

The Town Drunk
Presents

The Wingie

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I'll just peek in, Bess told herself, and cracked the nursery door. Violet was curled up on her side, her belly rising and falling with each breath under the pastel stripes of her jumper. Her tiny arms shot toward the rails of the crib as the door hinges whined.

Bess held her breath and thought dark thoughts about her inability to let sleeping babies be, but Violet stayed asleep.

A glitter of light caught her eye as she backed out of the doorway. She tried to remember if Violet fell asleep clutching a toy or wearing one of those sparkly headbands Michael's mother loved. She didn't think so, but she wasn't sure, and she couldn't tell without walking into the room.

Bess bit her lip. Neither of them had slept more than twenty minutes at a time in four days. She needed the nap as much as the baby did. The glittery bit could be a choking hazard, though. Not safe.

The glitter moved.

Clenching her jaw, Bess squeezed through the doorway, avoiding the squeaks, and tiptoed her way to the crib.

A pinkish gold puffball nestled between the baby's cheek and shoulder, covered in sparkly scales and wrapped up in rice paper wings. Bess stared at the creature sleeping beside her child's face. It raised its narrow head to look back at her, blinking slowly through thin lids.

A dragon, no bigger than her fist. In the crib.

Was she finally so tired she was hallucinating?

"Shoo," she said.

It hissed at her. A tiny wisp of blue smoke rose from its nostrils.

Bess grabbed a diaper from the stand beside her and dropped it between the beast and Violet's face.

“Get lost!” she hissed back.

It grumbled and stood on four stubby legs, shaking out its wings. She pointed to the open window. “Out!”

It stared back, and opened its wings wide.

It’s trying to scare me, she thought, not sure if she was frightened or amused by the idea. She tried to use the diaper to push it away from the baby’s face, intending to grab Violet and run.

The dragon hissed at her again and rose into the air, spitting a tiny blue flame at her before winging out the window.

Bess laughed at herself as she watched the creature fly. The pink and green shimmer followed a jagged path into the back woods. It was only a hummingbird, made scaly and strange by her over-tired mind. She closed the window, ignoring the flutter in her stomach that questioned the hard and shiny look of the feathers and its resting place in Violet’s crib. Michael would laugh at the combination of sleep deprivation and her imagination, turning tiny little birds into flying lizards. Or imagining it all together.

I need to get some sleep.

Violet, of course, started to cry as soon as Bess closed the door.



The oak tree in the back yard gave just enough shade for Bess to feel comfortable setting Violet in the grass beneath it. As Bess yanked weeds from the vegetable garden, the baby cooed and kicked, pulling up a blade and tasting it before scrunching up her face and waving her arms about her head.

Bess loved the squish of the loam between her fingers, the tickly spikes of garlic plants against her elbow, the warmth of the sun on the back of her neck. *This is why we moved here*, Bess thought. She remembered sitting on the concrete steps outside of her apartment building, gazing longingly at the planters on a neighbor’s fire escape. Here, the dirt went all the way down, past the pipes and power lines. She could plant and grow anything she liked. She wiped the sweat from her forehead, smiled at Violet, and went back to work.

It’s too bad Michael can’t be here more often. They’d known the little house on the mountain meant fresh air and freedom to play for the baby, peace and quiet, and a real garden. The long commute and frequent travel hadn’t seemed like such a big deal, but on days like this Bess wondered if they’d made the right decision: peace and quiet was better when there was someone else around to appreciate it with you.

“You’ve got a wingie!”

Bess spun around, catching herself on the base of the weeping cherry she’d planted in the center of

the yard. Harriet's round, weathered face peered over the stockade fence at the foot of the drive.

"Hello," Bess said, wiping her hands on her jeans and wondering how Harriet always managed to sneak up on her, even when both of their houses and the five hundred feet of road between them were in plain view. "How are you?"

"Haven't seen one since I was a girl," Harriet said, wiggling her fingers over the fence at Violet, who shrieked happily.

"What?" Bess looked over at the baby. A sparkly ball of pink and green danced inches away from Violet's toes. She picked up the trowel and stepped toward it.

Violet guffawed. Bess froze.

"They can't resist the little ones," Harriet said. "It won't harm her."

Bess glanced at the old woman again, but moved closer to the baby. She hated the idea of hurting anything so tiny and fragile-looking, but what if it bit Violet? What was she supposed to tell the doctor? "*Sorry, I didn't think the little dragon would hurt her.*" "*Yes, Ma'am, can you wait here a minute for the child welfare worker?*"

"Hard rains tonight," Harriet said, her voice slipping into the strange staccato that made Michael uncomfortable. Bess's anxiety faded, replaced by pity. Harriet was probably a little crazy, but she was also kind, and she looked in on her and Violet when Michael was away. The older woman's presence just up the road was reassuring. Everyone else up on the mountain liked to mind their own business. "Big storm from the south, strong winds."

Bess studied the creature. It danced and spun and fluttered its wings, tickling the baby's foot. Violet hooted with joy, kicking fiercely into the air and tipping herself backwards into the grass.

"I think it's some kind of hummingbird," she said.

"Hummingbirds don't play with babies. It's a wingie," Harriet said, frowning down her nose. "Funny little creatures, ain't they? Skittish with adults, gaga for babies."

"Hm," Bess said, wondering if perhaps she was sharing Harriet's psychosis. More than once she had seen the kids in town imitate Harriet, conducting clouds like traffic cops and hollering at the rain. How long before Bess started to speak in beats and carry a barometer in her head? Was there something in the water up here?

No, it's just isolation and exhaustion. I need a night off. She'd get one, too, as soon as Michael got home. Jessie had agreed to make the trek out from the city to meet her for dinner. Bess had *plans*, just like any normal person. And when she came home, she'd demand an end to the business trips and find a nanny to help her from time to time, like her friends in the city had done when they'd had children.

Bess checked her watch—six more hours until Michael’s train was due. *Ugh.* Maybe she’d run to the library between lunch and naptime. It would break up the day a bit, and they might have the book she’d ordered.

“My nana always said they’d protect a baby better than a pup. You don’t see them much, not since those new developments went in. Don’t like the commotion.”

The closest housing developments were eight miles away, and at least thirty years old. The handful of neighbors that Bess had met all called them “those new developments.” She knew this meant she was going to spend the rest of her life as “the new girl up the road.” She sighed.

Harriet’s head disappeared behind the fence. Bess waited for her to turn up at the gate, then stretched up to take a look. Harriet often forgot the beginnings and ends of conversations, but she tended to stay and chat for a while. Odd or not, she was another adult, and Bess appreciated the company. She preferred Harriet’s blunt conversation and harmless idiosyncrasies to the spiteful chatter she heard in town. The coffeehouse gossip was that Harriet had a daughter who never visited and a husband who had run off with a bank teller. Bess thought the woman might just be lonely. She nudged the trowel aside with her toe and unlatched the gate.

“Bad winds, tonight!” Harriet’s voice carried downhill as she climbed the gravel road to her house. Shaking her head, Bess waved toward the voice as she turned back to the baby. *She’s got to be seventy or seventy-five, but I couldn’t move that fast, even before the baby.*

She squatted beside Violet, ignoring the creature cavorting just out of the baby’s reach. Violet looked up at her with a gummy grin and chuckled. Bess smiled back and stroked Violet’s cheek.

The wingie hissed at Bess as it zipped into the trees.

Hummingbird, she told herself as she carried Violet inside.



When the rain started, Bess was on the phone peering out through the blinds on the patio doors, counting the seconds between flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Michael said. “The train’s late. I won’t be in until tomorrow morning.”

She’d guessed that, somehow, as soon as she heard the phone ring. “Vi’s asleep,” she said, swallowing her irritation. “If she’s up before the train comes in I’ll pick you up. Get a ride if you don’t see us waiting.” The first few raindrops hit the glass. “It’s storming, anyway. If it gets much worse the road will close.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, an automatic response to her tone that only annoyed her more.

“I had plans, Michael. You were going to take the early train home so I could have a little time to myself, remember? I was going out with Jessie.”

“Bess, I said I was sorry. How about tomorrow night?”

She rubbed at her eyes and took a deep breath. *He has no idea what it's like, being stuck out here.*
“Fine.”

I can't do anything about it, anyway. There's no point in taking it out on him.

She dropped the phone into its cradle and curled up into her reading chair, resting her head in the crook of her elbow. It wasn't that taking care of Violet was that hard; Vi was a happy baby, and did little more than eat, hoot, and sleep. But Bess needed an adult conversation once in a while. With someone sane. Like Jessie, who had two kids of her own.

Someone who didn't see little dragons flitting around the yard...

Over the insistent drumming of the rain, Bess heard a gentle tap against glass. She peeked through the blinds, watching the rain running down the panes in little rivers.

The slapping sound started again, louder and faster this time. Scowling, she crept through the dark house to Violet's room and pushed open the door, reasonably sure of what she'd find.

The little iridescent creature rapped one clawed foot against the window pane, tack tack tack. Its mouth opened in a hiss when it saw her.

She drew the curtains.

The tack became a thump as the creature hurled itself against the glass, over and over again.

She looked from the curtains to the crib and back again, calculating the chances of Violet sleeping through the racket at the window versus the risk of her waking up as Bess tried to move her.

Another thwack against the glass made up her mind.

She tucked the quilt around the baby and lifted her gently, trying to keep her head as still as possible. Violet sighed and settled into her shoulder.

“You stay asleep,” Bess whispered, kissing the fold at the top of Violet's ear.

She heard another sound, this one from the front of the house. It sounded like one of the dairy cows from the farm towards town; she wondered if it had wings, too. She settled Violet into the car carrier beside the sofa and went to the door.

The rain stung her face as soon as she stepped out, and she was soaked through before she made it off the step. Gusts roared across the side of the mountain, punctuated by the random snap and crash of broken branches. She could just make out the outline of the two huge pines behind the house, their tops bent sharply against the wind.

She closed the door as a shiver of panic raced up her spine. Violet was awake and staring at her, her eyes round and serious. Bess smiled at her, and bent down to tuck the blanket around her arms. Violet's wide eyes blinked solemnly. "Silly bird," she sang, hoping Vi wouldn't catch on to the tremble in her voice. "Let's go somewhere quieter, okay?"

The rational thing to do was to take the baby into her room and go to sleep. They both needed the rest, and the heavy drapes in the master bedroom would muffle all the noise from outside. The storm would be gone by morning, and maybe if she slept long enough the little pink and green creature would be, too.

Violet wiggled and grunted.

Another crash of thunder rattled the entire house. Bess shivered and noticed that the little hairs on her arms all stood straight up. The shiver stayed in the back of her neck, tingling every time she moved. It got worse when she tried to shrug it away. *Be reasonable. Check the weather report and see how long this is supposed to last and then go to bed. It's just a bad storm. You wouldn't react like this if Michael were here. You're the adult. Get it together.*

Bess looked out the front window and blinked back her own tears as she rocked Vi's carrier, trying to think of something soothing to say. She'd never been good at pretending, but before Violet that had never felt like failure. She dug in the couch cushions for the remote. The local station had a storm warning—*no kidding!*—and reported a number of utility outages, but no real information.

The lights flickered and went out, and the television clicked off; the computer's battery pack beeped obnoxiously behind her. Violet started to cry. Bess squeezed her eyes shut.

"We're out here in the dark, twenty miles from anybody," she crooned, her voice hitching at the end. The lights came back up. Bess opened her eyes. *Okay, it's okay.* Violet sighed and looked out the window.

The rain was still coming down hard, but the wind had eased up a little. She saw a faint flicker up the road, and wondered if Harriet had a backup generator.

I never lost power in the city.

The wingie threw itself against the front window, its open mouth revealing two rows of jagged little teeth. Bess shrieked as she slid off the arm of the couch, landing on the floor beside the baby.

Violet howled. Bess had to look at her to see if she was laughing or crying; Vi's expression didn't make it any clearer.

Bess took a deep breath and rubbed at her hip. Violet waved her fists around and blew raspberries at the window.

Bess sighed.

I can't stay here alone. Not with that thing diving at the windows all night. I really can't. Even if it's all just in my head. We have to go somewhere.

Harriet had always said to drop in if she needed a cup of tea and a chat. And her lights were on.

Bess met Violet's curious look and shrugged. It couldn't be any worse at Harriet's, right? "Any port in a storm, kiddo. Let's get out of here."

The wingie dove at her as she carried the car seat and the diaper bag down the steps, missing her head by inches. Bess yelled, catching the bag before it fell into the mud and using it to shield her face. Even over the wind and the rain she heard the creature hiss and spit. One thin wing missed her nose by an inch.

Bess slammed the car door shut and fastened Violet into the seat in the back. The wingie landed on the hood and banged on the windshield with its nose, but retreated to the doorway when she started the engine. Bess scowled into the dark, trying to catch her breath.

The wingie landed on the lever door handle, spreading its wings wide and hissing every time Bess's eyes lit on it.

She checked the rearview mirror. Violet stared at her with big eyes. Every few seconds she'd look out the window, her lips tight together. It was an oddly adult expression on a five month old; Bess had to hold in a giggle. "We're going to visit Harriet. It'll be all right."

Ten seconds later she parked in Harriet's driveway. She considered driving back. How does a rational adult defend being undone by a winged lizard and a thunderstorm?

Harriet had been on the wingie's side, earlier.

That's just nuts. The rain started again. Bess held Vi tightly against her and ran up the stairs.

Harriet opened the door before Bess even raised her hand to knock.

"I'm sorry," Bess said. "Our lights were flickering and—"

Harriet shook her head. "No one likes to be alone during a bad one."

Bess relaxed a little as the door closed behind her. "Thanks."

Harriet handed her a mug. "I was beginning to think I would have to come to you."

"Harriet," Bess said as she watched Violet crawl happily across the floor. "I tried to find some information about wingies when I was at the library today."

"I don't like those kids standing around there," Harriet said.

Bess stared at the tiny violets painted around the rim of the cup, remembering how well one of the awkward and gangly boys had mimicked Harriet's voice. "Me either," she said. "But I was curious. I didn't find anything."

"Oh, books," Harriet said dismissively.

Bess smirked, and Harriet shifted in her chair, avoiding Bess's eyes. Bess waited. Harriet couldn't stand silence. Sooner or later she'd have to say more.

"They're not for us," Harriet said. "They're for the babies."

Bess raised her eyebrows.

"They're bad news for us," Harriet said.

"Bad news how?"

Harriet stood and put her mug in the sink. "Depends. I don't know," she said. "Last I saw one I was a babe."

Bess reached under the table and caught Violet's hand before it reached her mouth. Cat food fell out of it. "It attacked me on the way over here," she said. "How is it protecting her by bothering me?"

Harriet shrugged.

Bess gave up and drank her tea.



Bess's mobile rang. She squinted into the dim light coming into Harriet's living room. She'd forgotten about Michael at the train station. She fished the phone out of the diaper bag with her free hand. "Hello?"

Still asleep on her lap, Violet squirmed and grunted. Bess put one hand over the baby's exposed ear and tucked a blanket in around her.

"Bess, where are you? Are you okay? I just got home and—"

"I'm at Harriet's."

"Bess, honey? Is Vi all right? Where were you? I—it's—the bedrooms are gone."

With a confused look at Harriet, who had appeared in the doorway and was staring into her tea pretending not to hear, Bess eased the baby onto her shoulder and walked stiffly to the front door.

Michael was at the top of their driveway. His hair stood up straight on top and swirled in the back, and even from this distance she could see the wrinkles in his shirt from sleeping on the train. He turned around, saw her, and dropped his phone onto his bag before sprinting up the hill to Harriet's stairs.

"Thank God," he said, squeezing them so hard that Violet woke and began to wail. Chuckling, Michael took the baby and kissed Bess's cheek. Harriet stepped onto the porch behind her.

There was only one pine tree standing behind their house now. The other had broken off near the roofline, crushing the bedrooms beneath it. Bess walked down the hill on wobbly legs, the sound of the wind loud again in her ears.

Michael was right—the bedrooms were gone. Most of the family room, too. Branches and glass and pieces of cloth were scattered all over the yard, but had somehow missed her little cherry tree.

She heard cars pull up behind them; Michael assured someone they were fine. When she looked over her shoulder, she recognized one of the faces as the owner of the dairy farm down the road.

I guess now we get to meet the neighbors. She turned around again to examine the rubble, her ears buzzing with the voices behind her. One of them offered to help Michael rebuild.

We could stay in the city with my sister until it's finished. It wouldn't take that long.

She was sure no one else noticed it, but she could see a tiny sparkle weaving through the branches of the remaining pine tree, catching tiny pink and green reflections in the early morning sun.

The wingie dove into the cherry tree and out again before dashing up into the branches of an oak, vanishing into the dark of the woods.



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