

"A DELIGHTFUL FANTASY ABOUT THE EXTRAORDINARY POWER OF SMALL JOYS."
—SANGU MANDANNA, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE VERY SECRET SOCIETY OF IRREGULAR WITCHES*

Small MIRACLES



OLIVIA
ATWATER

small miracles

olivia atwater



**STARWATCH
PRESS**

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It was eight o'clock on a Wednesday morning when the Fallen Angel of Petty Temptations walked into a quaint café on the north end of Church Street. There were lace curtains in the windows, and a collection of ferns hung in between the low pendant lights over the small, round tables. It was the sort of café that attracted writers and thinkers—those who would gladly set up shop for hours at a time—though typically, there were still only a few tables occupied. Today, unlike most Wednesday mornings at eight o'clock, there was a substantial queue curving through the bistro tables. Gadriel had never seen the place actually *busy* before.

Easy to overlook, Gadriel had the appearance one would expect from the Fallen Angel of Petty Temptations—that is, not at all special. Her short hair was a plain shade of brown—neither too light nor too dark—and her eyes were the same boring shade, set into a perfectly unobjectionable face. Her height was on the upper end of average, but she carried herself as if she were much taller, such that she had an awkward, gangly look about her. The awkwardness was only amplified by her out-of-fashion trousers

and by the sleeveless argyle knitted vest she wore over a white buttoned shirt. All in all, her fashion sense was not the most appealing... but she was *terribly* comfortable, and that was what mattered.

Gadriel was, in all respects, the sort of woman whom one would call 'very pleasant', but also 'very forgettable'—which might explain why none of the café patrons paid her any attention as she studied the customers one-by-one, searching for the man she was supposed to meet there. When the face that Gadriel sought failed to materialise, however, she sighed to herself and joined the unusually long queue in front of the counter.

At the front of this backed-up queue, there was a man—the handsome, fast-talking, sharp-dressed sort who'd likely sinned his fair share already that morning. Said gentleman was currently paralysed with indecision. He stared at the menu board with a slight wrinkle between his brows, shifting from one foot to the other. Before him, the barista at the counter looked on with a brittle customer service smile. Behind him, a woman in line groaned softly.

This had clearly been going on for some time.

"Hm," said the man in front of the counter. The sound had an unusual weight—a *gravitas*, if you would. It made the gentleman's agony over his morning coffee seem deep and meaningful. And perhaps it was a deep and meaningful decision on some level, given what Gadriel knew of the human soul.

But either way, Gadriel wanted a bloody coffee.

The fallen angel sighed heavily. "Just buy the expensive one, won't you?" she said. "It's only an extra quid, you nitwit."

Instead of shouting it across the café, Gadriel used what she liked to call her *inside voice*, which meant that the words came out more like:

"JUST BUY THE MORE EXPENSIVE ONE, WON'T YOU? IT'S ONLY AN EXTRA QUID, YOU NITWIT."

No one else reacted to Gadriel's comment—none of them could hear it—but the man at the front of the queue nodded decisively to himself. The trick, Gadriel had found, was to make the words sound like something a mortal might say to themselves in private.

"I think I'll have the chai latte after all," the man at the counter told the barista. As he said the words, a great tension left his shoulders; a recognition that he had conquered one more minor existential dilemma in the due course of his human life.

"WITH EXTRA WHIPPED CREAM," Gadriel added. "YOU MIGHT AS WELL."

"Could you do extra whipped cream on that?" the man added quickly.

As the man at the counter finished paying and stepped aside, a tall Black woman in an exceptionally tailored beige suit stepped into line just next to Gadriel. Her black, curling hair was closely cropped, accentuating the dramatic contour of her head and her neck. Her eyes were dark and intense, set above broad lips which curved with ever-present amusement. She was, in many respects, all of the things which Gadriel was not—that is, she was impeccably dressed, strikingly beautiful, and nearly impossible to ignore. Her name was Barachiel. She was, among other things, the Angel of Good Fortune, the Chief of Guardian Angels, and a regular thorn in Gadriel's backside.

"Good morning," Barachiel said cheerfully.

Gadriel narrowed her eyes. "No," she said. "No, absolutely not. I *told* you I was going to be a woman today. That means you're obliged to change and not me."¹

1. Angels do not actually have genders. Or rather, they *do* have genders—but

If Barachiel was at all flustered by the obvious faux pas, then the emotion didn't show upon her face. She glanced innocently at Gadriel, clasping her wrists behind her back. "And here I thought you weren't very fond of rules," she said.

Gadriel scowled. "It's not about *rules*," she said. "It's about style."

Barachiel swept her eyes silently from Gadriel's head down to her feet. She didn't *say* anything, of course—proper angels liked to pretend that they were more polite than the opposition. But her expression clearly implied her scepticism that Gadriel could ever be considered *stylish*.

"Ah, well," Barachiel mused. "If you say so." She stayed right next to Gadriel, however, and it soon became obvious that she had no intention whatsoever of slinking out the door to change her gender.

"You are... infuriating," Gadriel muttered tightly.

Barachiel ignored Gadriel, peering over the fallen angel's head to consider the queue in front of the counter. "Well, look at that!" she said. "That whipped cream's put Mr Indecisive in a cheerful mood, hasn't it? I think he just left a few quid to pay for the woman behind him. How generous."

Gadriel whipped her head around to look, just in time to see the man with the chai latte strolling for the door with a smile on

these genders are inexpressible to human beings, who tend to lose track somewhere after the fifth wing and the tenth burning wheel. As such, when said beings divine descend with the intent of having a coffee, they choose a more human-looking gender for the day in rather the same way that you and I might choose a shirt and trousers. This minor sleight-of-hand makes it possible for baristas to ask the question *And what can I get for you today*, instead of babbling incoherently.

But—as with any fashion choice—there is always the danger that one might end up at a luncheon wearing exactly the same gender as the friend with whom one is meeting. This is considered both *gauche* and embarrassing.

his face and a spring in his step. As he passed, the man whistled softly to himself.

Gadriel calculated numbers quickly in her head. As she finished her arithmetic, she stifled a groan. "I've put him into the positives, haven't I?" she muttered.²

Barachiel nodded. "Quite likely," she said. "And my goodness—you've moved the line along as well! Splendid news. Poor Becca up there was having a terrible morning, but things are really starting to look up for her. She's having troubles at home, you know, and every little bit helps." Barachiel jerked her chin towards the barista, who was looking very relieved indeed at the slowly shortening queue.

Gadriel glanced sideways at Barachiel. "Becca?" she repeated sourly. "On a first name basis, are you? I thought you were middle management now. You're not supposed to be anyone's *personal* guardian angel, are you?"

Barachiel shrugged elegantly. "I'm allowed to make small talk with my regular barista," she said.

Gadriel raised one sceptical eyebrow.

Barachiel smiled. "I can't help it if I'm naturally curious. And Becca says I give good advice."

Gadriel shook her head. "One of these days, you're going to discover a rule so silly that you finally decide to break it outright," she said. "I look forward to it."

Barachiel frowned at that. It was an old argument of theirs—the Oldest Argument, in many respects. But Barachiel despised arguments, and so she diverted the subject instead of rising to the

2. Buying the most expensive option out of gluttony is worth at least a quarter point of sin. Heartfelt acts of generosity, no matter how small, always add a full point of virtue to the tally.

bait. “You’ve inspired something, Gadriel,” she said. “The next customer just paid for the woman behind *her*, as well.”³

Gadriel closed her eyes and sucked in a breath. “For the record,” she said. “I hate you.”

Barachiel laughed. It was a rich, pleasant laugh from deep in her chest—the sort which made you feel instantly warm and at ease. “I didn’t do anything,” she said. “Honestly, I often wonder if you botch the job on purpose.”

Gadriel opened her eyes to fix Barachiel with a withering stare. “Perhaps neither of us knows the other quite so well as we’d like to believe,” she said flatly.

Barachiel deflected that stare with another warm smile. “We could always find out,” she proposed.

It was at this point that Gadriel realised Barachiel had started shuffling an ornate deck of cards from hand to hand. The cards were long and thin—made of a sturdy, flexible material which most mortals would have mistaken for cardboard. Gadriel, who could see in several extra dimensions, knew that Barachiel preferred playing with fate.

Barachiel offered out the deck to Gadriel—who leaped backwards with a soft hiss of alarm.

Barachiel smiled innocently. “Why don’t you pick a card?” she asked.

Gadriel eyed the gold-trimmed cards as though they were a cobra within striking distance. “The last time I touched that deck,” she declared, “I played three hands and lost my metaphorical shirt.”⁴

3. Inspiring good deeds in others gains one half the value of the action so inspired. In this respect, particularly contagious good deeds can be compared to pyramid schemes.

4. Gadriel’s metaphorical shirt was a tatty old Beatles band shirt. One might

Barachiel assessed Gadriel's knitted vest critically. "You *could* do with a fashion update," she observed helpfully.

Gadriel wasn't fond of Barachiel's cards on the best of days—they were bossy, they knew too much, and they had a tendency to be smug about it. And while Gadriel was absolutely certain that angels weren't allowed to stack the deck, she had of late begun to wonder whether the deck was allowed to stack *itself*.⁵

Gadriel narrowed her eyes. "Stash the cards," she said. "Let's just get our business over with, shall we?"

Barachiel tilted her head thoughtfully. There was a spark of mischief in her dark eyes. "You could always try for double or nothing," she offered.

As temptations went, it was a fairly good attempt. But Gadriel was *very* familiar with temptations, thank you very much.

"No," Gadriel said emphatically. "No more bets. No more wagers. No more... *cards*." The recollection sent a shudder through her. "I'm deep enough in debt with you already. So just tell me which favour you want this time, and I'll be off to do your bidding." Under her breath, she added: "I never learn. Ought to know better than to play cards with the Angel of *Gamblers*."

"I am *not* the Angel of Gamblers," Barachiel protested. "I can't help it if they keep praying to me."

"Miss?" the barista at the counter called out timidly. "Er, miss? Could I take your order, please?"

Gadriel and Barachiel were the last ones in the queue.

Barachiel waved a hand at Gadriel, dismissing the argumentative tone between them once again. "Let's discuss over coffee," she said with a winning smile. "I'll pay."

therefore argue that her metaphorical fashion sense was even more out-of-date than her literal fashion sense.

5. It was allowed, and it often did.

Gadriel slouched after her, sulking. As Barachiel put in her order, Gadriel said spitefully: “GET THE ONE WITH CHOCOLATE.”

Chocolate was always worth at least half a point of sin, and there was rarely any resistance to the temptation. It was the low-hanging fruit of sins—but Gadriel surmised she’d earned a bit of pettiness.

“I’ll have the mocha please, Becca,” Barachiel said pleasantly. “Oh—with extra chocolate, if you don’t mind.”

Gadriel shot a satisfied smile at the barista. “I’ll have the same, thanks,” she said.

It was only after they’d retrieved their drinks and settled into a corner table that an unpalatable thought occurred to Gadriel, souring her mood further.

“You let me have that one,” she accused Barachiel.

Barachiel took a long sip of her very syrupy coffee. “You seemed like you could do with a pick-me-up,” she said.

“Hm,” Gadriel muttered. She slouched down into her seat. “Heartfelt act of generosity, that. Probably earned yourself extra points with the boss. Wanker.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Barachiel asked. “I know you don’t approve of the system—”

Gadriel scoffed. That was an understatement. Given the chance, she could rage for millennia about *the system*.

“—yes, I *know*,” Barachiel sighed, holding up a hand. “We both know I can recite your rant from memory. *Chocolate shouldn’t be a sin at all. Everyone deserves a bit of chocolate. And then you’ll say—*”

“It’s utterly ridiculous!” Gadriel burst out. The words slipped free before she could contain them. She threw up her hands, only narrowly avoiding the coffee cup she’d left on the edge of the table. “Did you know that taking the *last* piece of chocolate is worth an entire extra point of sin? What’s the reasoning, I ask

you? If no one *ever* takes the last bit of chocolate, then we'll have chocolate going in the bin for no reason! And binning food is a full point as *well*, so what's the solution there?"

Barachiel sighed and leaned back in her chair, waiting patiently.

Gadriel slammed her palm onto the table in front of her, unable to stop the torrent of irrational fury. "Have I told you about the—"

"—yes, the Cynics," Barachiel said. "The ones in Ancient Greece."⁶

"Your boss probably loved them," Gadriel said sulkily. "They're exactly the sort who'd never eat chocolate at all, even if you offered it to them. Perfectly miserable people."

Barachiel nodded politely, but Gadriel knew that she'd probably exhausted the angel's attention span on the subject sometime last century, if not well before then.

Gadriel sucked in a deep breath all the same, preparing herself for Part 1.1.2 of her rant ("Regarding the Proper Disposal of Sweets"). But this time, Barachiel shot the fallen angel an exceedingly pleasant smile and opened her mouth to interrupt.

"I agree with you, you know," said Barachiel.

Gadriel closed her mouth with an audible *snap*. She stared at the angel, caught halfway between suspicion and satisfaction.

"I agree with you... *somewhat*," Barachiel amended herself. "At least as far as the chocolate is concerned. I've been thinking on the matter for the last century. I've come to believe that a little bit of sin is good for the soul—in moderation, of course." She

6. The Cynics of Ancient Greece were an ascetic subset of the Stoics, particularly well-known for preaching self-sufficiency and the abandonment of earthly possessions. Many thousands of years later, the mere mention of Diogenes could still send Gadriel into fits of apoplexy.

sipped thoughtfully at her mocha. “Which is precisely why I think you’re the best candidate for this job.”

Suspicion abruptly overwhelmed satisfaction. Gadriel narrowed her eyes. “And... which job would *that* be, Barachiel?” she asked slowly.

Barachiel smiled, folding her hands together in front of herself. “I only want you to do what you do best,” she assured Gadriel. “There’s a mortal woman—Holly Harker. She has one of the lowest Cumulative Sin Metrics I’ve ever seen. Truly, she must be even more miserable than a Greek Cynic.” Barachiel raised an eyebrow at Gadriel. “I want you to tempt her. Not *too* much, obviously. Just... enough to make sure she’s enjoying her life.”⁷

Gadriel eyed Barachiel carefully. “You’re serious?” she asked. “You want me to—”

“—to do what you do best,” Barachiel agreed. “I’d hazard, oh... twenty net points or so should do the trick.” She lifted one well-manicured finger towards Gadriel in a display of imperious warning. “But Miss Harker only needs to sin a *little* bit, Gadriel. If you overshoot and get her damned, I will consider you even deeper in my debt than before. Understood?”

Barachiel picked up her cards again, shuffling them idly from hand to hand.

“Hm,” said Gadriel. Doubt dripped from the sound. “That’s it, then? I get this mortal to eat a bit of chocolate, nick a few flowers from her neighbour’s garden... and then my debts are repaid?”

7. The angels in the accounting department define the Sin Metric thusly:

For every soul, let the Sin Metric be defined as a function of time, intentions, and actions of said soul. Let positive numbers be associated with sinful actions and negative numbers be associated with virtuous actions.

The Cumulative Sin Metric is therefore defined as the integral of the Sin Metric over time.*

*For a detailed infinite-sized matrix of recorded actions, please submit the appropriate prayers to Saint Peter.

"That's it," Barachiel said cheerfully.

Though they were no longer on the same side, Gadriel and Barachiel had always considered themselves siblings. Oh, there had been an initial adjustment period following Gadriel's Fall—but there had never been any *real* animosity between them. Unlike many of her contemporaries in Hell, Gadriel wasn't out to wreck the world or doom humanity. In fact, for all of its foibles, she rather *liked* humanity. She just thought it deserved, well... better.

Perhaps the road to Hell *had* been paved with good intentions, as far as Gadriel was concerned. But she liked to think that Barachiel appreciated those intentions, even if the angel disagreed with her conclusions.

"It... *sounds* simple enough," Gadriel said slowly.

"Oh yes," said Barachiel. "Simple enough for *you*, surely."

"Surely," Gadriel mumbled. Still... she had the peculiar notion that this must be what a moth felt like when confronted with a lovely bright light. She *wanted* to believe that it was all just a convenient arrangement—but she also knew from experience that Barachiel always came out ahead, no matter the stakes. There was a reason that gamblers prayed to the angel, after all.

The gilded cards flickered back and forth between the angel's hands.

"So?" Barachiel asked. "We have a deal?"

The question was really just a formality, and they both knew it. Gadriel owed a debt, and Barachiel had called it in. The angel was being more charitable about it than she really needed to be; she could have handed Gadriel a far more challenging assignment. A bit of petty temptation was perfectly within her wheelhouse. Ideally, it wouldn't take very long at all.

"Yes, all right," Gadriel answered with a sigh.

Barachiel grinned. The cards stilled in one hand, and she offered them out to Gadriel again.

"Oh no," Gadriel said quickly. "I'm not falling for that again." She leaned back in her seat, trying to put as much distance as possible between herself and that accursed deck.

"I'm not offering a wager this time," Barachiel assured her. "I just thought you might want to take a peek at what's ahead."

Gadriel frowned. "Well, *obviously* I'm going to pull the Devil," she said. "I'm about to go and tempt someone."⁸

Barachiel arched an eyebrow. "I'd ask if you want to bet on it... but I suspect I know the answer." She flicked the top card off of the deck, offering it out encouragingly. "Go on. Aren't you curious?"

Against her better judgement, Gadriel reached for the top card. The deck didn't bite or burn her; she wasn't magically ensnared or teleported far away. But when Gadriel looked at the card she'd drawn, she sighed heavily all the same.

"Well?" Barachiel prompted. "Which one is it?"

Gadriel shot Barachiel a sour expression. She flipped the card around to show it to the angel.

The system may have needed work... but the boss still had a sense of humour.

"The Wheel of Fortune?" Barachiel murmured. "Oh dear. And you swore you'd never gamble again, Gadriel."⁹

Gadriel flicked the card at the angel's head with a deep, dark scowl. She rose wordlessly from the table and strolled for the door, leaving Barachiel alone in the café.

8. Gadriel has always had a great deal of sympathy for the Devil card. Naturally, she believes that the card has a poorly deserved reputation.

9. The Wheel of Fortune represents an inevitable change in fortunes. In Barachiel's deck, it's also a literal roulette wheel.

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CUMULATIVE SIN METRIC (HOLLY HARKER): -932

Somewhere near the south end of Church Street, Gadriel realised she had forgotten an important detail.

“Bother,” Gadriel muttered to herself. “Where *is* Holly Harker?”

She looked back in the direction from which she’d come. The idea of slinking back inside to confront Barachiel’s amusement didn’t terribly appeal. Technically, Gadriel had the angel’s phone number—it was in her contacts under the name ‘Bookie’—but Barachiel answered her texts about as reliably as she answered gamblers’ prayers.¹

“Surely, Harker’s not *too* far,” Gadriel mumbled. “Barachiel wasn’t just craving coffee on Church Street, was she?”

Gadriel shoved her hands into her pockets with a broad scowl. She glanced around the street—perhaps hoping that she

1. Far too late—and often sarcastically, to boot.

would see a woman nearby with a great big sign that read ‘Too Good for My Own Good’.

Instead, she caught sight of a group of teenagers loitering around a bus stop. Given the time of day, they were almost certainly skipping school and therefore didn’t require Gadriel’s help to sin any further. But, lacking any other viable targets, she focused her attention on one of the younger ones—a girl with far too much eyeliner, a cleverly tattered skirt, and enough jewellery to open up a shop. Even as Gadriel watched, one of the boys tried to pass the girl a cheap bottle of vodka.

The girl hesitated, hunching her shoulders and hiding behind her curtain of long brown hair.

Gadriel strolled slowly past the group, making a show of fussing with the hem of her knitted vest.

“GO ON, TAKE A SIP,” she said. **“YOU LOOK STRESSED. BESIDES, YOU DON’T WANT THEM SLAGGING YOU OFF.”**

To Gadriel’s surprise, the words had no effect whatsoever. They were about as effective as a preacher’s finger waggle. Indeed, Gadriel’s inside voice was no more helpful than Abel’s historically questionable attempts at diplomacy.

The brown-haired girl lifted a hand to stave off the bottle. As she did, Gadriel caught sight of a little silver pentacle around her neck, and the fallen angel’s frown darkened.

“Wiccans!” Gadriel said beneath her breath. **“Who ever expects Wiccans?”²**

2. Neither angels nor their fallen brethren have any authority over those who follow non-Abrahamic religions. Wiccans have their own nasty chuds to deal with, just as Hindus have asuras and Taoists have guei-shen. Mostly, all of these different spirits stay in their lane, so to speak—though every once in a while, someone incites a global plague, at which point the administrators in the Celestial Bureaucracy start filing very passive-aggressive paperwork with everyone else’s management.

The unexpected failure only added to Gadriel's poor mood as the teenagers slowly dispersed. Again and again, her mind wandered back to that awful card. The Wheel of Fortune was a gambler's card, of course... but it *also* represented the promise of a sharp, sudden change in fortunes, for better or for worse.

I'm perfectly happy with my fortunes as they are, Gadriel thought warily.

Gadriel had never liked excitement very much, even before her Fall. Once upon a time, she'd worked for Barachiel as a guardian angel, moonlighting on the side as an Angel of Small Miracles. She'd always delighted in the tiny banalities of existence—the lucky coin on the street; the butterfly that lands on your shoulder; the bread that bakes perfectly on the first try. Somewhere along the way, Gadriel had decided that yes, small pleasures like plucked daffodils and bits of chocolate *were* more important than pleasing the boss.

This decision, it seemed, had been enough to turn her into the Fallen Angel of Petty Temptations. But while God's angels had since become very fond of smiting the fallen, they rather had their hands full with the louder, angrier rebels like Lucifer and Beelzebub; none of them could really be bothered to visit divine judgement upon someone who spent their time tempting mortals to eat just one more crisp.

Gadriel refused to participate in exciting things. Exciting things tended to be... loud. Abrupt. *Unpleasant*.

"Miss!" a woman's voice called breathlessly. "Excuse me, miss!"

Gadriel continued walking. A moment later, however, it occurred to her that she had made herself visible for the purposes of ordering her coffee and had never bothered to disappear again.

Ah, she thought with annoyance. *I'm 'miss', aren't I?*

Gadriel turned with a frown. She was used to being over-

looked, even when visible; her commonplace appearance did a lot for her in that respect. But the woman that had called after her—a tall, willowy brunette of Filipino ancestry with impeccable makeup and an off-the-rack suit—was waving urgently in Gadriel’s direction.

Gadriel sighed and gradually backtracked.

For some reason, the brunette woman’s smile wavered imperceptibly as Gadriel approached. But she straightened her posture and steeled herself. Then, in a desperately cheerful voice, she said: “Good morning, miss! Would you like to play our game?”

Gadriel stared at her in puzzlement. A moment later, she realised that the woman in question was standing in front of a cheap cardboard prize wheel, stuck upon a wobbly tripod. Brightly coloured wedges on the wheel said things like ‘free belt with trouser purchase’ and ‘ten per cent off’.

LIMITED TIME, said the sign beneath the wheel. *DON’T MISS YOUR CHANCE*.

“Oh, well done,” Gadriel muttered beneath her breath. “Very subtle, aren’t you?”

The brunette blinked. “I’m sorry?” she said. “I couldn’t quite hear you.”

Gadriel considered the woman seriously. “What’s your name?” she asked brusquely. “I don’t suppose it’s—”

The brunette forced a fresh new smile. “I’m Sara,” she answered quickly. “Pleasure to meet you. It’s a lovely day, isn’t it?”

Gadriel sighed. “Ah,” she mumbled. “Yes, that would have been too simple.” Holly Harker was clearly *somewhere* nearby... but someone upstairs was intent on having a laugh at Gadriel before she found her.

Gadriel straightened again and pasted on a pleasant smile in return. “It is a *lovely* afternoon, Sara,” she emphasised. “Now,

what is this here? Your... game, you said. For your shop? For advertisement purposes, I take it." Gadriel glanced at the shop window just past the prize wheel, where faceless mannequins posed in stances far too dramatic for their grey, business casual clothing. She looked back at the woman in front of her, who was still smiling with a hint of self-conscious misery.

"That's right!" Sara said brightly—as though Gadriel had committed an act of deduction worthy of praise. "Castle Clothing is running a promotion right now—"

Gadriel held up her hand. "No, stop," she sighed. "Don't say it like that. Are you trying to tempt me or not?" She strolled for the other side of the wheel, settling herself next to it. Gadriel cleared her throat once—and then she turned to address the brunette, who had paused to blink at her in bewilderment.

"Oh, hello!" Gadriel said, pretending surprise. "Thank goodness you're here. I haven't got much time left in this game, and I've still got so many prizes left." She pulled out her phone and mimed a small gasp at the time displayed there. "Only five minutes to go! Oh no, I really should give out some of these prizes. It'd be a shame if *no one* won them, wouldn't it?"

"Er," said Sara. "I'm sorry, are you talking to *me*?"

Gadriel smiled at her. "We don't do this very often at all," she said confidentially. "And the *best* prize is still on the board. I mean... there's only five minutes left. You might as well spin and see if you win it. What's the harm?"

Sara looked around herself, suddenly uncertain.

"**GIVE THE WHEEL A SPIN,**" Gadriel advised her.

The suggestion caught hold, digging in neatly. A genuine fascination flickered across the brunette's face, and she stepped forward to spin the wheel.

The two of them stood there watching, briefly transfixed by the way the colours whizzed past, and by the steady *click-click-*

click of pegs passing under the flapper. Finally, the wheel slowed to a complete stop, landing upon a crimson wedge with the word ‘makeover’ written in bulky letters.

“Oh!” said Sara. “That *is* our best prize, actually!” She glanced back at Gadriel, suddenly confused. “I suppose that goes to you, doesn’t it?”

Gadriel narrowed her eyes at the wheel. “I don’t *need* a makeover,” she said. She addressed the empty air around them, rather than the woman directly next to her. Predictably, no one replied.

Sara hadn’t heard Gadriel. She rummaged in one of her jacket pockets for a little red piece of paper that matched the wedge on the wheel. “You’ve won a thirty per cent discount and a consultation with one of our employees,” she said, offering out the voucher. “Would you like to schedule a time?”

“I would not,” Gadriel said flatly. But she glanced one more time at the sign beneath the wheel—*DON’T MISS YOUR CHANCE*—and a heavy sigh escaped her. “I’d rather have my consultation now, if you don’t mind. Is someone available?”

Sara, who had finally keyed to Gadriel’s knitted vest, offered her an oddly sympathetic smile. “We can... certainly *make* time,” she said soothingly. “Go in and ask for Holly. She’ll sort you out in a jiff.”

Gadriel smiled, despite the implied fashion emergency. *There you are, Holly Harker*, she thought. But all she said out loud was: “Excellent.”

The fallen angel headed into the shop with a spring in her step, and a respectful nod towards one of the mannequins in the window.

The inside of the shop was an awful mixture of sterile light and dirty carpets, perfectly calibrated to quench any accidental cheerfulness in those who happened to behold it. Racks of

synthetic clothing spread out across the shop, carefully arranged to look more flattering than they probably were.

Gadriel scanned the shop curiously, searching for signs of life. But only a few seconds later, she was forced to conclude that Miss Holly Harker was missing-in-action—unless, of course, she was hiding behind a mannequin. She wandered the room for a minute or two, checking behind flower-printed jumpers for stray employees. Eventually, she made her way to the counter at the back, which had a little bell upon it.

“Ugh,” Gadriel muttered. “If I must, I suppose.”

Ringling one of those annoying bells for service was technically worth a quarter point of sin. Gadriel wasn’t normally one to worry about the points—but something about forcing an intelligent being to come running like a dog *did* ruffle her wing-feathers. It reminded her an awful lot of the way her old boss liked to test people for obedience.

Gadriel reached out, nevertheless, to tap the little silver bell.

Ring ring.

The sound echoed in the silence of the shop. But no employee appeared.

Gadriel frowned and hit the bell again. *Ring ring.*

Though she tapped the bell a few more times, it soon became clear that no employee was going to come running to fix her knitted vest situation.

Gadriel sighed and nudged the bell aside. Instead, she shoved her hands into her pockets and started directly for the door at the back, labelled ‘employees only’.

The cramped, box-like office at the back of the shop was even less appealing than its front, without even a window to let in some light. A single dirty lamp shed its yellow light over a pink paisley sofa that had seen better days.

Draped unceremoniously over the sofa’s arm was a pale,

sleeping woman in a wrinkled white blouse and a black pencil skirt. Her honey-coloured hair, half-caught in a sloppy chignon, had lost several locks against her neck. Her hand still clenched a plastic fork with odd determination, though the takeaway container on the table next to her was mostly untouched. She would have been cute as a button if she hadn't looked so miserable, even in her sleep.

For just a moment, Gadriel dared to hope that Holly Harker had *already* sinned today by napping at work. But even a cursory inspection suggested that the woman had fallen asleep in the middle of eating, rather than sneaking off for a purposeful illicit break.

Gadriel cleared her throat.

The woman shot up in her seat, blinking quickly. As her senses caught up with her, she brandished the plastic fork at Gadriel with wide brown eyes, as though to hold her off.

"This—you—" she stammered dazedly. "Employees only!"

Gadriel nodded reasonably. "Oh yes," she said. "I must have missed the sign." She paused. "Are you Holly?"

The woman on the sofa flushed. "I... yes, I suppose I am," she mumbled. The colour stained the apples in her cheeks, making them stand out more prominently.

Gadriel squinted at her. "You *suppose*?" she asked.

Holly pushed up to her feet, brushing at her clothing with obvious embarrassment. "I mean—I am. Yes." Her eyes caught on the red voucher in Gadriel's hand, and she cringed. "You've... won a consult! Congratulations."

Gadriel rubbed at her chin. "Yes, very lucky," she murmured. She was only half-listening; most of her attention was on the woman in front of her.

Holly Harker was probably a woman in her late twenties—but the dark circles beneath her eyes and the permanent

concerned wrinkle between her brows made her look somewhat older than that. Her nose stuck out prominently among her other features, like a very proud mountain. There was a faint speckling of freckles visible upon it, but they were difficult to see clearly in the yellow light of the room's single lamp.

I can work with this, Gadriel thought. The twenties were an excellent time for sinning. All she really needed was a few more details about the woman in front of her, and she'd be ready to get to work.

"—we'll get you and your knitted vest into this decade, no problem," Holly was saying. Gadriel blinked and brought herself back to the conversation.

"Pardon?" Gadriel said.

Holly flushed self-consciously. "Oh, I didn't mean—I'm sorry, I was trying to be funny. That wasn't very funny, was it?"

Gadriel considered this hopefully for a moment. Jokes in poor taste only counted for sin if they were purposeful, though. "The knitted vest is an obvious target," she advised. "But you've got an inch or two on me, if you want to make jokes about my height."

Holly stared at Gadriel blankly. Her eyes were wide now, like a deer in the headlights.

Gadriel sighed heavily. "I'd just like to be sure," she said. "You *are* Holly Harker?"

Holly blinked several times. "I... am," she confirmed. "Do we know each other?"

Gadriel shook her head. "Not *exactly*. More by reputation." She opened the door again, gesturing for the shop, and Holly crept past her with a confused expression on her face.

"Wait," Holly mumbled. "Did we... go to school together? You look awfully familiar."

Gadriel smiled. Barachiel might have had star quality, but

there was something to be said for the boring everyman approach. "We never met directly," Gadriel assured her.

Holly nodded, now certain of her assessment. "And your name was..."

"Gadriel." The fallen angel in question waited patiently for the inevitable reply.

"I'm sorry?" Holly asked. "Gabriel?"

Gadriel shook her head. "Gadriel," she repeated. "With a 'd'. Very different, I assure you. Wouldn't want to mix us up." She paused. "It is a funny name. Plenty of jokes there, as well."³

Holly smiled nervously, and Gadriel cleared her throat.

"GO AHEAD," she said. "CRACK A JOKE."

Every human being has a smug little part of their brain that enjoys feeling superior to other people. Gadriel aimed her suggestion at this specific part of Holly Harker's mind, pitching her voice to match its mutterings. The words caught there neatly, digging their way in...

...and then, for some unknown reason, they *snagged*.

"I really didn't mean to insult you," Holly assured Gadriel anxiously. "I promise, I'll leave off. It's just... I don't remember a Gadriel at school. I feel like I would."

Gadriel stared at her.

That should have worked, she thought. I felt it start to work. What went wrong?

Gadriel caught up to Holly's observation an instant later though, and she shook herself. "I let people call me Gabe some-

3. Gadriel often received stray prayers from trumpet players and mail carriers which were clearly meant for the Archangel Gabriel. No one ever prayed intentionally to Gadriel, of course, and so she often saved time by responding immediately to all prayers with the words "sorry, wrong number".

she said slowly. "I'm sure you never heard anyone say my full name, is all."⁴

"That... *does* sound more familiar," Holly observed dubiously. She turned to head for a rack of clothing, and Gadriel relaxed very slightly. "Er... what sort of outfit are you looking for, by the way?"

Gadriel followed after her, blinking. "Something from this decade?" she offered. "I thought you were supposed to tell *me*."

Holly winced. "Oh, you're right," she admitted. "You know, I've never done one of these makeovers before? There's nothing about them in the employee manual."

Gadriel nodded. "You're supposed to find me something expensive, I'd wager," she said. "Make me try it on, then tell me it's perfect."

Holly pursed her lips. "That's a bit cynical," she mumbled.

Gadriel snapped her head around. "It is *not*," she declared vehemently. "I don't care at all for Cynics, just so we're clear."

Awkward silence fell between them.

Holly cleared her throat first. "We can find you something to wear for work, then?" she suggested tentatively. "What is it you do for a living, Gabe?"

Gadriel reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose between her fingers. "Something very much like this," she said. *Though I'm normally much better at it*, she thought to herself.

"Ah, retail," Holly sighed. "You have my sympathies, obviously." She assessed Gadriel one more time before stepping off to pull clothing from the surrounding racks, draping items over her arms in quick succession. "We can try something with a blazer, maybe—"

4. It was true that Gadriel often capitulated to the nickname *Gabe*. She was inherently quite lazy, and the Gabriel thing just wasn't worth the fight.

"I'll take it all," Gadriel interjected hurriedly. "Thirty per cent off, I think." She forced a smile at Holly. "You know, we should have a night out. Catch up over drinks. Fruity ones, with little paper umbrellas."

Holly blinked slowly, setting the pile of clothes onto the counter. "I... do like those little umbrellas," she admitted. "I'd really like to, actually. I'm just not sure if I have the time."

Gadriel caught the obvious flicker of interest in Holly's face. *Aha*, she thought. *I have you now.*

"No rush," she said casually. "We can work around your schedule." Gadriel levelled her gaze at Holly, and then added: "YOU DESERVE A NIGHT OUT."

Holly hesitated visibly. The flicker of interest in her face blossomed into outright longing, pruned loose by the suggestion. Gadriel's inside voice caught upon that emotion, wriggling it free and dragging it up to the forefront of the woman's mind. Any moment now, she was going to say yes—

But an instant later, this suggestion snagged as well. The hook that had dug into Holly's desires cut loose, and all at once, her expression turned gloomy.

"I'm afraid I really can't," Holly sighed. "You'll have to drink an extra for me."

She started ringing up the clothes, while Gadriel stared at her in mute astonishment.

"Is something wrong?" Holly asked curiously.

"No, nothing," Gadriel said slowly. "I'm... *fine*. I just need a different approach, is all. I'm sure that's it."

Gadriel snatched the bag of clothing from the counter and headed for the door, already reorganising her thoughts.

three

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CUMULATIVE SIN METRIC (HOLLY HARKER): -932

Had Holly Harker been less tired, she might have noticed that she was having an exceedingly strange day.

For one thing, there was a small crowd outside of Castle Clothing. There was *never* a crowd in front of the shop—not even on the weekends. But at the very moment Gadriel had left, tapping furiously into her phone, another woman had come in looking very pleased with herself, waving around her green ‘ten per cent discount’ voucher as though it was a hard-won triumph.

“I won the last one!” the woman declared. “With only five minutes to spare, as well!”

“Five minutes until... what?” Holly asked her blankly.

“Until the prizes go away, of course,” the woman said.

Outside, an older gentleman—more bewhiskered than his leashed terrier—spun the tacky wheel in front of the door. Holly’s coworker Sara shot him an encouraging smile and handed him another green voucher, eliciting a triumphant cackle from him. Poor Sara had drawn the short straw today, which meant that she

was stuck outside with the cardboard game the salespeople had quietly nicknamed the Wheel of Misery. Normally, the Wheel of Misery only brought in one or two spare customers—the sort who couldn't bring themselves to say no to an obviously humiliated employee. Today, however, it seemed to be unusually popular.

"Ah," said Holly. "I see." She didn't understand the situation at all, actually—but everyone involved seemed awfully satisfied with themselves, and so she decided to focus on doing her job.

Sometime right after Holly's fourth customer, however—a teenage girl with far more body piercings than her usual clientele—things began to get *noticeably* strange.

YOU LOOK TIRED, said a voice in her head. YOU OUGHT TO TAKE A BREAK.

It was the same voice in Holly's mind that normally said things like *I'm tired* and *This is demeaning* and *I'd rather die than stand in front of that silly wheel ever again*. But she had grown intimately familiar with such thoughts over the last few months; in fact, they were such *regular* thoughts now that she'd mostly learned to ignore them.

IT'S NOT LIKE THE BOSS IS GOING TO PAY YOU BY THE CUSTOMER, the voice added matter-of-factly.

For some reason, the voice in her head sounded a bit testier than usual.

"Oh, shove off," Holly muttered back. She reached out to refold another shirt on the display table near the front of the shop.

SHOVE OFF? the voice repeated disbelievingly.

Holly narrowed her eyes at the table. "One day at a time," she mumbled beneath her breath. "*Un jour de plus.*" The simple act of translating the words settled her mind, refocusing her on her goals. First, she would finish her shift. After that, she'd finish her

other shift. Then, she would gather her things and hop on the Tube. She'd stop for groceries—she'd written *that* list in French as well—and then finally, it was just a matter of picking up Ella.

These things were all doable, she thought. They were all... little things, really. As long as she thought of them each separately, she could work her way through them.

The jarring tone of the door interrupted Holly's thoughts. She looked up and saw that Sara had entered with the Wheel of Misery folded beneath her arm.

"What a morning!" Sara sighed, planting a fist on her cocked hip. "I think I've tired myself out."

"That was some crowd!" Holly said. "What on earth happened out there?"

Sara tossed the wheel onto the table with a rueful smile. "I suppose I've discovered how shameless I can be when I'm starved for human company," she admitted. "I even had a proper conversation once or twice, in between the vouchers. Best social interaction I've managed all week. Isn't *that* pathetic?"

Holly frowned at her. "But weren't you dating someone?" she asked. "His name was, er... John? Jeremy? Jacob?" She was almost certain it had been a J name.

"John was a bigot, Jeremy yelled at waiters, and Jacob had two secret children," Sara said, listing off the men on her fingers. "If I find a man named Jingleheimer Schmidt, I'll have been through the entire children's song." She shot Holly a flat, helpless look. "I really can't pick men, can I? Or rather, I'm very good at picking all of the *wrong* men."

Holly winced. Casual conversations had never been her forte; yet again, it seemed she'd managed to stick her foot in her mouth. "That *is* a bad run of luck," she admitted, hiding her embarrassment. "I suppose you're taking a break?"

"The Wheel of Misery and I are officially an item," Sara

responded blithely. "May no man ever come between us." She reached out to caress the cardboard wheel with a feigned look of adoration, batting her eyelashes.

Holly shook her head. "That one is definitely going to let you down," she advised. "But it won't yell at any waiters, I suppose."

"My standards are exactly that low," Sara assured her. She frowned at Holly. "D'you mind taking your break and picking us up a snack? Honestly, I'm famished."

"I suppose I could," Holly mumbled. She grabbed her handbag from behind the counter. "Hold down the fort, will you?"

EXCELLENT, said the voice in Holly's head—though she wasn't sure exactly what *that* was supposed to mean.

"I'm finally going bonkers," Holly muttered to herself, as she headed out the door.

about the author

Olivia Atwater writes whimsical fantasy with a hint of satire. She lives in Montreal, Quebec with her fantastic, prose-inspiring husband and her two cats. When she told her second-grade history teacher that she wanted to work with history someday, she is fairly certain this isn't what either party had in mind. She has been, at various times, a historical re-enactor, a professional witch at a metaphysical supply store, a web developer, and a vending machine repairperson.

* * *

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