

THE NEST

KENNETH OPPEL

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The Nest

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THE FIRST TIME I SAW THEM, I THOUGHT THEY were angels. What else could they be, with their pale gossamer wings and the music that came off them, and the light that haloed them? Right away there was this feeling they'd been watching and waiting, that they knew me. They appeared in my dreams the tenth night after the baby was born.

Everything was a bit out of focus. I was standing in some kind of beautiful cave, with shimmering walls like white fabric, lit from outside. The

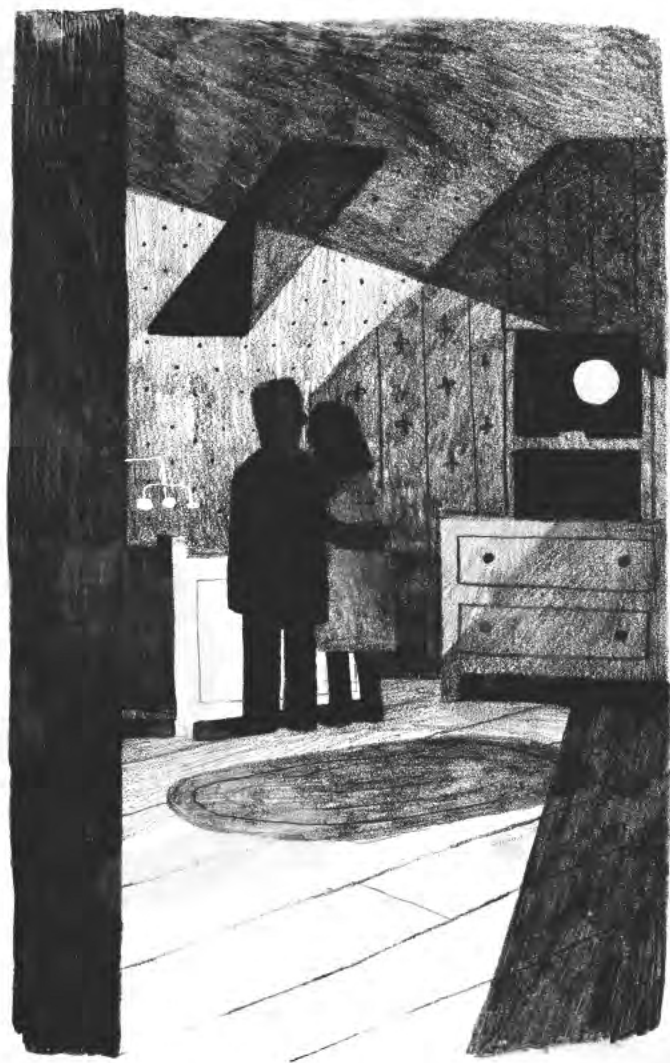
angels were all peering down at me, floating in the air. Only one came close, so luminous and white. I don't know how, but I knew it was a she. Light flowed from her. She was very blurry, not at all human-looking. There were huge dark eyes, and a kind of mane made of light, and when she spoke, I couldn't see a mouth moving, but I felt her words, like a breeze against my face, and I understood her completely.

“We’ve come because of the baby,” she said.
“We’ve come to help.”



THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH THE BABY, but noone knew what. Not us, not the doctors. After a week in the hospital, Mom and Dad were allowed to bring the baby home, but almost every day they had to go back for more tests. Whenever Mom and Dad returned, there were new bits of information, new theories.

It wasn't like a virus, something the baby would just recover from. It wasn't that kind of sickness. It might be a kind of sickness that never gets better.



He might not talk. He might not walk. He might not be able to feed himself. He might not even live.

When the baby was first born, Dad came home to tell me about his condition. That there was something wrong with his heart and his eyes and his brain and that he'd probably need surgery. There were a lot of things wrong with the baby.

And there was probably stuff Mom and Dad weren't telling me—and they definitely weren't telling Nicole anything at all. She thought the baby was getting all its shots at once and that this was just normal—for a newborn to be visiting the hospital every day and often staying overnight.

At night I sometimes overheard my parents talking, words and little bits of sentences.

“ . . . very rare . . . ”

“ . . . poor prognosis . . . they don't know . . . ”

“ . . . degenerative? ”

“ . . . no one knows for sure . . . ”

“ . . . congenital . . . ”

“ . . . we were too old, shouldn’t have tried . . . ”

“ . . . nothing to do with that . . . ”

“ . . . the doctor couldn’t say . . . ”

“ . . . certainly won’t develop normally . . . ”

“ . . . doesn’t know . . . no one knows . . . ”

During the day Mom and Dad kept looking things up in books and on the computer, reading, reading. Sometimes this seemed to make them happy, other times sadder. I wanted to know what they were reading and learning, but they didn’t talk about it much.

I had my angel dream in my head, but I kept it to myself. I knew the dream was stupid, but it made me feel better.

It was a bad summer for wasps. Everyone said so.

The Nest

We usually got them in August, but this year they were early. Dad hadn't even put up his fake paper nests. Not that they worked that well anyway. One year we'd tried these liquid traps, half-filled with lemonade to lure the wasps inside so they'd get stuck and drown. They'd pile up and up. I hated wasps, but even I didn't like looking at them in their soggy mass grave, the few survivors clambering over the dead bodies, trying in vain to climb free. It was like a vision of hell from that old painting I'd seen in the art gallery and never forgotten. Anyway, there were plenty of yellow jackets zooming around our table, mostly around the pitcher of iced tea. I kept an eye on them.

It was Sunday and we were all sitting out on the back deck. Everyone was tired. No one talked much. The baby was having a nap in its room, and the baby monitor was on the table, with the vol-

ume turned up so we could hear every breath and snuffle. We drank iced tea, with the umbrella shading us. Nicole was on the lawn, where Mom had spread out a big blanket for her. She was storming a LEGO castle with some action figures. She had her knights and her big box of LEGOs and her toy telephone. She loved that telephone. It was plastic and old-fashioned, and you actually had to dial the numbers with a kind of transparent wheel. It used to be Dad's when he was little, and it wasn't busted-up or anything. Dad said he'd been very careful with his toys.

Suddenly Nicole broke off from her attack on the castle and picked up the toy phone as if it had rung. She had a quick conversation, laughed once, then frowned like a doctor getting very serious news. She said "Okay" and hung up.

"How's Mr. Nobody?" I called out to her.

“Fine,” Nicole said.

Mr. Nobody was a family joke. About a year ago, just before Mom got pregnant, we’d get at least one phone call a day that was just silence. Whenever we answered, there was no one there. Who was it? It was nobody. Dad complained to the phone company, and they said they’d look into it. But it kept happening, so eventually we changed our phone number, and that stopped it for a bit. After a few weeks, though, we started getting the calls again.

Nicole began calling him Mr. Nobody. Mr. Nobody got his jollies calling us and not saying anything. Mr. Nobody was just lonely. He was a practical joker. He wanted friends. Nicole started including him in her nightly prayers. “And bless Mr. Nobody,” she’d say.

“Any good jokes today, Nicole?” I asked from the deck. “Any interesting news?”

Nicole rolled her eyes like I was an idiot.

Two yellow jackets circled the rim of my glass. I moved it, but they followed; they liked sugary drinks. I'd never even been stung, but wasps terrified me, always had. I knew it was wimpy and irrational, but when they flew near me, my head filled with hot static and I'd lash out with my hands.

Once, before the baby was born, we'd hiked up Mount Maxwell and were looking at the view, and a wasp came buzzing around my head and wouldn't go away, and I started running straight for the drop-off. Dad grabbed me and shouted that I could've been killed. "Get a grip!" he shouted. I always remembered those words when I saw a wasp. Get a grip. There were a lot of things I was supposed to get a grip on. I just wasn't much good at it.

A third wasp flew in, and this one had different markings. Instead of black and yellow, it was mostly white, with a few silvery gray stripes. It was the same shape as the others, just a little bit bigger. The two yellow jackets took off, and the white-and-silver one settled on the rim of my glass.

When I tried to shoo it away, it veered toward my face, and I pushed back in my chair so hard, it fell over with a bang.

“Steve, just leave it alone,” my father said. “If you make a big fuss, they’re more likely to sting you.”

I couldn’t help it. I especially didn’t like it when they flew around my face.

“Where is it!” I said.

“It’s gone away,” said Mom.

It hadn’t gone away. I could feel it crawling on my hair.

With a shout I tried to smack it off, and suddenly I felt a precise searing heat in my palm. I pulled back my hand. In the fleshy part near my thumb was a bright red dot, and already the skin around it was feeling hot.

“Did you get stung?” my mother asked.

I couldn’t answer. I just stared.

“Honestly,” grumbled Dad, coming around to look. “Come on inside and let’s give it a wash.”

The bottom half of my hand started to feel fat, like it did when you came inside the house after a really cold winter day and started to warm up suddenly.

“It looks a bit swollen,” Dad said.

Numbly I compared both hands. “It’s way redder than the other one.”

“It’ll be fine.”

I didn’t feel fine. A big wave of heat flushed through me. It started in the center of my back and

radiated across to my shoulders, then down my arms. I could feel my heart racing.

“I don’t feel right.” I sat down.

“Do you think he’s allergic?” I heard my mom say in concern. She pointed. “Look.”

I was wearing a T-shirt, and on my upper arm a blotchy rash had appeared.

“Is it itchy?” Dad asked.

“I don’t know,” I said numbly.

“Does it itch?” he asked impatiently.

“Yeah! It’s itchy!”

Mom said, “His hand looks pretty swollen. You should take him in.”

“You mean the hospital?” Just saying the word made me feel like electricity was jolting through me. My heart pumped. I felt hot all over. “Am I gonna die?”

Dad sighed. “Steve, you are not going to die.

You're panicking, is all. Okay? Deep breath, buddy."

I was glad Dad didn't seem too concerned, only weary; if he'd been as worried-looking as Mom, I might have flipped out altogether.

"We should just rent a room at the hospital," he said.

The hospital wasn't far, and the nurse who first saw me didn't seem to think I was very important. She gave me some Benadryl to drink, and we found seats in a crowded waiting room. Dad read a magazine, but I didn't want to touch anything in case there were germs. I looked around at the other people. Most of them didn't look too sick, but they were sick, or else why would they be here, and they might have had something I could catch. Every fifteen minutes I went to the bathroom to wash my hands, and then slathered

on hand sanitizer from the wall dispenser. I tried to breathe in little sips so I didn't take in too much hospital air. We waited a couple of hours, and by the time I saw the doctor, the rash on my arm was fading, and my hand wasn't quite as swollen.

"You had a mild to moderate allergic reaction," he said. Shadows sagged beneath his eyes. He didn't really look at me when he talked; I guess he'd looked at quite enough people that day. "But next time you get stung, it might be worse. So I'm prescribing an EpiPen for you."

I knew what those were. I'd been in the staff room once and seen an entire bulletin board pinned with Ziploc bags containing the names and photos of kids, and their EpiPens.

The doctor said to Dad, "You might also want to get him a course of desensitization shots. That way

you won't have to worry about the EpiPen."

In the parking lot, when Dad got behind the wheel of the car, he gave a big sigh before turning the key in the ignition. It was the same hospital where the baby had been born. The same one Dad and Mom kept going back to almost every day.

We didn't talk much on the way home. I felt bad about getting stung and making him drive me to the hospital. He looked tired. He glanced over a couple of times and asked how I was feeling, and I said fine and he nodded and smiled. He patted me on the knee.

"Sorry I was short-tempered with you," he said.

"That's okay."

"We'll book you those shots as soon as we can."

I wasn't too crazy about getting a bunch of needles jabbed into me, but I said, "Thanks."

That night when I slept, I slept deep—and that was the first time I saw the angels.



I still get scared at night. When I sleep, I pull the covers right up over my head and leave only a little hole that I can breathe through—but not see through. I don't want to see what's out there. I've slept like this for as long as I can remember. It's embarrassing, and I never tell anyone about it. I have a lot of nightmares. One of the worst ones is that I wake up in my bed, still under my covers, but I know there's someone or something standing at the foot of my bed. I am too terrified to move, or call out, and then there's a sound like paper tearing and my blankets are yanked off my body. I can feel the weight of them disappear, the sudden sweep of cold air, and I know I am totally exposed to whatever is standing there. And that's when I wake up for real.

When I was little, I'd call out for Mom—it was

always Mom—and she'd come and sit on the edge of my bed and settle me down. Sometimes she stayed and waited for me to get back to sleep; sometimes, though, after a few minutes she'd head back to her own room and tell me to call out if I needed her. And I'd wrap myself up and try really hard to get to sleep.

Back then there was a show on TV I liked, about secret agents who had a hidden lab. To get to it they flipped a switch and part of the floor slowly dropped down to their underground lair. I wished my bed were like that. So that whenever I was scared, I could just press a button and my entire bed would sink down, and then the floor would slide over top of me, and nothing could get past it. No one could break through. I would be completely safe and untouchable in my little nest.

But I didn't have a bed like that. So I'd listen to the house clicking and settling and doing all

its night things, working the furnace, keeping the fridge cold, and all the other secret things it did at night. And I'd try to get back to sleep. But sometimes I couldn't. And I'd start feeling it again, that shape in my room, that thing watching from the end of my bed, and I'd call out again. And this time Mom would stagger in and do what I'd wanted her to do all along—ask if I wanted to sleep in their room for the night. When I was younger, I spent a lot of time in their bed. I slept beside Mom, right on the edge, trying to take up as little room as possible, because I didn't want them to stop letting me sleep there.

I'd never told any of my friends about this, ever. That I was scared of the dark. That I had nightmares. That I'd sometimes slept in my parents' bed.

The night after the wasp sting, I could feel the nightmare coming on in my sleep, like a thun-

dercloud gathering on the horizon. A dark shape assembled itself at the foot of my bed, and just stood there, watching me.

But then the most amazing thing happened. There was a sound, a kind of low musical trill, and with it, points of light. I knew because I looked; for the first time ever I turned in my dream and looked. More and more tiny little bits of light surrounded the dark shape and landed on it, and the darkness started to dissolve and disappear, and I felt such relief.

Suddenly I was in that bright cave-like space, lying on my stomach, and in front of me was her voice.

“We’ve come because of the baby,” she said.
“We’ve come to help.”

“Who’s we?” I asked.

“We come when people are scared or in trouble.
We come when there’s grief.”

I looked around at all the glittering creatures on the walls and in the air.

“Are you angels?”

“You can think of us that way.”

I stood up. I tried to look more closely at the angel in front of me. Her head alone seemed as big as me. It was a bit like standing before that huge stuffed lion at the museum, except the mane and whiskers were all light, and the eyes were huge, and the mouth never moved. She was magnificent, and I wasn't sure she had a mouth at all, but I was aware, every time she spoke, of something grazing my face, and of the smell of freshly mown grass.

“Now,” she said, “my first question is, how are you?”

“Okay, I guess.”

She nodded patiently, waiting.

“Everyone's worried about the baby,” I added.

“It's dreadful when these things happen,” she

said. "It's common, you know. There's some comfort in that. You are not alone in this."

"No, I guess not."

"And your little sister, how is she?"

"She's a pain, as always." I was beginning to feel a bit more at ease.

"Ah, yes. Little sisters."

"I don't think she really understands about the baby being sick. Really sick."

"That's just as well. Your parents?"

"They're superworried."

"Naturally."

"And scared."

"Of course they are. Nothing's scarier than having a sick child, and one so newly born, and so vulnerable. It's the worst thing for a parent. That's why we've come to help."

"How can you help?"

“We make things better.”

“You mean the baby?”

“Of course.”

“No one knows what’s wrong with him exactly.”

“We do.”

“Angels know everything?”

She laughed. “Everything is a tall order! But we know enough to know what’s wrong with the baby. It’s congenital.”

“What does that mean?”

“He was born with it. Don’t you worry—I know you’re a worrier—it’s not something you can catch, or get later in life.”

I wondered how she knew I was a worrier. But I guessed angels knew all sorts of things without needing to be told.

She said, “It’s just a tiny little mistake inside him, and we can fix that mistake.”

“You can?” I said with a rush of relief.

“You know about DNA, don’t you?”

I remembered it from science: all the little pieces inside each of our cells, like a spiral ladder, that made us who we were.

“Well,” she continued, “sometimes the bits get mixed up. It’s the tiniest mix-up, but it can lead to bigger problems. People are very complicated inside.”

“When?” I asked. “When can you do all this?”

“Soon enough. You’ll see.”

And then I woke up.