

# Annunciation

YOU DON'T USUALLY see pictures of angels wearing duffle coats but that's what my angel was wearing when she turned up on the doorstep. Of course, I didn't know she was an angel then.

I was hanging my blue dressing gown on the washing line. It was a lovely afternoon, and there were swallows and sand martins swooping and diving all around me; they were so close I could feel the breeze from their wings. Our garden is on top of a cliff that's pocked with sand martin holes. Last year, when we had a lot of rain, there was a fall and dozens of tiny bird skeletons could be seen amongst the chalky rubble. The martins don't just nest in the cliff, they die there too, and the cliff has been their tomb for hundreds of years. Those wafer thin bones lay on the beach until the tide crept in and washed them away, and then it was as if they'd never been there at all.

That afternoon Benson started barking - he's our doorbell these days - and when I opened the door the angel was standing on the front step in her brown duffle coat. I half expected to see a paper tag round her neck with 'Please look after this bear' written on it. She was a pretty thing in her own way, what would have been called 'gamine' in my day. Short brown hair, dark eyes, wide mouth. Very good skin. I notice skin, I've always taken care of mine. Cleanse, tone, moisturise: that's

been my motto for seventy years. People say I look good for eighty-seven, I could pass for seventy-six.

'Hello,' I said to her. 'Can I help you?'

'You're going to have a baby,' she said. Her voice was soft and monotonous, as if she was in a trance. 'It's God's will. You will carry his child and he will be the Messiah returned to man. Peace to you, full of grace, our Lord is with you; you are blessed among women.'

'Jehovah's Witnesses, is it?'

I never mind them coming to the door, always invite them in for a cuppa. I keep biscuits for them specially. Sometimes when I'm writing the shopping list for Sandra, our home help, I think, 'Now, do I have enough biscuits if the Witnesses come this week?' They don't mind talking about death, the Witnesses.

She shook her head.

'Come in anyway,' I said. 'I'll get the kettle on.'

Muriel was in the back garden. I'd wheeled her onto the patio and positioned the parasol to give her a bit of shade. She loves being outside, even on cooler days. Then I wrap her in a lovely tartan blanket we got from Scotland, back when we had holidays, and she's snug as a bug. I took the girl into the garden and waited for her admiring comments on the view but she just stood there.

'Why don't you sit yourself down and I'll bring us a pot of tea. Jaffa Cakes all right?'

She frowned slightly, creasing her lovely lily-white brow. I had a feeling she didn't know what a Jaffa Cake was; she was in for a treat.

'I'm Deirdre and that's my sister, Muriel,' I told her. 'She talks a lot of rubbish but she's harmless. And you can say what you like, because she'll have forgotten it in ten minutes. Thinks it's 1972. Don't you, you old bat?' I patted her arm affectionately and went inside for the tea.

It was dark in the house after the dazzle of the sunshine, and I nearly collided with the side of the sofa. I have to be careful, I bruise easy as a banana now, and as

for breaking a bone - well, I live in fear. Some days I feel as brittle and desiccated as those old sand martin bones.

I took the tea out, with the biscuits on a plate as there was a visitor. 'It's not often we see a new face, is it Muriel?'

Benson came waddling over in hope of a biscuit and the girl jumped.

'Don't like dogs, dear?' I asked. 'Don't worry, he's harmless.' I patted his knobbly old head. 'Go on Benson, have a biscuit and leave our guest alone.'

He gulped down his Jaffa Cake and lay on the grass, panting slightly from his exertions.

'Did you say something about the Lord, when you were at the door?' I asked, pouring the tea. I offered the biscuits round and she took three, bless her - she must have liked the look of them. Even as children we knew that two was the most you were allowed, *especially* at someone else's house.

Muriel declined. 'I'm on a diet,' she announced.

She thinks she's going dancing at the weekend (it being 1972 and all) and wants to look her best in case there are any eligible men. She'd have been forty-six back then but she never gave up hoping. Neither of us ever married though. I had a fella once and he asked me, but he changed his mind when I said yes. No one asked Muriel. She wasn't unattractive, it was just there weren't that many men to go round after the war.

After my 'jilting' I knew it wasn't meant to be, so I concentrated on my career. Secretarial school and then a job in a solicitors. I was there thirty-five years, don't know how they manage without me.

'Yes, the Lord,' said the girl. She repeated what she'd said at the door, only I was listening properly this time. 'You are going to have a baby. It is God's will. You will carry his child and he will be the Messiah returned to man. Peace to you, full of grace, our Lord is with you; you are blessed among women.'

'Oh dear me!' I laughed. 'I don't think so. I'm eighty-seven! Only did it a few times, and that was too long ago to be worth mentioning.'

I shouldn't really have said that as I don't think Muriel *ever* did it, and I don't like to rub her nose in it. But she'll have forgotten in ten minutes. It's quite handy, really; we get to wipe the slate clean all the time. 'You must be hot in that coat,' I said to the girl, realising she still had her duffel on. 'Would you like me to take it for you? I can hang it up indoors.'

I stretched out my hand but she leaned away from me and gripped the front of it protectively.

'Right you are. Lovely day though. Nice to see the birds back.'

'I will go now. I have delivered the Lord's message.'

She'd hardly touched her tea and biscuits but I showed her out and said goodbye. 'Come back any time!' I called after her.

Muriel had a funny expression on her face.

'Do you need the commode?' I asked. We have a portable one, it's very handy, and no one can see us in the garden, except the occasional hang glider.

'That was an angel,' she said.

'She was very pretty,' I said, not really sure where the conversation was going. It can go anywhere with Muriel.

'She said you were going to have a baby.'

'She did, yes, but I'm not going to. Sausages for dinner sound all right?'

Muriel nodded.

'Remind me to bring my dressing gown in later,' I said, though it was just politeness: I had more chance of Benson reminding me. A few years ago the doctor had shown me a scan of Muriel's brain - it was full of holes, like the cliff with its sand martin tunnels, and the holes were getting bigger every year.

'These are the areas of the brain that affect memory and language,' he'd said, pointing to a dark space on the scan. 'These areas control her physical movements.' He'd pointed to another gap. 'In time, the damage will spread to the areas of the brain that control the body's essential activities - digestion and breathing, for example. And that will precipitate death.'

'Crumbling like the cliff,' I murmured.

'Hmm?' But he wasn't really interested. Doctors are busy people, much busier than old women with nothing to do but look after their sister and watch the birds.

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The next morning the angel's words were the first thing I thought of. I lay there and put my hands on my stomach. Imagine growing a baby inside you. It's a miracle when it happens to anyone.

It was a Sunday, so Mr Harvey was taking me and Muriel to church. He's a sprightly sixty-eight and very good at helping me to get Muriel in the car. I prayed very hard at church that day, but I couldn't concentrate on the vicar's sermon or even the hymns. Muriel loves the hymns, she remembers all the words and has a lovely singing voice. Not like me, I'm an out-of-sorts donkey. But I prayed and prayed, though the funny thing was that I didn't really know what I was praying for. Reassurance, perhaps. Isn't that what we all pray for?

Later we sat in the garden again. I was listening out in case the girl in the duffel coat came round again, but Benson slept soundly all afternoon. I planted some lettuce seedlings from the greenhouse while Muriel tutted. 'Might be a late frost,' she kept saying. This was something our dad used to say, it was our joke to whisper it to each other at night in our beds, but now it got on my nerves.

'So what if there *is* a frost, Muriel!' I snapped. 'You don't even like lettuce, so what's it to you?'

She hung her head, but she was still muttering it over and over to herself.

'Keep that up and I'll put you indoors,' I said, but then I felt sorry and decided to make macaroni cheese for dinner; it's her favourite.

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On Monday our home help Sandra was here as usual and Muriel told her that she'd seen an angel.

'Course you did, love.' Sandra was running a duster round the ornaments on the mantelpiece and she lifted her eyes to me as if to say, 'That's a new one. What's she on about now?'

'We *did* have a strange visitor,' I said. 'She thought she had a message from God.' I told Sandra what the girl had said.

'Well!' Sandra was properly outraged. 'I think it's cruel, telling a woman your age she's going to have a baby.'

'Oh, I didn't mind,' I said, though a tiny part of me was almost wistful. 'She must have been not quite right in the head.'

'I'm glad you see it that way, Deirdre. I'd have told her to piss off.'

'I don't think she meant any harm,' I said, and took myself off for a lie down.

All that week I didn't feel right. It was hard to put my finger on it - I just felt *different*. Then I started being sick in the mornings. I went to the doctor. 'Just a vomiting bug, Mrs Heath,' he said. 'Take yourself home and try not to spread it to anyone.' He always calls me 'Mrs' and I never correct him; I like the sound of it and it makes me think of my old mum.

After a couple of months I felt much better and in fact I was *looking* better than I had in years - my hair had stopped falling out and my eyes were very clear and shiny. My figure filled out and my breasts strained at the front of my blouse.

I did start to wonder. To consider the possibility, that was all. I held it in my mind like a precious stone and examined it from all sides. No harm in that. We should all try to be open-minded, it's good for the soul.

Sandra noticed my bosom. 'Been eating too many biscuits?' she joked. I laughed, said it was my middle-age spread.

Then my belly started to swell. Imagine, I said to myself. Imagine if there really was new life inside me. Like the baby swallows and sand martins pecking their way out of crisp-shelled eggs; like the lettuce shoots shouldering their way out of those little brown seeds. Coming into existence is never easy, but most of us would agree it's worth the effort.

I went to church every Sunday and prayed, but now I prayed every day at home too. Intense, heartfelt prayers. I asked the Lord to show me the way. And he did. There was no sign or words, but gradually God filled my life; he was everywhere. He was in the breeze, fluttering the clothes on the line. He was in the scent of the honeysuckle that looped around the drainpipe at the backdoor. He was in Benson, in his bark and doggy ways, in the wag of his tail and his pleasure in a biscuit. He was in the lettuce shoots that were now firm and plump, and even in the striped snails that feasted on them.

Summer was more wondrous than ever before. We sat outside as long as we could, and then sat indoors with the curtains open so we could watch the sun go down. The great blazing globe turned the sea into fire before the water swallowed it whole. I felt calm and strong and at one with the world. And I was certain by then. While I tended my flowers and vegetables - watering them, thinning them, hoeing between the rows - I thought of the child growing inside me. The delicate threads of nerves, the tough little heart, the intricate folds of the brain getting ready to take on the explosion of information when it entered the world. At night I lay awake and smiled. I had become magnificent.

At first it was easy to keep my belly hidden. My skirts and trousers were elasticated and I draped baggy cardigans over them. But then I had to go into town and get some bigger sizes from Marks. Mr Harvey drove us and he took Muriel to the café, bless his soul, and bought her a slice of raspberry sponge. I hadn't seen her so happy, or so covered in jam, for a long time.

But soon there was no hiding it. Sandra gave me a worried look. 'You all right, Deirdre?' she asked.

'Blooming,' I replied, without thinking, and then blushed. 'I mean, I feel fine, thanks Sandra.'

'Oh good.'

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Eventually the first frost let the birds know it was time to leave and the vegetable patch took on a sodden, rotten aspect. I usually feel melancholy at this time of year, wondering how many birds will make it back to us next spring, and whether Muriel and I will be here to see them, but this year felt different. I was confident I'd see the birds again. I began to walk differently and my movements became softer, gentler. Every living thing seemed so precious. At church I looked at Mary in the stained-glass window, at her Mona Lisa smile, and I thought 'Yes, I *know*.'

Sandra stared at my middle again. 'Deirdre, don't take this the wrong way, but you're looking a bit bloated. Should you get it checked out? I saw it on telly - they took a tumour the size of a beach ball out of a woman's stomach.'

'I don't think I've got a tumour. But I appreciate your concern.'

Soon I was having trouble walking and my ankles puffed up. I did wonder why God hadn't chosen another virgin to deliver his child, a nice elastic teenager, for example, but he's entitled to choose his own methods. Dressing was becoming a challenge so I often stayed in my nightie all day, wrapping my blue dressing gown around me. The baby started kicking and moving around. It had been a long time since I was touched but now there were little hands *inside* me. I put Muriel's hand on my bump and the baby writhed like a bucket of eels. Muriel's face lit up and we

smiled at each other. She was calmer and more content than she'd been in a long time, I think she was aware something wonderful was happening.

'Imagine when the baby's here, Muriel,' I said. 'With its chubby knees and its smile, its tiny grasping fists. The house will be so lively and we'll get lots of visitors all laughing and chatting about the miracle of it and bringing the baby presents.' I sat there and dozed, picturing how happy we'd be.

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The week before Christmas Sandra asked, 'You've not seen that angel of yours recently have you? The one with the message from God?'

'No, we only saw her the once. Shame really. She was a very mysterious young woman, I'd have liked to talk to her some more.'

'You don't think about what she said, do you? About your having a baby and all that nonsense?'

'It *would* be a miracle, wouldn't it?' I smiled. 'A woman my age.'

Sandra erupted. 'There's not a chance in hell, Deirdre! Don't even go there!'

'Not in hell, Sandra, but in heaven. And Elizabeth had a baby didn't she, when she was old. Another of God's miracles.'

'What are you on about? Who's Elizabeth?'

'Have you never read the Bible?'

'I've no time for reading, I've got too much to do to be putting my feet up.' She was wiping the hobs with a greasy sponge. 'You've got to put the idea out of your mind!'

'Why?'

'Because it's ridiculous, that's why!'

'It's a miracle, Sandra. All babies are miracles, but this one is even more special, because it's the Lord's.'

'I don't believe in miracles,' she snapped.

'If you believe that swallows fly to Africa and back every year you believe in miracles,' I told her. 'If you believe doctors can remove tumours the size of beach balls you believe in miracles.'

Muriel was sitting beside me at the kitchen table. She stroked my hair and whispered, 'Pretty.'

I looked at her and she looked right back at me, as if she suddenly knew exactly where she was and what was happening. 'It's the Lord's child,' she said.

'See,' I said to Sandra. 'Muriel knows it's true.'

'Muriel? Muriel thinks the Bee-Gees are in the charts and she's got a hot date on Saturday night!'

Benson started barking.

'Must be someone at the door,' I said. I went to see and it was my angel in the duffel coat again. She looked at me and said, 'It is time. You must come with me to a special place where you will be delivered of a boy, the Son of God.'

Then she slipped off the coat and held out her hand to me, and I could see her enormous wings flapping behind her. They were five feet high at least, bronze, and angled like a kestrel's. They looked strong enough to lift us both off the ground.

'Right you are,' I said. I was ready.

She led me round to the back garden. The sun was just setting and the clouds were tinged with gold.

'I should let Muriel know first,' I said, but when I turned around Sandra was standing there, arms folded.

'Who are you talking to?' she demanded.

'The angel,' I said, pointing, but she'd vanished.

'What are you doing standing in the garden? It's blimmin freezin and you don't even have your slippers on. Come back inside now, Deirdre.'

'I can't,' I said. 'I have to go. Will you say goodbye to Muriel for me?'

'Right,' said Sandra. 'We're going to get this nonsense sorted out. We're making you a doctor's appointment.' She clearly meant business, but at that moment my waters broke. The liquid poured down my bare legs and seeped away into the grass. 'Oh for crying out loud, Deirdre, have you wet yourself?'

'It's my waters.'

'Your what?'

'I'm going into labour,' I groaned, as a contraction squeezed its way through my body.

'I'm phoning an ambulance. There's definitely something wrong with you!' She ran back into the house.

Then the world was very quiet.

There was only the sound of the sea lapping at the pebbled beach below, and my body began swooping and soaring like I had a belly full of sand martins.

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First published in:

*New Writing from Scottish Book Trust's New Writers Awards Vol 8 (2016)*