart taste best. Send yours to *Angels on Earth*, 110 William Street, Suite 901, New York, NY 10038.



BENJAMIN HENRY HUTTON
DIED MDCCLXXXV
ANNE COUNTESS HAROLD
MORTRE LEVELEDT

AND HIS WIFE
ANNE HUNTER GORDON
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ADELE MARQUISE DE VINTES
MORTRE LEVELEDT

JACOB'S LADDER (1887) BY MARY ELIZABETH TILLINGHAST, AT GRACE CHURCH IN NEW YORK CITY. PHOTOS BY KATIE HOGIN

In This Place

Jacob's ladder connects heaven and earth

BY RICK HAMLIN
SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

I DIDN'T GO to Grace Church in Manhattan with angels on my mind. I was there to talk about prayer, leading a class before worship. It was only later that I caught sight of the stained-glass window in the back of the nave, the angels ascending and descending on Jacob's ladder, seeming to fly right out of the frame.

Grace Episcopal is a historic spot; the current church was erected in 1846 on the edge of Greenwich Village. I had visited it years ago when my wife, Carol Wallace, was doing research for her book, *To Marry an English Lord*, about the American heiresses who married into the British aristocracy at the turn of the last

century, a book that became the inspiration for the popular TV show *Downton Abbey*.

Many of those prominent New York families, their mansions lining Fifth Avenue, made Grace their parish. There, the robber barons gave their daughters away in grand weddings. They paid a pretty penny to make the church look worthy of their social ambitions, filling it with beautiful art, including that window of Jacob's ladder, and memorials to some of society's (mostly now forgotten) mavens.

I can't remember exactly what I said during the class—the temptation in quoting myself is to sound more polished than I am—but the crux of our discussion was how to pray “with-

God showed Jacob a ladder with angels going up and down it in a holy circuit of communication.

out ceasing” in a world of rattling cell phones and endless distractions. “I know sometimes when I pray I don’t feel worthy of God’s attention,” I said, “but God always hears us. Of that we can be sure.”

After the class, I joined the congregation for a service of prayer, song, communion and praise. I was floating on that joy that comes when you feel as if you have—finally—given back to God just a little of what God has given to you. At the end of the service, I picked up a church brochure and walked around to see the high-lights. And there I stood in front of Jacob and the angels.

One reason stained glass is such a popular feature in churches is that it offers a perfect metaphor for how God works through us. Most art is best appreciated when the light shines on it, bringing out the textures and colors of the medium. With stained glass, the light going *through* the window allows us to see the artwork in all its glory. Those pieces of col-



Rick at home in New York City

ored glass are transformed, pierced by sunlight, the same way God lights us up.

Was there ever a figure who needed God’s light more than Jacob, especially when he saw those angels? He’d just done something reprehensi-

ble, at his mother’s urging no less. Disguised as his twin brother Esau, he finagled a blessing out of his father, stealing Esau’s birthright and inheritance. It was a flagrant lie, and when Esau learned of it he was ready to kill his brother. Jacob fled for his life.

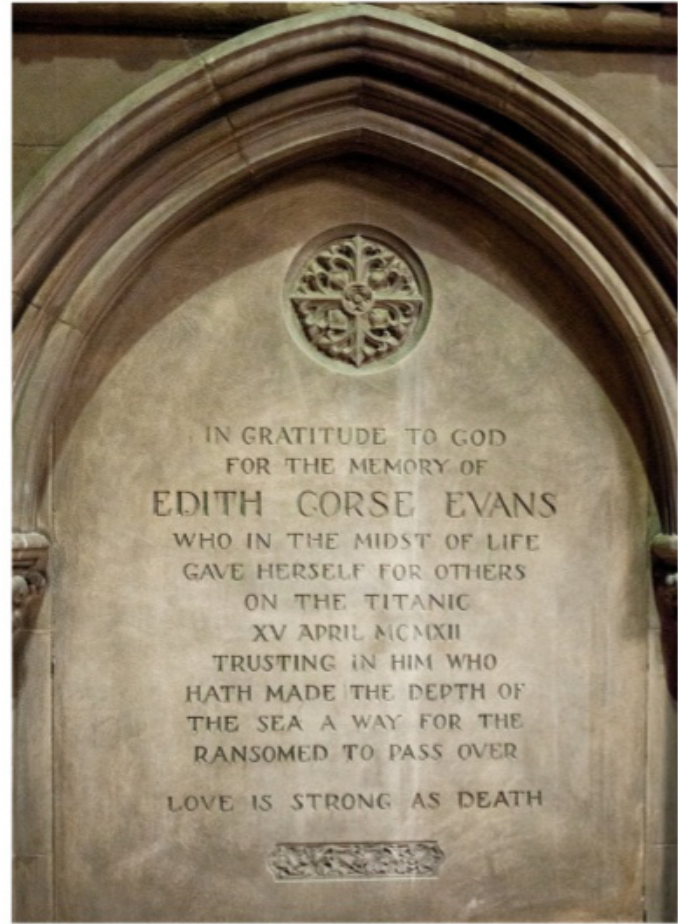
At night on his journey, he took a rock for a pillow and fell into a deep sleep. He might have felt abandoned by God, but God did not abandon him. On the contrary, while Jacob slept, God showed him a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels—God’s very messengers—going up and down it in a holy circuit of communication. “I will not leave you,” God promised.

When Jacob woke up, he was ter-

rified. I wonder sometimes whether it was because of what he had seen in the dream or the realization of what he had done to his brother, a cosmic understanding of his guilt. At any rate, he said, “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it,” a verse I wish I had emphasized in my class. God is present in all places, even in our desperate flights, when all we can find is a rock for a pillow to sleep on.

As I stepped back from Jacob’s angels, I noticed a plaque on the wall beneath the window, a memorial for a parishioner named Edith Corse Evans. According to my brochure, Edith was 36 years old when she died on April 15, 1912. A New York socialite, she had made a trip to England—like a character out of *Downton Abbey*—then visited Paris for a shopping spree. To get back home she booked herself a first-class cabin on an ocean liner making its maiden voyage across the Atlantic. The name of the ship? The *Titanic*.

The newly christened cruise ship, as we all know, hit an iceberg on its crossing, and its 2,200-some passengers scrambled to get to safety on a craft that had only enough lifeboats to accommodate about half of them. “Women and children first,” came the command. Edith stood with others on the deck of the sinking ship. “You



The Evans memorial plaque at Grace Church

go first,” she told a friend. “You have children.” Edith died along with 1,516 others, her body never recovered. Her life was short, but it defined itself in one heroic act. Surely God was present even then, and Edith Corse Evans seemed to know it and find strength in that fact.

I knew that Jacob did make it back to claim his birthright and was indeed forgiven and embraced by his brother Esau. God had stood by Jacob, as promised. Just as he stood by Edith, and just as he stands by me, with nothing but a ladder of angels between us. ■

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on a wing and a prayer

AS THE SECOND-GRADE Sunday school class gathered in a semicircle around my co-teacher, I stepped outside to change the door decoration. Usually I told the Bible story, but today I needed a moment to myself.

All weekend I'd been feeling anxious about the mastectomy I had scheduled on Monday. I had talked to my doctors at length and knew I was making the right decision, but still I worried. How long would the recovery take? Would I be in a lot of pain afterward? Worst of all, what if something went wrong? It didn't help that my husband was away on U.S. Army Reserve duty and wouldn't be there to comfort and take care of me.

I hung the last decoration on the door. I wasn't quite ready to go back to class, so I bowed my head. "I'm sorry, Lord. I do believe you hear my prayers, but if it isn't too much trouble, I would truly appreciate a sign that you'll be with me during the surgery."

I lifted my head at the pitter-patter of footsteps. One of my students came running up the stairs. *Guess that's my cue to go back in*, I thought.

My co-teacher was still telling the story, so I took a seat in the back. As the children listened intently, I began silently calling each of their names. *Lord, I prayed, please bless and always take care of this child.*

I proceeded around the circle, and when I asked God to bless Wendy, she suddenly stood up and rushed over to my side. What was this all about? She put her arms around my neck and whispered in my ear, "I love you!" Tears welled in my eyes. I knew then that God had heard me.

FRANCES MOORE, WILSON, NORTH CAROLINA

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because of times like this

Despite our complicated relationship, I didn't want to shut my mother out of my life completely

BY LOU DEAN, DINOSAUR, COLORADO

“IT LOOKS LIKE a perfect spring day to go fishing,” Mama said when I answered the phone. I listened close to gauge whether or not she sounded sober. So far, so good. “Suppose to get in the seventies today.”

“Actually, Scott and I were planning on trying our luck down by the river this evening.”

“Mind if I come along?” The question made my fingers tighten around the phone. *Why had I even mentioned it?* If I let my guard down for one second, things got complicated with her.

Nothing about Mama—or her drinking—was simple. Trying to have a relationship with her was like dancing with dynamite. But how could I shut my aging mother out

of my life and refuse to let her spend time with her grandson? And what was I suppose to say to her now that I'd admitted we were going fishing? Mama loved to fish.

“Are you still there?” Mama asked.

“No beer, Mama,” I said, embarrassed to have to say the words. Again. But after only six months back home following my divorce, and several bad experiences, I had set that one boundary. If she wanted to be around Scott, there would be no drinking.

“Of course not,” Mama said, as if she were appalled at the very idea. I felt the conflicting emotions settle in.

“We'll go down to the river about six,” I said. “The catfish bite better in the evening.”

“See you then.” Mama's voice es-



47A

calated with excitement. “Nothing more fun than being on the river in Oklahoma in the springtime. Seeing the Canadian geese, watching the fish jump.”

Mama had that magical side to her. She’d always had the ability to grab life and live it to the fullest... when she was sober. I hung up the phone and made a quick decision not to tell my five-year-old son that his grandmother was coming. It was too difficult to explain why Grandma didn’t show up when we were expecting her.

Later that afternoon Scott helped me dig for worms and gather up the fishing tackle. I fought the emotions that lingered—the stress, the guilt, the confusion. How many chances did Mama deserve? Was I right to trust her around my son? I took a break to sit still and pray: *Lord, help me. Please show me the way when it comes to my mother.*

It was a prayer I’d repeated a thousand times since childhood. Mama’s problems with alcohol had left a wake of destruction that could never really be healed, but I had kept trying. The minute my two brothers turned 17, they had fled the state. My older sister, who still lived nearby, had recently shut Mama out of her life for good. Maybe my siblings were smarter than me. Maybe all the turmoil and

frustration of dealing with my mother would only lead to more heartache in the end. But I couldn’t dismiss Mama’s joyful, loving side. Surely that was worth something.

I got up and went to the porch. Scott played in the yard with our dog, Twain. I tried to untangle a fishing pole. “Forgive seventy times seven,” I whispered. After going through my divorce, I had become less judgmental. But even Jesus lost patience with the money changers. When was enough, enough?

“LOOK, IT’S GRANDMA Johnnie!” Scott’s shrill voice cut through the evening. We grabbed our gear and started off. My son loved his grandma, in spite of her broken promises and occasional strange behavior.

An hour later, as the sun set on the Arkansas River, Mama and I sat in silence, watching a flock of Canadian geese wade in a shallow tributary and dip their heads into the water after small fish. Scott tossed a stick for Twain. Neither one ever tired of playing fetch. “He’s a happy boy,” Mama said.

I didn’t take solace in her compliment. Instead I flashed back to my own childhood. Mama had left our farm, left our family, left us with our dad when I was close to Scott’s age.

I forced the bitter memory out of my head. *Please show me the way.*

The lyrics to a song I'd just learned came to mind, and I heard myself try a couple of lines aloud: "If I had the wings of an angel, over these prison walls I would fly."

"Where in the world did you learn that song?" Mama blurted out. Her tone of alarm caused the geese across the way to fly up in a chaos of honking and flapping wings.

I turned toward my mother. "I just heard it somewhere and liked it."

Mama stared at me with a perplexed look. "That was my father's favorite song. I don't remember much about him, but your singing opened a window to the past." She looked out on the river, remembering, I guessed. Remembering *what* was lost on me, considering how little I knew about her past. Only that she had lost her dad at an early age, and she'd been shuffled around to friends and relatives while her mother worked to support five kids. We had no connection to any of Mama's people, and I wasn't sure if she did.

As the sun faded further into the western sky, fireflies began to blink along the far bank of the Arkansas River. "Guess we better call it a day," I said.

"Guess so," Mama said, slowly getting up from the riverbank. "No



An old song struck a chord with Lou's mother.

luck on this day. But they'll be biting next time."

Scott bounded down the path back toward the house with Twain jumping and barking around his heels. I watched my mother walk slowly in front of me with her fishing pole and can of worms. She seemed somehow smaller. A flood of empathy rose up in me. There was no way to know what she had suffered in her childhood, and no reason to think she'd share it now. But maybe, in time...

The song came back to my lips and I began to hum as I walked. Perhaps there were other songs or connections that would help her open up. "If I had the wings of an angel, over these prison walls I would fly...."

Mama stopped, turned and smiled. "Thanks for letting me come," she said.

I didn't have answers for Mama's addiction to alcohol, and I sure didn't know what to expect in the future. I didn't have the wings of an angel, but I had the security of knowing that God was guiding me through the darkness, showing me the way. ■

angel sightings



AFTER A FRIEND TOLD ME she thought my cat, Gracie, might have some Russian blue in her, I decided to do some research. Russian blues are described as sweet-tempered, even genteel cats—just like my Gracie. I also learned they're known as the Archangel cat because they come from northern Russia's Archangel Isles. If I had any doubts about her angelic origins, seeing the wings on her tummy put them to rest for good!

KATHY KEELEY ANDERSON, WAUTOMA, WISCONSIN

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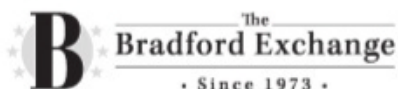
Words from the *Footprints in the Sand* poem appear courtesy of Margaret Fishback Powers, author of the book *Footprints: The True Story Behind the Poem that Inspired Millions*.

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heaven's music

I ROLLED DOWN MY CAR WINDOW and breathed in the cool spring air. It felt good to get out of the house. *I'll just take a drive through the back roads*, I thought, *to clear my head, like a church visit used to do.*

But as I cruised through the rural neighborhood, I was reminded that we still hadn't found a good youth program for my sons.



Mozart called it "the king of instruments."

We had moved to the small town in Ohio years before and hadn't found a church to suit our needs. I wanted the boys to have an outlet for their faith but felt lost as to where to turn.

Speaking of lost, I thought. I looked around. I'd traveled the back roads in my neighborhood many times, but now I was in an unfamiliar area. I stopped at a desolate intersection to get my bearings. Not a car or person in sight, but what was that sound? I leaned my head out the window. An organ, playing a hymn. I tapped the gas pedal and crawled forward, following the music. I turned onto a nearly hidden dirt road. At the end sat a little church. Organ music spilled from

its open door. I never knew there was a church back here.

I noted the name of the church and emailed the pastor for a meeting. He excitedly told me about their services and the youth program they were revitalizing. I signed the boys up, and it turned out a few friends from their school went to the same program. We'd finally found the perfect place. All I had to do was follow the music.

JAMIE WILSON, VALLEY CITY, OHIO

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Try standing on the other side of the counter

BY ROBERTA MESSNER, HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA

F EDEX WAS SUPPOSED to be known for its speedy delivery. I shot a look at the clock on the wall. Again. It was almost 4 p.m. *What is taking so long?* I thought.

"Found it!" the clerk said, holding up the mailing label he'd been digging for. Did he expect a reward?

The clerk had warned me this wasn't going to be easy. As soon as I walked in he announced, "I'm a newbie." He also told me his name, which I'd already forgotten in the long while I'd been standing there watching him search for the right label. And price. And the right box.

He slipped the books I was sending inside and turned the box over. The books *thunked* to the other end. It took everything I had not to roll

my eyes. "Maybe put a piece of cardboard in there. To stabilize them."

"Oh! Good idea," he said. He went off to find a piece of cardboard. I tapped my foot on the floor. Drummed my fingers on the counter. Finally I just crossed my arms across my chest and leaned on the counter with a heavy sigh. *If that doesn't give him the message, nothing will*, I thought.

The March sun was practically setting when I finally got to my car. My cell phone buzzed. It was my friend Faye, who ran one of my favorite local clothing shops.

"Roberta," she said, "I was hoping you could help me out this Saturday. Ed and I have a chance to take a weekend trip. It was really last minute, so I don't have much time to find someone





Faye and Roberta at the consignment shop

to mind the store. You were the first person who came to mind.”

How could I say no? Faye had done so much for me. When I lost weight a few years back she built me a new wardrobe practically single-handedly—and helped me sell my old clothes for extra cash. “Sure, Faye,” I said. “I’d love to.”

I stopped by the store on Friday so Faye could teach me the ropes. “It’s really just learning how to work the cash register and credit card machine. And what to do if someone writes a check. Oh, and how to tally your sales. Easy-peasy,” she assured me.

It certainly sounded like it. I’d spent my nursing career managing hospital-wide programs. *A cash register ought to be a piece of cake*, I thought as I jotted down step-by-step notes just in case.

“Once you start using the machine, it’ll come automatically,” Faye said.

“I’ll be fine,” I told her. “You just go and have fun.”

Saturday morning I stationed myself behind the counter, adjusted

some of the angel figurines that lined the narrow window. Outside, four cars pulled into the parking lot. *That’s plenty of people at once*, I thought. I looked down at the register. A memory from my nursing career flashed in front of me. We’d just gotten a new blood-glucose monitoring device at the hospital and I couldn’t get it to register a reading. A coworker came over to help. As he left, he shook his head, smirked, and within earshot of several patients and other coworkers, said, “A fool with a tool is still a fool.”

My cheeks had gone red. I could feel them warming up again now. What if I messed this up? I imagined all those customers standing at the counter tapping their feet, drumming on the counter, heaving heavy sighs. Just as I’d done at FedEx. *Dear Lord, what am I in for?*

The front door opened. As the customers milled around, I tried out the register. I took the price tag off a shirt I planned to buy myself, punched in the sale amount using the gray buttons and hit the “1/9” key. *Now total the sale with the blue button*, I told myself. I checked the notes. Sure enough they said, “The drawer should pop open.”

Easy-peasy, right? Nope. Nothing happened. *Oh, no*, I thought. I pressed one button after another. Nothing.

The door opened again and a man entered with a Starbucks cup. “What

do you think, hon?" his wife called to him. She was a chic blonde modeling a long asymmetrical floral top over black leggings. "I saw this same outfit at the mall last week."

"Of course Faye would have it too," one of the other customers said. It seemed the whole crowd were Saturday-morning regulars. I dried my clammy hands on my slacks. "Faye's not here today," I said. "And I can't seem to get it together." I fumbled for my notes. "I've got all the instructions scribbled down here..." *A fool with a tool is still a fool*, I thought.

An awkward silence followed, broken by one of the customers. "This is *Roberta*, y'all," she said, like I was a special treat. "Faye told me she'd be here today."

The man with the coffee appeared at my side. "Just read over your notes," he said. "And take a deep breath. There's no rush here. It's the twenty-first century version of an old-time general store, except instead of RC Cola, we drink chai!" He raised his cup in a salute.

"Chai's my favorite," I blurted out.

"Well, your wish is my command, Roberta," he said. "I'll be right back."

He sauntered out the door. The ladies went on with their shopping. I bit my lip and studied my instructions again. Punch in the sale amount from the garment ticket. Hit "1/9." Then

total the sale with the blue button.

Bing! The door popped open as promised. I tried it again. *Bing!*

The power of a few kind words, I thought. By the time my chai arrived I was ringing up sales like a pro. Faye's customers were a dream. I helped a teenager choose something to wear to her school's band dinner and an older lady find a stylish jacket for a friend's memorial.

When I locked the door at four o'clock I caught sight of those angel figurines in the window. "Job well done," I said to them. I got into my car, feeling accomplished. But I had an errand to run on the way home. I drove straight to the office supply store and headed for the FedEx counter. My newbie clerk was there again. His name tag read BRAD. I wouldn't forget that again. "You mailed a package for me the other day," I said. "I wanted to apologize for my behavior."

Brad grinned. "Not to worry," he said. "I look forward to assisting you again."

"Thank you," I said. I noticed the manager standing nearby. "I came by today to tell you that *Brad* here did a really good job the other day."

Practice—and a few kind words—would make Brad a better clerk. Hopefully it would make me a better customer too. ■

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he makes winds his messengers

PSALM 104:4

MY HUSBAND OWNED a truck and trailer, so when my son was giving away a mattress and box spring I volunteered to help with the transport. The guys tied everything down tightly and tested the knots to make sure they wouldn't come undone. I drove carefully, taking my time and giving the other cars a wide berth.

All was well until I got to the main road and had to speed up. As I merged I checked my rearview mirror. The mattress had come loose! I watched it fly off the trailer and right into a lane of traffic.

I pulled over and leapt out of the truck. The mattress was lying yards away—in the middle of the road. Someone stopped to block the traffic, but I had to do something. It had taken two people to get the mattress in the trailer the first time. How could I possibly lift it alone?

Traffic was backing up. Drivers were honking. I had to try.

Dashing into the street, I grabbed the binding and tugged with all my might. The mattress didn't budge. What now? I couldn't just leave the mattress where it was. *Lord, I need help!*

With a grunt, I pulled again. A strong breeze rose up, and this time the mattress moved. It seemed light. As if someone had helped me lift it off the ground. I made it to the other side of the road and breathed a sigh of relief. Traffic returned to normal. I called my husband and my son to help finish the job the heavenly wind had started.

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earning their wings



Richard (front row, center) and clan celebrated Thanksgiving 2014 at Beaufort House in Ireland.

Big Family, Big Faith

**RICHARD BIRMINGHAM
WARREN, NEW JERSEY**

When a good friend passed away just before Ash Wednesday in 2014, I wondered what I would do if I knew this was my last Lenten season. At the top of my list: passing on my faith to my family. I fired off an email to my 10 children. “Every day during Lent, I’ll share what I think God wants me to share with you,” I wrote. “If you find it helpful, great! If not, relief is just a click away.”

In my first message, I reflected on

lines from Psalm 95, “Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart.” My wife had just had an echocardiogram, so I guess all our hearts were on my mind.

I figured a couple of the kids would just read the email to humor me, but it turned out everyone liked my idea. They shared my emails with their friends, who forwarded them even further. There are 40 people in our immediate family and 40 days of Lent. So this year we’re praying for one person each day, and the whole family on Sundays. I think my spiritual legacy is in good hands.

Back in the Saddle

YESSENIA LUNA, CYPRESS, TEXAS

Because of a lack of oxygen at birth, I have cerebral palsy. The doctor warned my parents I would never walk, sit by myself or speak. But he didn't say I wouldn't ride a horse.

I was six when I climbed on a horse at SIRE (Self-Improvement thru Riding Education), a therapeutic riding program for people with disabilities. Since I lacked the strength and balance to ride properly, my teacher put a pillow behind me so I could sit up straight. With time, my physical capabilities improved. Now I ride high in the saddle. Being able to connect with a horse helps me both physically and emotionally.

The program gave me so much confidence, I now volunteer for SIRE. I clean equipment and feed the horses

before their therapy session. After all the program has done for me, I feel good giving something back. As American horse trainer Pat Parelli says, "There's nothing you can't do when the horse becomes part of you."



Yessenia rides high, courtesy of SIRE.



Small hands on deck, with Tyler!

Learning and Doing

ANDREA BLACKSTONE
HALETHORPE, MARYLAND

There are a lot of veterans in my family. When my son, Tyler, was four, he didn't understand what that meant. I searched YouTube for videos to help me explain. One about homeless vets came up.

"Let's build a house for every veteran," Tyler said. I explained we didn't have enough money to do that, but he insisted we do *something*. We wound up making Hero Bags. Tyler applied for a grant, which we used to buy backpacks, toiletries, socks, winter hats and gloves, and restaurant gift cards. In the past four years, Tyler has handed out more than 3,500 bags.

"I want veterans to know they're important," Tyler says. He gets it.

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letters & messages



Brenda, one of our newest subscribers, shows off the story that won her over.

BRENDA O'CONNOR
ACWORTH, GEORGIA

Recently I received a sample issue of *Angels on Earth*. I enjoyed every page, especially Douglas Scott Clark's nostalgic Christmas story, "A Surprising Request" (Nov/Dec 2019), about the unusual presents he and his brother asked Santa for. I can't wait to read what else is in store now that I've ordered my own subscription—and sent another to a friend.

ADRIENNE RIGGENBACH
MEDINA, OHIO

I first came across your magazine in May 2003 when my teenage son was hospitalized after a car accident. *Angels on Earth* was in his room, and the stories brought me comfort throughout his recovery. I have subscribed ever since. The stories always make me appreciate the little things in life, but I was so touched by LaNeta Locke's angelic hospital experience ("Angels of Mercy," Nov/Dec 2019) that I had to write and thank you.

ROMELLE MALONEY
DURANGO, COLORADO

On school days I sit at my kitchen window and wave to the families passing by. One morning a young mother and her children stopped to talk. Soon after, the mother returned alone. "My children said you seemed sad. Is there anything I can do to help?"

As I assured her I was well and happily waving as usual, God



The kindness of strangers eased Romelle's grief.

letters & messages

quickened me to the fact that deep down I was silently grieving the loss of a dear friend. I hadn't realized, and told the mother so.

The next morning mother and children and some of their friends arrived back at my door with flowers and hand-drawn notes. I was able to tell them that they made my heart happy again.

CINDY SEACHRIST
BOYERTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

June 27, 2019, started out like any ordinary Thursday, and I got myself ready for work. I'd just finished my morning coffee when I noticed a smudge on the side of my cup. To me it looked like an angel! I snapped



a photo to show my coworkers and felt blessed all day. I guess no day is too ordinary for an angel blessing.

Wake up with an angel in your cup.

VIVIAN A. MATHERNE
ABITA SPRINGS, LOUISIANA

“Did you hear about your mother?” another nursing home visitor asked me as I walked down the corridor toward Mom’s room. “She said



Vivian cherishes her mom's last words.

she saw an angel. I've been praying for a sign that my own mother would go to heaven—I think this was it.”

I didn't know what to say. Not only had my 95-year-old mother never spoken of angels, but she also hadn't said anything at all in five years. She seemed to have lost the ability to speak altogether.

I spent the morning with Mom. Helped her eat. Tried to engage her in conversation. I asked her about her meal, the weather, the events of the previous night. She said nothing. Not that morning, nor until she died at the age of 97. But her words had brought comfort to another daughter who needed a sign, and to me, who hadn't thought to ask for one.



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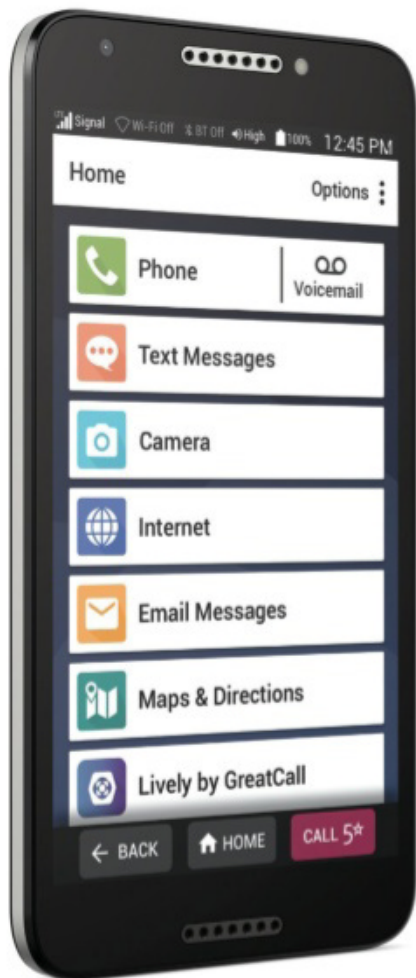
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