



This was always my favorite family story growing up, one I never got tired of hearing over and over. Most of Dad's stories were funny—like the time Dad, as a little schoolboy, forgot he had a slice of custard pie in his coat pocket and sat against it on the school bus—but this story had an eerie, uncanny quality that stayed with me over the years. How ironic, then, that when I sent Dad a copy of *Angels on Earth* magazine, he said the stories reminded him of his own childhood experience—a connection I myself had never made!

I suppose I should have known all along that my father believed in angels. In our Catholic household, it was my mother who first took me to church, but my father was the one who allayed my fears. Early on, Mom told me to pray that Dad would start going to church regularly with us. I did, and *he* did, yet in time I realized his sincere faith did not depend on such outward rituals. It was something he relied on, like air, but did not think much about until he needed it.

When I was about five or six years old and newly introduced to the concept of Hell, I cried out from my bed one night. It was Dad who came to check on me. I told him I was afraid I was

going to go to Hell when I died and burst into tears. He reminded me that when Jesus was on the cross, He forgave both the thief and the murderer dying alongside Him and promised they would be in Heaven with Him that day.

“You’ll never do anything as bad as kill someone,” my father added, “so I know God will certainly forgive any mistakes you make.” That truth has stayed with me my entire life, and although I have been afraid of many things, I have never again been afraid of Hell.

The angel story, which happened when Dad was three years old, started with the neighbor’s new car—no, perhaps it *really* started with the tailor who made Dad a beautiful new sailor coat. It was navy blue with brass buttons and a sturdy belt sewn across the back. One Sunday afternoon, the neighbors wanted to take my father’s family for a drive in the modern new Ford they were so proud of. My grandmother refused to go and was more than a little hesitant about letting her baby Alfred go off that day. However, as often happened, my strong-willed great-grandmother prevailed.

So my great-grandmother, whom we called “Nonny,” and her other daughter, my great-aunt or “Tanta,” piled into the crowded car with the neighbor family. The neighbors were in the front seat, Nonny and Tanta in back, and my young father-to-be in the rumble seat. Grandma stayed behind. Everyone thought she was just a worry-wart.

It was a beautiful day for a ride. The lure of driving along the water on a sunny day exerted a magnetic attraction. The driver steered his car through the beautiful Connecticut countryside, from Bridgeport up to Waterbury along the Naugatuck River. The car was filled with the sound of talking and laughing, while little Alfie watched the scenery roll by.

As they headed for home late in the afternoon, it began to rain. They were fast approaching a bridge. The rain must have made the road slick. The car skidded, the driver lost control, and the car slammed into the side of the bridge.

The car came to a dead stop, its back end tottering dangerously close to the water. Nonny and Tanta were stunned. The man and woman in front were seriously injured—he was badly cut, and she had a broken leg. As soon as they could free themselves, Nonny and Tanta attended to their injured friends. When the state police arrived, Nonny asked where baby Alfred was. He was no longer in the rumble seat.

Tanta responded, “I thought *you* had him!”

My great-grandmother wrung her hands and wailed, “Where’s the baby? Where’s the baby?”

Another car approached and stopped to help. From their vantage point behind the stranded car, someone was finally able to see my father—sound asleep through all the commotion—hanging by his coat-belt from a point on the rear of the car, suspended over the water below.

So many years later, my father still remembered what it was like, having been retrieved from his precarious position, to stand there surrounded by the towering state policemen, his grandmother, and his aunt. Nonny was asking, “How will we get home now? We must be twenty-five or thirty miles from home, with no car and no driver!” At that very moment, two neighbors from Bridgeport, Mr. and Mrs. Scanzillo, drove up! In fact, they lived right next door to my great-grandmother.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Grasso,” they told her. “We’ll take you home.”

Was the tailor who had sewn my father such a strong coat an angel in disguise? Perhaps. And surely some divine force had led the neighbors to the crash site at just the right time. But most of all, I know now that it was an invisible angel who rocked my father to sleep and held him safely over the water until he could be rescued by human hands.

*In loving memory of Alfred Gallucci  
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