

Conversations with an Angel

by

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“He said your heart wants to protect the other person while your head tries to protect yourself.” Farnham stared at me as if I farted. “What’s the matter?”

“He said the same thing to me.”

“I guess it’s his token advice.”

Even with this curious look, he still was the man I wanted to share my life with. For six months, I found sanctuary each time I visited his one-bedroom apartment. It was always messy when I showed up, and, like a dutiful husband, I’d whip out the rag and the cleaning products I bought for him and get to work.

But it went with the territory. It was him, and he truly had me under his spell. And even though at first his weekend sleep-ins, his habit of buying gadgets he didn’t need, and his unbreakable pattern of always showing up an hour late to anything we’d planned irked me, in time they were the little quirks that made him who he was.

And let’s face it, when you wake next to someone who is clutching your naked body with their hand on your chest, while you cushion their waist with your ass, you know there’s no use sweating the small stuff.

My phone rang. Farnham groaned, but not in a good way. “It’s her, isn’t it?” he asked.

I checked the screen. I nodded. “You know I have to answer.”

“No, Jamal, you don’t have to answer. Can’t you put that thing on silent?”

“It doesn’t matter. It stopped now.”

“But we both know it will ring again. Just wait five minutes. She’ll ring again!”

“Babe, do we have to?”

He stared through me as if I wasn't there. *Great start to the morning*, I thought. Two people I love are going to be cross with me. I wiggled my ass against him.

“That’s not going to work, Jamal.”

“Isn’t it? It feels like it’s working.”

He grinned. “Smoke and mirrors. That’s your weapon, smoke and mirrors.”

I pushed back harder while I held my phone near his face, then with a master stroke of my thumb, switched it to silent mode. I placed it on the bedside table, turned to him, and planted the sloppiest kiss I could muster on his willing lips. He was mine, but more importantly, I had to show him I was his.

“I dare you not to look at that phone,” he said. His tone was half pleading, half demanding.

“Hun, I have to see what she wants.”

He gritted his teeth. With only one shoe on, I checked my phone. She’d left three messages in the last half hour, one saying I had chores to do around the house, one saying she needed to tell me something private, and the last informing me my brother hadn’t been home all night.

“I can already guess what your mother has texted,” Farnham said. His expression resembled that of a soldier who was losing the battle.

“At least she’s not claiming it’s a medical emergency.”

“She knows better than to try that trick again.”

He was right. My mom even got my dad to ring an ambulance the last time. The medics weren’t impressed when they were told to go back to their base because she suddenly felt better.

Farnham gazed at me, knowing I would soon leave. But I had to. Family was calling, and my job as the oldest son was to take responsibility for my siblings. Yes, I’d have a word to my brother when he got home. Yes, I’d turn the vacuum

cleaner on or wash the bathtub or do whatever she expected me to do. And then I'd brew coffee so she could bitch about dad like she always did.

"So, what is it this time, Jamal? What excuse has she come up with to rip you from my arms?"

"I'll come back this afternoon. Now don't look at me like that. This afternoon, I promise!"

He sighed. "Is this a Jamal promise or a real promise?"

"Now don't be like that, babe."

"I'm serious. She'll keep you there. She's done it before. And I'll sit here waiting for you to come back, only to get a text message or a very quick phone call saying you won't be back, and you don't know when we'll see each other again. Come on, Jamal, it's been six months. I know the drill."

"Babe, it's my brother. He hasn't been home all night."

"That's because he's out doing what you're doing. But she's not texting him —" My phone chimed. "Like I said, she's not texting him ten times an hour because he's out sleeping with a woman." I glanced at my phone. He sighed again. "What does she say this time?"

"Same old, same old. Don't worry about it, babe. She wants attention."

"No, she wants *your* attention *off* me."

"I have to go."

"You don't *have* to do anything you don't want to do. You just feel obliged to go."

I wandered over, reached around, and caressed his back. I kissed his cheek several times as he kept his lips shut tight. So, I nestled my nose into his earlobe. He loosened up and half grinned. I brushed my lips against his. He kissed me, so I encouraged a longer embrace. Soon, he was rustling my hair and pressing his mouth to mine, and I was in a place where the world seemed normal.

Again, I was dressing myself. The phone had chimed several more times while Farnham and I made love, but I told myself not to look until I was outside his apartment.

“Darl, I won’t be waiting for your return. I have things to do. Ring me if you’re definitely on your way back, and I’ll let you know where I am. And I mean ring me, don’t text.”

“I will be back, babe.”

“Only ring me if you are on your way back. If you’re not coming back, don’t contact me.”

“You’re serious.”

“Deadly serious. I’m learning not to wait for you.”

“Ouch.”

“Sorry, Jamal, that’s just the way it is.”

We still kissed good-bye, but his severity haunted me as I made the journey home. And with his cutting words repeating like a broken record on my mind came the punch. That feeling in my gut that came with no physical contact, but boy, was it twisting me in knots.

I parked to the side of the road. I had to think. In the past, only two other men came close to how I felt about Farnham. One was a two-month thing because we both realized I was more in love with his city views than with him. It still didn’t stop us seeing each other from time to time. We had more fun after the breakup than before. The other broke my heart. He said I was a rebound. I said I loved him. He said he was sorry for believing he loved me.

And mom had a field day with that one. She said you can never trust men and listed off dad’s faults for the umpteenth time. I replied that I thought we were talking about me. She answered that we were because she knew best.

With Farnham, I never expected more than just a bit of fun. But all he had to do was smile at me, and I’d slip into a daydream. Hearing his name by chance was better than a serenade from a thousand minstrels. And nights without him

by my side hurt as if someone had cut off my conjoined twin in a botched operation.

A tear ran down my cheek. I didn't know why. I turned the key and started the engine. Soon, I was back home with my accuser. She was washing plates and handing them to my brother who was busy with a dishcloth.

"Mama, you said he wasn't home!"

"He's home now," she replied. She gestured toward him like a prize on a quiz show. "He came home."

"I came home from where?" my brother asked.

"Apparently I had to come home because she was worried about where you were."

"You did? Sorry, bro. Were you with Farnham again?"

"Obviously. That's why I have fifteen messages from mama."

"Don't mention that boy's name," she said. "That goes for both of you, don't mention his name."

"Who's name? Farnham's name? My boyfriend's name?"

"No. No. No. I told you not to use the devil's name."

"Oh, he's the devil now. What happened to the dirty temptress? At least that one was original."

"I liked 'the man who'll sell your soul'," my brother added. "That one was poetic, Ma."

"What would your father say if he knew, Jamal? Think about that."

"I'll have to tell him at one stage," I replied.

"And bring shame on this family! Who do you think you are?"

"He's a homosexual in love," my brother answered.

"Go to your room!"

My brother folded his arms.

"It's okay," I said. "I can handle this." He shared a cheeky smile, handed me the tea towel and ran off.

“Jamal,” she continued in a lighter tone, “what is wrong with you? Don’t you want children? Think about these things. How can you go out to a party with a man on your arm? What is he going to do, wear a dress?”

“Mama, his name is Farnham, and he’s not that kind of gay man. Besides, he’d look like Aunt Rihanna in a dress.” I shook my head. “Not a good look.”

“Jamal!”

Our doorbell rang. My mom grinned as if her cheeks would burst. My brother answered the door and instantly I heard a woman’s voice asking for me. He paraded her in. She stared at me like a sorceress with a spell to cast.

“Sweetheart, I’m taken,” I declared. I stormed out, only to hear my brother inform my failed blind date that he was single. Our neighbour, Guy, was on his driveway washing his car. He took one look at me and told me to come inside.

“Do I look that frazzled?” I asked.

“Oh yeah,” he replied, turning off the tap.

“This is what she wants,” I began. I sat in what he called the counselling seat, the plushest armchair in his living room. “She wants me to be a good family member, marry some girl, any girl, and have kids while I screw men on the side. It’s the honourable thing to do. Everyone will know what’s going on, but they won’t talk about it. That way, no shame is on the family.”

“A medieval mentality in a twenty-first century world,” Guy replied. He filled my wine glass. “And somehow I can’t see Farnham putting up with being the mistress.”

“Some woman that mom invited just showed up at our place. She’s stunning, but my body doesn’t work that way!”

“Calm down, Jamal. Trust me, this doesn’t have to be complicated.”

“But it is. It *is* complicated. That family next door raised me. They were proud of me when I came second in my third-grade spelling bee. They told everyone about it. Then when I was a teenager, they kept bragging about how

many female friends I had. I can see my dad's sly grin just thinking about it. And mom's right. What will he say when he finds out?"

"Surely he already knows."

"I don't know."

"What would be the worst thing that could happen if he finds out?"

I thought, but the answer in my head rose like a toxic beast from a radioactive swamp. "I need more wine, Guy."

He took the glass from my hand. "I don't think you do. I think what you need now is to see Farnham."

"I need a sounding board."

"But your sounding board shouldn't be me."

I brushed my hair back with the palm of my hand, then stared in the direction of my parents' venomous house. "Mama thinks I'm screwing you as well as Farnham. It's the way her mind works."

"Well, she has seen both of you visit me. How does she feel having a gay neighbour?"

"She puts up with it. My dad doesn't seem to care. But he hasn't seen me visit you."

He sat back down, still with my empty wine glass in his hand. "You know, Jamal, the heart wants to protect those we love, while our head tries to protect ourselves."

"I know. You've said that before."

"Now think about those words as you drive to see the man that loves you."

There's something about blue eyes. You gaze into them as that person talks to you, but you're really diving into their soul as their words float by. I caught him by surprise as for some reason he was home. He had no errands to run as he had claimed before I left him that morning. It was his way of protecting himself from my absence.

And even in his confident stance, I could see the small boy wanting more from his play friend. While here was I, the child who let everyone down. It's a lonely place inside my skin. Elders judge my every move unless I seek forgiveness and play the role I was born to play.

But while I keep the peace, a huge grate skims my heart, taking off slivers as if it were cheese. It whittles away the love I once had to share with the world. And somewhere inside my body I want to scream, but those screams get muffled. What does it matter? I'm not sure I'm ready for anyone to hear my screams.

Here in his arms, though, I'm the chameleon whose fears slowly melt away to find clarity. He struggles to hide the distrust in his blue eyes. And I want those eyes to care again. I want those eyes not to dismiss me. I need to follow through this time and not let him down.

"Let's dance," I said.

"But there's no music," he replied.

"There's a tune waiting to be written. It's titled 'Farnham and Jamal,' and if we touch and sway a little, it will write itself."

"Are you on drugs?"

I didn't answer. I shuffled my right shoe forward, followed by my left. I was a doo-wop girl making my way to my lover. And he smiled a smile I hadn't seen in god knows how long.

I blew a puff of air on his face which made him giggle, as I reached around his waist. We waltzed like amateurs. No one judged. No one minded. No one cared.

"Imagine both of us living in this apartment," said Farnham.

"I can imagine that."

We laid on his bed naked, my back against his chest. A breeze had begun, sounding more like a gentle ocean outside than a gust of wind. Trees rustled as

if they were waking from their stillness, and a few stars gathered in the night sky to peek into our world.

“I’m serious, Jamal. You’re twenty-five, and you still live with your family. Imagine coming home to your own pad. We’d cook dinner together, fight over the bathroom sink and complain about each other’s snoring. It would be bliss.”

“As long as you were near, I wouldn’t care if cockroaches set up house in the kitchen.”

“I could trim your beard hairs. With your beard and my nose hairs, we’d clog the sink like confirmed bachelors.”

“Yeah, and we’d change the sheets only when visitors complain about the stench.”

“Like I said, it would be bliss.”

“Hmm, it would be.”

“Then move in, darling. Move in with me.”

“Babe, I might just do that.”

On cue, my phone chimed. I ignored it. Thirty seconds later, it chimed again.

“I know you want to look, Jamal. I can sense it in your body.”

“How?”

“You’re tense now.”

“Farnham, consider this. Your mom is so cool. She’s had us over for dinner often, while your dad and your sister fuss over me. You have the life. Mine’s more difficult. I could lose my family, you know that.”

He coughed, more to clear his throat than as an involuntary action. “Can you stay here tonight?”

“You know I can’t. It’s a workday tomorrow. I promised my mom I’d be home on school nights.”

“It’s nice to know you keep *some* promises.”

“Don’t be like that, babe. That’s our arrangement, and trust me I had to negotiate long and hard so I could spend Saturday nights with you. That’s our night.”

“Hmm.”

“What? That’s all you have to say?”

“Hmm.”

I wished we had a storm. We had only calm, but no storm. And there’s always something eerie about the calm. Farnham and I would normally have argued so passionately, our protests would shake the neighbourhood. But tonight, he was lobotomized. His kind heart, misplaced.

Although I parked in front of my parents’, I couldn’t go in. I wanted to know if Guy was still awake, so I snuck into his front yard like a spy and peered into his living room. His back was to me while candlelight accentuated his lanky outline. But that’s not all that was accentuated. I looked closer.

He had wings. They towered above him a third the length of his body. I stepped back, not meaning to, and then I huddled closer to the glass. I definitely saw an angel praying with a candle in his hands.

I ran to his front door, but I stopped myself as I was about to knock. What would I say? What would I do? I turned toward my parents’ place, but as I took the first step, his door opened.

“Why didn’t you knock?” he asked. His wings were no longer there.

“It’s late. I shouldn’t have come to see you at this time of night.”

“Nonsense. I want to know how your talk with Farnham went. Come in.”

He opened the fly screen, and I stepped inside. The candle was still burning on a side table next to his counselling armchair. “Guy, I think we broke up.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“No, I’m serious.”

“That explains why you’re acting shell shocked, Jamal.”

“It’s been a strange night for lots of reasons.”

“Have you been home yet?”

“No, I needed a friend.”

“So, tell me what happened.”

I sat in the armchair as the angel crouched at my feet. A tear ran down my cheek, so I wiped it with the back of my hand. I heard fluttering, as if a bird had been startled. At the same time, the flame on the candle flickered.

“Guy, I think I fucked it up. He wanted me to move in, but I acted cool and —” I wiped another tear away. “Oh, my stupid bravado.”

“Go on, talk.”

“Why am I scared to live my life? Why am I so scared of losing my family when all it’s doing is making me unhappy? Why am I tearing myself and those I love apart?”

“Farnham must be worth it if you’re putting yourself through this.”

With blurred eyes, I saw his wings again. I swallowed hard. “But what if it doesn’t work out and I lose both him and my family?”

He stood, jutting his wings out as a shield to protect me. “Jamal, let’s look into the future.”

As he folded his wings back into place, his living room and any hint of his house was gone. But I was still seated in the most comfortable armchair he owned. Behind him was the night sky as if we were floating in space, yet I felt the proper force of gravity.

As I peered into the darkness, two figures materialized. One was me without my beard while the other was Farnham who’d grown a beard.

“What the —”

“Shh. Just sit and listen.”

“Hey Darl,” said my boyfriend, “she’ll come around. At least your dad knows about us now.” In the vision, a kitchen appeared, and I realized the other me

was peering into a pot on the stove. “Come on, stop moping. You’re where the love is.”

This image faded and in its place was a slightly older version of us. Historic buildings appeared in the background as we stepped onto cobbled streets. “If it wasn’t for you, Farnham, I would have never made it to Europe.”

“Oh, come on, darling. It wasn’t all my idea. The moment I mentioned it, you were listing off the cities you wanted to see.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Well, what did you mean?”

“Never mind.”

I knew the smile on my doppelgänger. It was a smile that said I was at peace. The vision changed again, but this time in more detail. Funky furniture littered this enchanted stage, and we were on a grand lounge suite. I rested my head in his lap as I held a book. He had his attention focused on the screen of a tablet. We were plumper. Both with no beards. And my peaceful smile still reigned.

Guy fluttered his wings, causing ripples which washed this scene away. A party appeared in its place. Old fashioned streamers were tossed around someone’s garden and about fifty people in various states of drunkenness were waiting. I knew some of them. Farnham’s best friend, Pete, stood with a girl I didn’t recognize. My brother drifted with his eyes half shut, until something caused him to clap. The rest of the party applauded instantly.

And out we came, a little thinner and definitely older. We kissed before Farnham stepped forward. He raised a glass of champagne.

“Thank you for all being here to celebrate our twentieth anniversary.” The crowd cheered. “It means a lot to me and Jamal.” He paused and breathed in. “You know, love doesn’t always pop into our lives the way we expect it to. We have the ideal man in our mind, but the ideal man is never what we expect.

“The ideal man is always better than we could ever expect. We know his neuroses, and he knows ours. We know that if the outside world gets too dark,

we just steal a glimpse at our man and light will fill the room. And we know that whatever age he gets, he will still be the most beautiful man in the world, hands down.

“Okay, I know that sounds corny, but it’s the way I feel about this man. My man, Jamal.”

More applause sounded as I lowered my head.

“Are you crying,” the angel asked.

“No,” I replied. “Damn it. Yes, Guy, I’m crying, just a little.”

“Talk about it.”

“We used to say things like that, Farnham and me. He used to call me the most beautiful man in the world, and—”

“And?”

“He was my ideal man. And when my family haunted my thoughts, I’d look at him and it didn’t matter anymore, until mama’s concerns got louder.”

Soon the starry sky returned, and Farnham and I were under it again. Tangled facial hair replaced the strands missing from our heads, and somehow between this image and the last, we’d lost more weight.

“Let’s dance,” said Farnham.

“But there’s no music,” the older me replied.

“There’s a tune that’s been written. It’s titled ‘Jamal and Farnham’, and I bet if we sway a little, we’ll hear it loud and clear.”

So, these men danced in sych, like a pair who’d spent a lifetime together. And I heard the music.

“Your heart wants to protect those you love,” said Guy. “But who are you really protecting?”

“I’ve been protecting my family, to the detriment of the man I’m in love with.”

My neighbour’s living room reappeared as his wings faded away. “So, who should you be protecting?”

“I know, Guy. I know. But what will my family say?” I stared at his far wall.

“You have a right to your own happiness, Jamal.”

“Can you show me how my family will react in the future?”

“I can, but I won’t. For nothing is written in stone. That is your challenge. You have to make amends as time moves on. But next door is your mother. A mother who believes she’s doing what’s best for her son.”

“You know, Guy, I can’t go home.”

“Why?”

I stood. “Because it’s not my home.”

He gestured to his front door. I strode confidently, stopped, and then turned to thank him. When I swivelled back toward the exit, I noticed my suitcase at my feet. I shook my head, lifted the luggage, and continued my journey.

I turned my key in the lock to Farnham’s apartment. There he was, deep in slumber. I undressed and carefully slipped under his sheets. He stirred.

“Jamal, darling, it’s a school night. What are you doing here?”

“Falling deeper in love with the man of my dreams.”

“Are you on drugs?”

“I may as well be. My head is light. I’m deliriously happy. And I know at last that being mama’s boy will never make me a man.”