A Story About a Homeless Man
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It was a cold, gray day in the city. Gray rain fell from a gray sky. Gray cars whizzed past. Gray people rushed down the street under gray umbrellas. A gray shape huddled against a tall, gray building. That gray shape was Damian Malvolio, the homeless man whose name meant bad luck. He sat on the frozen ground, thinking. Thinking, remembering, dreaming, and wishing. He painstakingly got to his feet. He began, for what seemed like the millionth time, time to make his way home. He trekked past the buildings, the supermarket, the baseball field, St. Vincent’s church. Each place brought back memories. The time he and his brother knocked down a canned soup tower. The time they set the church on fire. The best baseball game of his life. He smiled and laughed as he remembered. People walking past him sped up, glancing back over their shoulders, but Damian didn’t notice. He wasn’t even there. He was back in the past, playing and causing mischief.

Soon, he got to his house. It was a simple, two story building. Once upon a time, it had been painted a buttery, sunshine yellow, but the color had worn off over time. Now, in the rain, it looked gray just like everything else.

A little girl in a yellow jacket and boots splashed around in some puddles. She laughed and shrieked, never taking any notice of him. Damian leaned against a tree and watched her. She reminded him of a girl from long ago. A little girl with the same curly blond hair and big, round blue eyes.

He leaned his head back against the tree and closed his eyes. He disappeared again. He left the cold, the rain, the hunger. The sound of the girl’s laughter seemed to fade away as he traveled through time, back to his youth. He reached own into the depths of his heart and pulled out a memory to relive. His 8th birthday. A day of hugs, presents, and
Italian food and family. He went back to a day when his only worries were about melted ice cream.

“Hey Damian! Toss me that ball!” shouted his cousin Tony. Damian threw him a shiny new baseball, then caught it with a stiff new glove. The two of them played catch for a while, and then it turned into a full-out baseball game, with all of his cousins, uncles, and various family members joining in.

His loud mouthed cousin Mario volunteered to be the announcer. “It’s two and two on Uncle Gio now, with Leo on deck. Bases loaded. Marko’s taking the sign now. It looked like three fingers. What is that again? A fastball? No, a changeup, the only other pitch he knows. He’s winding up, watch out for that changeup Uncle Gio…” “Mario! Shut up!” shouted Marko. Everyone laughed as he ran up and pretended to tackle his cousin.

Damian, laughing at second base, looked over at Angelo...

NO! Don’t think about Angelo, Damian told himself, but he couldn’t help it. Angelo, with his curly blonde hair and twinkling blue eyes. His mind filled with thoughts of his childhood with his brother, the angel. A memory appeared before him like a mirage.

Damian, Angelo, and their parents walked into St. Vincent’s church. They were all stiff in their Sunday best. “Here, boys” whispered Grandma Lucia, “take this candle up to the altar for your poor dead Grandpa.” Damian grabbed the beige candle in his hand. It dripped wax onto the floor. He walked solemnly up to the altar with Angelo at his side. They knelt on the ground and placed the candle on the altar. They bowed their heads to say a quick prayer for their dearly departed grandfather, then they crossed themselves and started to get up. They must have gotten too close to the candles, or maybe they stood up too fast, but next thing they knew, a row of candles fell and set fire to the dusty rug. They stared as the flames began to crawl around the floor, then Angelo screamed, getting the attention of several old women sitting in the first pew. They saw what had happened and started screaming, and pretty soon everyone in the church had seen the fire at the altar. People shrieked and ran to the doors. Damian and Angelo stood there, paralyzed with fear, as the flames began to lick at their legs, then they were swept up in their father’s strong arms. There was a stampede for the door. People were running, tripping in their high heels and stiff pants. The priest tore off his robe, which had caught on fire. Everywhere there was shouting and chaos.

Once outside, the priest began his sermon in jeans and a white undershirt. They prayed
until the firemen arrived, but by then, St. Vincent’s church was ruined on the inside. When the firemen asked if anyone knew how the fire started, Angelo and Damian glanced at each other. No one said a word, then one of the old women pointed at Damian. Another one pointed at Angelo. “Which one was it? I’ll bet my hat it was the dark haired one. That blue eyed boy must be an angel, by the looks of him.” Several of the church-goers nodded in agreement.

Damian’s mouth dropped open in disbelief. He was being blamed, just because his brother was blond and blue eyed! How unfair! That was the day that Damian Malvolio, the boy whose name meant bad luck, became the boy who burnt down an entire church.

Damian went through other memories in his head, some funny, some embarrassing, and some that just made him plain happy. Others, however, gave him a deep panging of loss and emptiness in his heart.

“Mom!” Damian shouted. “Mom! Come and look! It’s a letter from Angelo!” His mother hurried into the living room, wiping her hands on her apron as she came.

“Hurry and open it,” she said. Damian happily complied. They sat together on a couch and opened the envelope. Two slips of paper came out. Damian grabbed the one written in his brother’s careful, slanted handwriting and unfolded it. He began to read.

Dear Mom, Dad, and Damian,

Thanks for the gifts you sent me. My friends and I have enjoyed the candy. The sweater helps a lot, as it’s cold where I am right now. That’s all I can say to you, because my letter is being censored. How have you all been doing? I wish with all of my heart that I could be spending this Christmas with you, but I owe a great duty to the country I was raised in. You have to tell me all about what happens. Mother, tell me what food you made, dad, tell me who comes to visit. And Damian, tell me all about Arabella and Celestina. If I hear this from all of you, then it will almost be as if I am there with you. It has been very cold and depressing over here, and all I have to hope and wait for are your letters. I wish that this war would end so that I could come home and eat my mother’s pasta, not the tasteless gruel they give us here.

Love, hugs, and kisses to you all, from Angelo
Damian’s mother held the letter to her heart. Her eyes were wet, but she was smiling. “Oh, my angel, my beautiful little angel! I’ll go get paper, so we can write back to him right now!” She walked out of the room. It was then that Damian remembered about the other paper that had fallen out of the envelope. He unfolded it. It was another letter, written by a typewriter, not a human hand. He read the top. To the Malvolio family, it said. He read through the letter, but his mind couldn’t seem to register what it said. He read it through a second time, then a third, and a fourth, but still, the words made no sense to him. His mother came into the room and saw him. She went over and read the paper over his shoulder. A choked sob escaped from her throat.

To the Malvolio family.

We are sorry to inform you that Angelo Malvolio is missing in action. He is presumed dead.

Deepest regrets,
US Army

Damian couldn’t believe it. Just a moment ago, his little brother had been alive in the letter he had written. He was cold, and homesick, but not missing and maybe dead. How could he be? It wasn’t possible. “Don’t worry, mama,” he said. “Angelo’s alive. They said he was missing, not dead. Do you really think he would let himself get killed?” These words only made his mother cry harder, but Damian held onto hope until the day another letter arrived, saying that they had found Angelo’s body, and it was being shipped home.

The funeral was the worst day of his life. He sat in between Celestina, Angelo’s wife, and Arabella, his own girlfriend. Both women cried, but not as hard as Damian. Angelo had been everything to him. A brother, a playmate, a best friend, but most of all, his angel. Damian had always felt that he had to protect his baby brother from the world, but Angelo wanted to go out and explore. He wanted to live every day to the fullest, and this was the result. Damian always felt guilty about his brother’s death. He could have done something. He could have stopped his brother from joining the army. He could have enlisted and gone over with him, but it didn’t matter now. “Good bye, Angelo,” Damian whispered. “You’re up in heaven now, with the other angels. Right where you belong.”

All of sudden, he was aware of his surroundings. The rain had stopped, and the little girl
in the raincoat had quietly come up to him. There she was now, staring up at his wrinkled old face. “Hello, mister,” she said. “Were you sleeping?”

Damian smiled. “No,” he said, “I was remembering.”

The little girl nodded. “My mommy does that sometimes,” she said thoughtfully. They were quiet for a moment, then the little girl asked, “what were you remembering?”

Damian sighed. “Well,” he replied, “I was just remembering a little girl just like you.” The girl clapped her hands. “Tell me!” she exclaimed, eager for a story. Damian looked out into the distance, then decided that he had nothing better to do. “Once upon a time,” he began, “there was a man who was in love with a lady. The lady’s name was Arabella.”

As he said this, the girl shrieked.

“What is it?” asked Damian, alarmed.

“My name is Arabella, too!” answered the girl, hysterically. Then she got serious again. “Keep telling,” she urged him.

“The man,” continued Damian, “loved Arabella so much that he asked her to marry him.”

“Oooh,” interrupted the little girl again, “like a prince and a princess?”

Damian nodded. “Yes, exactly like that. One day, the Princess Arabella had a baby. The baby had blond hair and blue eyes. They named her Angela. Angela was the most precious little girl in the world. She was perfect.”

When he said this, Damian became silent. What he didn’t want this little girl to know was that Angela wasn’t perfect. Like the person she was named after, she wanted to go out to seek adventure in the world. One day, his angelic daughter had run away and never returned.
“Then what happened!” the girl said impatiently. Then the little girl seemed to make a discovery. “I know,” she said sadly.

“What happened?” Damian asked curiously.

“The mommy princess died,” she said, “that’s what always happens in the movies. The mommy dies.”

Damian nodded at her wisdom and reasoning. He closed his eyes to the world, as he always did when it got too depressing. He remembered his whole, tragedy-filled life. His mother had become depressed when her angel son died. Damian’s mother and father both died before he was married. When he did marry Arabella, they found out that she had cancer. She was also pregnant at the time. He remembered the doctor asking him “who do you want to live, your wife or your child?” It had been the hardest decision of his life. It was so hard that he refused to pick a side. Arabella was the one who decided that their daughter would be the one to survive. “Take care of her,” she had told him, “because a piece of me lives in her. Love her as you love me.” Arabella had only lived long enough to hold her daughter once, then she died, and Damian was left alone in the world with a child.

That child was the joy of his life for eighteen years, until the day that she ran away from home. When she left, Damian felt as if he couldn’t go on. Life, for him, was over. Everyone he loved was gone. He sat in his room, crying every day, until life money ran out. Then he sat in alleys and churches, mourning his losses and those of the ones he loved. He was always cold and hungry, but he never noticed. All he felt was the pang of his heartbeat, heavy with loneliness and sorrow.

“Hey, mister!” shouted the little girl, interrupting his thoughts. “Hey, mister! Are you hungry? My mommy’s making chocolate chip cookies and lemonade. Come and have some!”

Damian pulled away from her. “Oh, no. I doubt your mother would like that idea very much.”

The little girl wouldn’t take no for an answer. “You have to come!” she shouted, stamping her foot. “You’re my new best friend.” She clung to his arm in a four year old iron grip.
Finally, Damian complied. He followed the girl up the stairs to her porch. She yanked the door open and called out, “moooommyyyyy, I brought my friend to have a snack!”

“Bring her into the kitchen, Bella,” said a woman’s voice. The little girl dragged Damian into the kitchen, dropping her muddy coat and boots on the floor. “Oh, Bella, don’t do that! How many times have I told you…” the woman’s voice trailed off when she saw her daughter holding the hand of a strange old man. But all of a sudden, he wasn’t just a strange old man.

Damian couldn’t believe what he was seeing. It was his wife, Arabella, back from the dead. It couldn’t be. He pictured her in his head. Her thick black hair falling over her shoulder, her dark eyes crinkling in laughter. The woman before him had blond hair and blue eyes, but other than that, she was the spitting image of his wife.

“Angela?” he whispered. The little girl, angry at being ignored, broke the silence.

“Mommy, this is my new best friend. He told me a story about a prince and a princess who had the same name as me! The mommy princess died, and then the prince was all alone, but that was okay because he had a baby who was perfect!”

There was silence. “Can we have cookies now?”

Tears began to stream down Angela’s face. “Twelve years,” she sobbed. “I went back, but I couldn’t find you.” Damian realized that he was also crying. His heart felt heavy, not with emptiness, but with overflowing joy. Without another moment of hesitation, he went up and hugged his long lost daughter, his angel.

“So can he stay and have a snack?” asked Bella. “He can stay,” answered Angela, “forever.” In one week, Damian was officially moved in. He had a home and a family, and that was all he had ever wanted. Every day, he told little Bella stories of his childhood. She especially liked the one about the time he burned a church down. The days passed in happiness and bliss. Damian lived them to the fullest. He told stories,
cooked pasta, and even taught Bella how to play baseball. It turned out she was a natural at shortstop, Angelo’s old position.

One day, about a year later, Bella barged into Damian’s room. She jumped on top of him, shouting “Grandpa! Grandpa, wake up! It’s Saturday! We’re making pancakes today, remember? Grandpa, wake up! You promised!” Damian didn’t move.

Bella made a face. “GRAAANPPAAA!!” she screamed in his ear. Still, he wouldn’t stir. Then Bella began to cry. Angela walked in to see what the commotion was all about. “Mommy,” wailed Bella, “Grandpa won’t wake up!” There was silence. Nothing but the sound of two people breathing.

“Dad,” whispered Angela. She went over and put a hand on his cheek. It was cold.

“Where is he, mommy?” asked little Bella. Angela looked out into the distance. She smiled. “Grandpa’s in heaven now, with Angelo,” answered Angela quietly.

Strangely enough, neither of them cried over the loss of the man who had just barely entered their lives. They both seemed to realize that wherever Damian was, he was happy. Angela knew that her father had been given the gift of one more year of life. One year to make up for a lifetime of pain and sorrow. Somehow, in the back of her mind, and in the bottom of her heart, Angela knew that it had been enough.

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