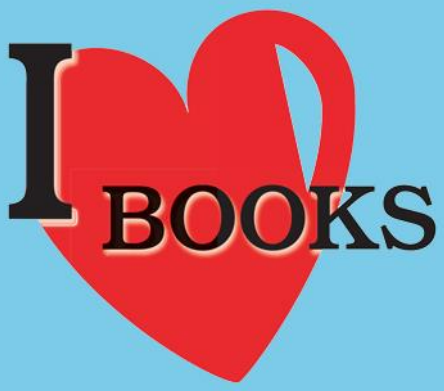


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The Nest

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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 no one 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 got 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. 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 volume 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 differ-

ent 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 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 at school 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.

