

SHORT STORY EXCERPT (YA): *MEET YOUR GUARDIAN ANGEL* BY RUTH WEINER

Summary: Angel Ashe has a psychic skill: understanding people through the letters in their names. When Herbert Heath Hecht seeks refuge in Angel's store, he discovers more than he could imagine.

Note: Pages are extracted from the middle of the story.

I tell DeeDee that the letters in her name reveal power and wealth, so she hires me as a psychic reader. I wear a peasant skirt and a frilly off-the-shoulder blouse. DeeDee calls it psychic chic. I call it crass. I sit in the front window of her salon, studying my Letter Bible and waiting for the hordes of curious to come in.

Without warning, a boy barges into the store and dives under my table as a trio of skinny kids runs by shouting, “Faggot! Faggot! We’ll chop your prick and bag it.”

I feel the sting of the nasty words; I crouch down and look into the boy’s swollen face. “They’re idiots,” I tell him.

Between hiccoughs, he sobs, “Easy for you to say. You don’t have to deal with them everyday.”

“I have a special place where you can hide till they’re gone. I’ll tell you when the coast is clear.”

He sucks in a breath and nods. After the the boys’ voices trail down the street, I signal for him to follow me. I whisper to DeeDee that I’ve got the situation under control. She arches her orange eyebrows in a “This kid has no money glare,” but I won’t let him go outside to be bullied. I know what it feels like to hang in the wind.

I’ve transformed a closet in the back of the salon into a private room where I can read people’s letters. I hate sitting in the front window like a street-walker. No one but me has stepped foot in my new space, not even DeeDee.

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I turn on a light and letters in all their moods spring from the walls. Shadowed and crouching, reckless and aggressive, sweet and comforting – each shape vibrates a letter’s essence. An S slinks along the edges, silvery-thin and shiny; another S slithers and streaks paint. E’s escalate their way to the ceiling. Linked O’s circle across the center; solitary O’s are orphaned in the corners. W’s welcome the boy and me with open arms.

I sit cross-legged in the middle of the unfurnished room and pat the paint-splattered floor for him to join me. “What do you see?” I ask the boy.

“A mixed-up messy mess of letters,” he growls. He picks at a few stray hairs above his lip. His fingers are slender and his wrists narrow. He sits tiny, although his legs are way longer than his torso.

It’s not so long since I was his age, awkward and shy with a heaping dose of attitude. I understand about giving someone time to think and breathe, so I repeat the alphabet six times to myself before speaking again. “Do any letters stand out for you?”

He points to a sky-scraper letter, bold black with heft. “I like the way that H looks. It’s bigger than the others.”

“Ah, the H. Potentially a happy letter.” I stand before his letter of choice and trace its lines. “The top part looks up and out.” I pause to examine the bottom section. “But the lower part tucks itself away and faces down. It’s saying you have a choice: optimism or pessimism.”

The boy furrows his forehead. “That’s a bunch of crap.”

“You’re the one who likes the H.”

He lies flat on the floor and stretches his arms high. “I’m Herbert Heath Hecht. That makes me a triple H.”

“Nice. But how many H’s are actually in your name?”

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The boy writes his full name in the waiting air, playing to a private audience. “There are five. That must mean something.”

I take a piece of royal blue chalk from a bucket and write H - E - R - B - E - R - T in boxy-block letters on the floor, underlining the double E and R. “E’s are eager for adventure, like ladders that extend into the unknown. R’s are runners and risk-takers. They’re ready to kick ass.”

The boy twists his lips and squints his eyes at me. “I’m betting the B is for big baby.”

“How the letter uses space is its truth. The B is balanced, the top mirrors the bottom. Both balloon with pride. And the T is tall and independent. It’s willing to consider both sides of an issue.”

I straighten my spine and fold my hands in my lap. I watch as his chin lifts, like he’s tuning in to what I’ve said.

But he stands up fast. “Herbert’s a faggot’s name. The kids say so. Besides, they’re just stupid letters.” He smudges the lines with his sneakered foot.

I reapply the chalk. “That might be, but they’re your letters.”

“What’s that got to do with those dumb asses who chase me?”

“They were after a person who’s afraid of who he is, and that creates an easy target.” I point to his chosen H. “Do you learn about metaphors in school?”

“You mean that poetry shit that makes a comparison of some kind?”

My mind wanders to when I learned about figures of speech and synonyms and antonyms.

“Give me three words for fall,” my teacher had said.

“Drop. Lower. Dive.”

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Instead of praising me, he said, “Try plummet. Or plunge. Descend. Hurtle. Use a simile or a metaphor. Falling like a thousand bricks. Tumbling into darkness. Be creative with what you say and how you say it.”

That got me wondering about letters and how their shapes define them. S - I - M - I - L - E. Except for the side-winding slippery S, the word looks like a city of tall buildings. M - E - T - A - P - H - O - R. The letters are arms and legs and bodies and bellies. They’re the roll of the seasons: snow-falling winter, wind-sweeping autumn, up-popping spring, and sun-happy summer.

I studied the thesaurus from abrogation to zero. I memorized fifty-one synonyms for cool, forty-three for anger, and nineteen for bored. I wanted to flabbergast my teacher! Stupefy him! Bowl him over.

That’s what I want for Herbert, for him to see beyond the obvious. To care about the larger picture. To recreate himself with his own power.

“What images appear in the H?” I ask Herbert, who’s got one foot out the door.

He scrunches his face, snorts in a breath, then throws out ideas. “The H is two sticks and a bridge connecting them. It’s a ladder with one rung.” He peeks at me sideways and up-ticks his shoulders. “How about two towers and a tightrope?” He flops onto the floor again. “Did you ever see a funeral pyre, you know where they put a corpse and light it on fire? I read about it in a book about India. That’s me. The funeral H, ready to be burned alive.”

I’m tempted to put my arm around him. “Each letter has a dark side. It can control you, if you let it. Think about the optimistic H. It will get you farther.”

He shrugs and then a twinkle dances in his eyes. “There’s a girl that I like. Two people holding hands looks like an H!”

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I detect his letter wheel whirring in his brain. I feel good about my wall of letters and how it's making this boy think about himself.

"What do Heath and Hecht mean?" he asks.

"Are those the names that you're called daily?"

"Nope, just Herbert, with an emphasis on HER!"

"Herbert is your name. It's your choice if you want to change it. My suggestion? Be proud of your letters. The hopeful look-to-the-skies H followed by positive energy."

Herbert tilts his head toward me. "It's kind of weird that I ducked into your store, wouldn't you say?"

"We met by chance. But it is by choice that we shall become friends." I hold out my hand and he shakes it in agreement.

"You and I look like an H," he says and laughs.

I walk him to the front of the salon, ignoring DeeDee's scowl. I'll console her by saying he has a big family and they're all coming for readings.

Herbert notices the billboard advertising my skills. "So you're Angel? I get it. You're like the A, above the other letters, watching over the rest of us, like me."

Herbert leaves the store, stepping into the sunshine. My hope for him is to embrace his letters as I have embraced mine. A - N - G - E - L. The agreeable A with a smile across its center. The no-nonsense N, who knows how easy it is to fail and how hard it is to rise. The gut-poking G, who grows in spite of pain. The evolving E, edging into the L that enables one's legs to advance.

Even though DeeDee believes that I am her maker of money, today I am the maker of meaning.