

The Angel Dilemma

By

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Summary

When what appears to be wings, wings of light, are seen flying above a Los Angeles park, a discouraged and downhearted, Ben Jenson, is compelled to understand what's happening.

Due to substantial unpaid parking tickets, a traffic court judge offers Ben the opportunity to 'work off' the debt by volunteering for six months at a homeless lot—a lot where people have cars but are without a place to live. What becomes a journey of heart and spirit, Ben meets an Angel and many richly storied characters within the lot who slowly open his eyes to another world, a world of promise and hope—a world where anyone can begin again.

The often humorous and uniquely insightful characters of the lot all have a story to tell. An old woman who drove away from her retirement home to discover her heart's lost love; an ex-prostitute turned crystal spirit-guide who believes the power of crystals will give her life new meaning; an always smiling woman who burned down her trailer home and set out cross country to find who she used to be; an addict on the ropes and reaching for one last reason to live; a former Alabama tight-end who's emotional struggles nearly killed him but has found a calm and guiding spirit within; a recently divorced and overweight middle-aged accountant who imagines that learning to surf might alter the course of his life; an old man writing one last poem in

memory of his long since departed wife; a hardware store worker who's convinced that shop-vacs can change one's life for the better; customers at that same hardware store struggling to understand wall anchors as if the meaning of life be hidden within their applications; a writer processing the suicide of her boyfriend who discovers the words of a novel that just might bring her back to life and her potential within it, and, the dead-pan humor of a man who's kaleidoscope mind is a wonder to behold.

An Angel who's forgotten how to fly. Her journey is the universal journey back to one's purpose and understanding of the human condition. A boots-on-the-ground kind of spirituality, the novel is completed at 70,000 words.

Prologue

The first time I saw her... she was flying.

Of course, I didn't know that then and she would later say she wasn't flying, she was trying to remember how to fly—and that there is a profound difference between the two. But at that moment, I couldn't tell the difference because there she was, up maybe three or four stories above the park in a hard-pouring rain when lightning momentarily lit the LA sky and everything in it... even an Angel.

LA's more an idea than a place.

You can spend your whole life trying to get here but never quite arrive or, perhaps worse, you arrive—but still never quite get here.

On a chilly, rainy day in downtown LA, depressed and discouraged, I stepped into the old traffic court lobby with its untold stories of dastardly characters like me who apparently had issues pertaining to paying traffic tickets. Ever the optimist, I thought, *This isn't going to go well.*

And it's raining... did I mention it's raining?

I'm not from LA and have never quite become accustomed to the way it rains here. Maybe 'way' is the wrong word, but it just doesn't feel exactly like rain. It's more like the scripted idea of rain, almost on-location and manufactured as a nod to Nature's necessity. It's wet enough as far as that goes, and the sky is an appropriate shade of gray, but it feels painted and just doesn't quite possess that quintessential something that makes one feel the all-encompassing presence of rain, such that I'm not entirely convinced it's raining just around the block, or certainly not throughout greater LA—maybe just here, maybe just on me.

The lobby of the traffic court feels more like a going out-of-business sale or a small business that is in the middle of a move, a bit unorganized with just a hint of disheveled. It's quiet when you step into the courtroom, hearing only the words of the judge and those who are either accepting of, or taking issue with their parking ticket situation. Unconsciously, having regressed to high school instincts, I walk to the back and sit in the last row, as if maybe the judge won't see me or call on me for the book report I haven't finished—or started.

There are maybe fifteen of us waiting. Some guy's up there pleading his case to a judge who is the textbook embodiment of refrained indifference, having heard it all and having so decidedly *been there, done that*. Nevertheless and to her credit, she is patiently listening to the somewhat nervous gentleman who stands before her.

“The thing is,” as if to establish his position, “your judge”—surely he meant to say your Honor—“the thing is, I didn’t see the meter. If I’d seen it, I would have paid the ticket.”

With the briefest pause, she asks with a steady, clarifying tone, “You didn’t see the meter and therefore you didn’t pay your parking ticket. Did I hear you correctly?” She’s now wearing a curious, almost appreciative expression, thinking that maybe this is actually a new one, a somewhat new explanation for not having paid the ticket.

“Yes ma’am, your judge.”

“And so that I’m clear, if you had seen the meter, you would have paid the parking ticket?”

“Yes ma’am, your judge,”—I mean, the dudes just got way too much going on, possibly stoned, which seems an odd choice for traffic court, even for LA—and says simply, as if this might explain everything, “It’s weird, right?”

“Yes, Mr. Harris, it is indeed, weird.”

”I thought so, too,” he says, almost relieved, maybe thinking he’s found his pace and it’s smooth sailing now.

“Mr. Harris,” kindly disregarding the unimaginable and almost profound logic breakdown when clearly the parking ticket would have been on his front window for all to see and regardless of one’s mysterious inability to see the meter, she asks, somewhat sincerely, “Have you had problems not seeing things in the past?”

“Well, I mean, what’s weird is that I...honestly, no. Not like this, I mean.”

“Yes, we’ve established the essence of it as weird, I’m just trying to determine if it’s an eyesight issue or more likely a mysterious gap in the matrix that disallows you from seeing parking meters.”

“A gap in the matrix?”

“Yes, or maybe you’re having an out-of-body experience. It could be that aliens have abducted you and left behind a vague image of who you used to be and that image would understandably have specific issues with your being fully present. And so it stands to reason that untold details would be lost as you are only functioning as a kind mirage or projection of yourself—at least until the aliens return you to your body. Does that seem feasible, Mr. Harris?”

“Well, uhm...not really?”

“No, not really. And neither does I didn’t see the meter. Kindly pay your fine, good sir, and best of luck with the alien situation.”

“The alien situation...?”

“Next, please,” as she drops the gavel. It must be said that few things are as conclusive as when a judge drops the gavel. It is—the end.

As an aside, and in no way justifying my own negligence here, it seems safe to say that thousands of years from now, the alien race that inhabits Earth will speculate as to how humanity failed. I certainly can’t speak to what those dynamics are with any expertise— but when reflecting and discussing the turning point of humankind, the quintessential fail point that humans could not overcome, likely war or the environment—odds are it won’t be unpaid parking tickets. And unless I’m misreading the crafty-smart judge, she too has a reliable perspective—I’m hopeful anyway. And to be clear, I’ve never met an alien.

Still sitting in the back of the courtroom, waiting to be called up to suffer my penance, I’m in the unenviable position of having to overhear a couple of other courtroom characters, the kindly flat-earthier making his case to a woman who counters with something about fairies residing on her shoulder—but I must have heard that wrong. They seem like nice enough people,

each peddling their beliefs with genuine intent. The woman believes... oh, it's angels that sit on her shoulder, not fairies. I'm not so sure there's really much of a difference—kind of the same vibe, right?

I'm mostly open-minded, but I will go out of my way not to wake up the kind of crazy who is a flat-earther. And in the who-can-sound-more-crazy dialogue happening in front of me, it's a tight race but my money's on the flat-earther to take home the crazy cake. I should maybe mention I've never read a position paper on why some folks think the earth is flat. Who knows, maybe it is. I really don't care because it doesn't alter my day or life in any way whatsoever. What gets me is the passion people have to make their point—like it's some kind of public service message: May I have your attention please, the earth is flat—now please return to your regularly scheduled programming.

Is it fair to assume people who end up in traffic court meet a certain mental profile? Nothing disastrous, not a train wreck personality but perhaps slightly more likely to be late with birthday cards, etc. Sure, I'm here and all that but I'm holding fast to being the exception, not the rule. In fact, the jury is still out on me and will remain so—I reserve the right to my own fanciful delusions as I see fit.

“Oh, they're real,” says the flat-earther, as it pertains to angels.

“I'm glad you feel that way, and the more I think about it, maybe the earth really is flat,” she offers, “But isn't that what they used to think back before, you know, science? Like ships would just drop off the edge of the earth?”

“Yeah, it's hard to explain.”

“Yes, I would think so,” she says without irony or emphasis.

“The thing is, you really can’t trust science,” he says, and this is precisely when I get up for another cup of bad coffee. And hey, flat-earther, thanks for the heads up on faux science, buddy. I always thought gravity was overrated, kind of a get-rich-quick scheme if you ask me.

Anyway, I’m still here on earth, the round one I think.

Full disclosure, I’m not great about a lot of things—most things, actually—kind of the classic wanted to be an overachiever but instead became the underachiever type. I don’t know why I referred to that as a classic, not sure if that’s considered classic, whatever classic is, other than a mostly agreed upon cliché that’s also given special status as being a classic.

By way of explaining my current traffic court experience, allow me to first introduce my other-worldly glove compartment phenomena and offer, in my defense, that habits form, often unthinkingly—but here’s something you didn’t know about glove compartments—they can alter both time and space.

I was in the habit of tossing a parking ticket into my glove compartment, fully intending to pay it next week or next month. And here’s something else you didn’t know, it’s become fairly obvious to me that glove compartments also function as a kind of time portal. Admittedly, I can’t prove my glove compartment is a multi-dimensional parallel-universe vortex, not right now, or ever, but be mindful of what you put in there and whether or not you want it back in this lifetime, or any lifetime—depending on your predilection for time travel, etc. Because a good glove compartment can change your life, and not always for the better—don’t say you weren’t warned.

Anyway, the tossing tickets into my glove compartment continued for a year or so until one day there was a boot on my car and the chickens had come home to roost. Now, I’m not super savvy with chickens, haven’t spent a lot of time with chickens in my life. That may be my

loss or something to regret, but I doubt it. The point is I have no idea what exactly roosting is—other than something to do with where they sit or how they sit. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure chickens sit in the conventional way we understand sitting. Nevertheless, there was a big yellow boot roosting on my wheel—regardless of chickens and the surprisingly complex way they sit.

It's odd too, because I don't have anything against the whole society rules thing—makes sense to me. I had the money to pay them. Maybe it was more apathy than anything else. I honestly don't know—I just sort of didn't get around to it. It's not a position or issue, it's nothing at all, really. It's not even traditional laziness but some other space of casual and unthinking disregard.

And to be clear, I don't have issues with authority, it's not that the world doesn't need traffic tickets. For the sake of order, of course, it does. I'm not actually sure what my point is on this or if I even have a point but am saved by the bell. The judge says, "Mr. Jenson," her head not quite raising, her eyes up from underneath her black-rimmed glasses. She wears a distinct aura of the unimpressed and perhaps even slightly disappointed, the way a high school teacher might speak to a forever-distant student, as she continues, almost mysteriously, "Are you with us this afternoon?"

"Yes, your Honor," and I swear, for just a moment was tempted to say your judge, but opted against it. I'm wondering now if she is being prophetic, that she is aware of my tendency to be somewhere without actually being here. So this just got philosophically heavy, and I like her even more.

Presided over by the mostly austere yet increasingly personable judge, the traffic court vibe here is serious while also being somewhat casual. So in a situation like this, I keep my head

down and let it play out as it will. This probably isn't the time to mention that my life has lost all meaning, even if that somewhat overstates my experience. After all, I'm the unpaid parking ticket idiot and that creates for me not quite a head-down contrition but a sincere tone without commentary, saying, "I am, your honor." Again my brain so very much wanted to say, your judge—it was weird.

I should offer here that I've never been in court, for anything serious. There was that reckless speeding ticket in high school after the prom queen dumped me but does high school really count, I mean, really? Glancing around at the hapless whose journey has led them here, not considering that I too am one of the said hapless, and now wishing a word other than hapless had come to mind pertaining to those here. Self-awareness and traffic court rarely go hand-in-hand.

With her glasses hung low at the tip of her nose, she slowly reviews my case history and after a rather long pause which is generally not a good thing as a judge considers why you're in her courtroom. And with an almost revelatory tone which I take to be her uniquely dry humor—a trait I hold in highest regard and quite respect—she states, "It appears you have a problem paying traffic tickets."

"Yes, your Honor," I respond, sincerely.

"So, short of paying the rather substantial tickets and fines, you have a few options. For six months, you can work part-time community service to pay off your parking ticket debt."

"Ok..." trying to hide my hesitation.

"You can volunteer a few nights a week at a retirement home doing various things, mostly having to do with meals, etc."

"I guess, your Honor, and I don't mean to sound like a wise guy but it's the etcetera that I would be curious about?"

“It’s whatever they need. It’s an old folk’s home, Mr. Jenson, you can guess?”

“Yes, of course, and my other two options?”

“It’s not like they get much better, Mr. Jenson, that’s kind of the point here, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You can assist the waste and removal services unit three mornings a week—they start at four.”

“Okay, and that would be four in the morning.”

“Yes.”

“And I would be hauling trash?”

“Unless the sanitation department has lately become florists and gardeners, I think that’s the general idea, yes. Or door number three is you can work some late nights and early mornings at a homeless lot downtown. As I understand it, they have cars but are without a home or place to stay.”

“It’s a parking lot for homeless people who have a car?”

“Yes, and there is no door number four, Mr. Jenson.”

“Door number three it is, your Honor, and thank you,” I say for no particular reason, other than maybe acknowledging that I imagined this could go much worse.

The judge concludes by saying, “You start tomorrow night.”

“Ahh, I actually have plans tomorrow night, your Honor.”

“I know, I just confirmed them.”

“Yes, your Honor,” I say, sharing a small smile with her because you have to respect a skilled smartass who has so finely tuned her craft.

“Good luck,” says the guy who sort of officially checks you out of court with your walking papers and instructions. I’m not sure what luck has to do with it and very hopeful that good luck isn’t actually required as that all but dooms me and any efforts henceforth—here or otherwise. Not exactly Mr. Lucky over here.

What wouldn’t and couldn’t have occurred to me as I exited traffic court was a future filled with an almost infinite journey of souls who would soon arrive at this lot from nearby, or from cross country. Some were on the road, some were already there. But there’s one individual in the lot that need not travel by road, preferring her wings...when working properly.

As I walk out of the traffic court building and toward my car, I sincerely wonder, *Is this your best life, Ben....?*