

FROM

When the English Fall

BY DAVID WILLIAMS



September 6

Hannah tells me it was not so good with Sadie today, not good at all. She did not sleep last night, that I know. And she was so distressed today, Hannah says. There were no seizures, but she is so unhappy.

She broods, and will only sleep, or talk in strange circles, as she has since it got worse.

But now it is only one thing she can seem to think about. She talks about the lights, and about the darkness. The skies are bright with angel wings, she will shout, suddenly. The English fall! The English fall! Again and again she says this. The skies filled with angel wings, about the English, and about the fall. We give her the medicine, and it quiets her, but the quiet passes more quickly.

I confess I am troubled, and I am praying much over it.

Sadie was always different. Before the doctors told us there was something wrong, before the seizures, she was different. She was born with a caul, which means nothing. I have seen calves born with cauls, and there is no magic I can see in them. They get eaten, just like all of the other calves. Their jerky tastes no different from regular jerky. But sometimes the old women still talk, Hannah tells me.

The angel's touch, some said she had. And the folk still remember what she said about Bishop Beiler, before even the first signs of the cancer. And about the Hostetler girl. And about that calf. It was strange, and Bishop Schrock had many talks with me about the whisperings that should not be part of the order.

“There is no Christ in this,” he said. “This seems the Devil’s work,” he said.

I nodded, but told him she was a good girl, because she was, even if she did say strange things. I felt anger, too, for Bishop Schrock can be a hard man. Of the bishops in this district, his heart turns most quickly to discipline. But prayer and more prayer returned my heart to the grace of Christ.

And now she moans in the night, and I hear her whisper. Every night, every night for a month, as I read back.

And every night, it is the same thing.

The angel wings, and the sky, and the English. And the fall.

Though she is my little girl, barely more than a child, the hairs rise on my arms as I write this. It is just a sickness, I say to my soul. Just a sickness of the mind.

But I do not believe myself when I say it. I cannot but worry that something bad will happen.

September 16

This early morning, after the milking, Jacob and I slaughtered a pig, the big one. Much of the morning was cutting and preparing, and setting the meat into the freezer.

There will be more, but it was the whole work of our morning. It took longer than anticipated, and our breakfast was no longer warm, but Hannah was forgiving, even as she chided us.

After breakfast, we finished building the last of the order. Mike will be pleased. I sent Jacob to the community phone, so that we could tell Mike.

Hannah prepared simple food, slaw and some meat pies, and Sadie helped, as the Fishers were to come in the late afternoon. Joseph and Rachel and their five, plus Rachel pregnant again, they have been blessed and fruitful. And they are still not old. There will be more children, a larger family.

Their oldest, also Rachel, is fourteen just like our Sadie, then Fritz and Hosheah, then Mariam, then Micah.

It was a lively afternoon. The Fishers came in their wagon and a buggy, and Jacob was at once off with the boys to play. Sadie was calm, and she and Rachel went to talking and walking for a while, as Hannah and the older Rachel rested with lemonade before cooking for the evening.

Joseph and I sat, and we talked. He was worried about the Johansons, who operate the 375 acres just to the south of his own. They had always had problems, and always been the sort of family that struggles, even in the good times when the harvest was good and the money was plentiful. Even the best blessings of Providence cannot turn a soul from sorrow if it has set itself down that path.

But with the terrible weather, and the power outages, and the trouble, they were suffering. The hot and dry summer stunted their corn, and all they grew was corn. When the fierce rains began again, their fields were much damaged. Some rains, they can handle, but two or three inches an hour?

Joseph shook his head as he spoke. The Johansons had seen almost no yield this year. The herbicide-treated soil had no quackgrass, nothing to hold it, and the slight incline of much of that property meant that much corn and soil were washed away. I had seen it, the washes cutting across what had been good earth.

The Johansons also had several chicken coops, long flat structures with hens by the tens of thousands, all packed into crates. That had been a good cash yield, from one of the big companies that puts chicken into the stores in the cities. But then the power failed midsummer, not one of the storm outages, but when one power company wouldn't provide to another. The fans failed, and the coops became ovens. Most of the hens died.

Mr. Johanson was beside himself, deep in debt to the bank, and the loans and loan guarantees and payments from the government that used to tide English farmers over no longer came through. Something about China, and austerity measures. Mike has told me about these things, too.

Joseph was worried, because his neighbor had taken to drinking more and more. Two nights before, there had been angry shouting in the distance. It was just drunkenness and rage, as he stumbled through the fields shouting with a bottle in his hand, cursing uselessly at his own fields, blasting the sun-blasted earth with his hate. The police came, called by another neighbor. Very sad thing, we both thought.

So we prayed together for his neighbor, for the family. And then we ate, and gave thanks. It was good, to be together. A blessing.

I WAS LOOKING OUT ACROSS our little farm, in the halfdarkness of the night, and giving thanks for the blessing we had been given, when she was suddenly by my side without my knowing it. Like a wraith, she moves sometimes, my Sadie.

I asked her how she had enjoyed her time with Rachel, and she smiled and said it was good to see her.

She looked at the night sky, dimming at the cool of day. She said that the angels were coming soon. The sky will be filled with their wings. She was not upset, as she had been before. There was no seizure. She was very calm. But she was still saying it.

“We will be all right, when they come,” she said. “But it will not be easy, Dadi.”

And then she went inside. “It’s late, Dadi,” she called to me. “Come in.”

September 22

And on the third night, the angels came and filled the heavens.

It began in early evening, as I watched, sitting with Sadie again, just as she had asked.

It was just darkening, the last colors of the sun vanishing, the first stars showing, the light of the town brightening. It had been a beautiful sunset.

And then they came. A flicker here, and a flicker there, color danced in the sky. Then sheets of it, brighter and brighter, dancing wild sheets cast across the skies, beautiful purples and blues and pinks.

The sky became full of them, dancing, waving, and pulsing. They would fade a little, and strengthen, and then grow stronger and stronger.

So beautiful. But terrible. What was this? Angels? It was not as I would have thought. So bright and silent. I do not know. I do not yet know.

Hannah came, and Jacob, and we watched together, as the wings of angels lit the skies, and the earth glowed under the warm light. Jacob laughed and pointed and jumped around at the joy of it.

Then it grew so bright that it was brighter than midnight under a full moon, bright enough to see my hand, to see the house. Angel wings dipped, radiant with color, and touched the earth. There was a feeling of strangeness

in the air, I do not know what it was, but the hairs on my arm rose. From fear, perhaps, because it was strange, but also because the air seemed sharp with . . . something. I do not know. But the smell changed.

“Dadi, it’s so bright, what is that smell?” asked Jacob, suddenly stilled, his voice filled with awe and alarm. Hannah pulled in close, but Sadie stood separate, looking up, rocking back and forth a little.

It went on, radiant and terrible and beautiful. We stood silent.

And then Jacob said, “Dadi, look, there are no lights in the town now,” he said, “and there are no lights on the road.”

It was true. And he was excited and frightened, and looking everywhere and talking, and then he pointed up.

“Look at the plane,” he called out, and there it was, an airplane, a big one. It was not where the planes normally fly, high and moving north or south. The silhouette was low and large. There were no lights on it, or in it, just the beautiful light dancing on and behind it.

It was sideways. It was coming down.

I could see both wings, bent back dark like a broken cross, and it was floating downward, downward, very slow. It was very wrong. I began to pray.

The plane moved down, southward, like a dark, windblown leaf against the color-splashed sky. We lost it to view behind the trees.

And then there was a faint flash, and a few seconds later, a crump like a short peal of thunder.

“Oh blessed Jesus, all those people,” said Hannah, and she began to pray softly and in earnest, her whispered prayers melding with mine.

Still, the skies danced, so bright, so silent.

And a few seconds later, another flash, to the north. And a minute later, another to the southwest.

Sadie turned to us, and her eyes were huge and wet with tears.

“The English fall,” she said.

And then she went inside, away from the light that filled the sky over the darkened earth.

WHEN THE ENGLISH FALL

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