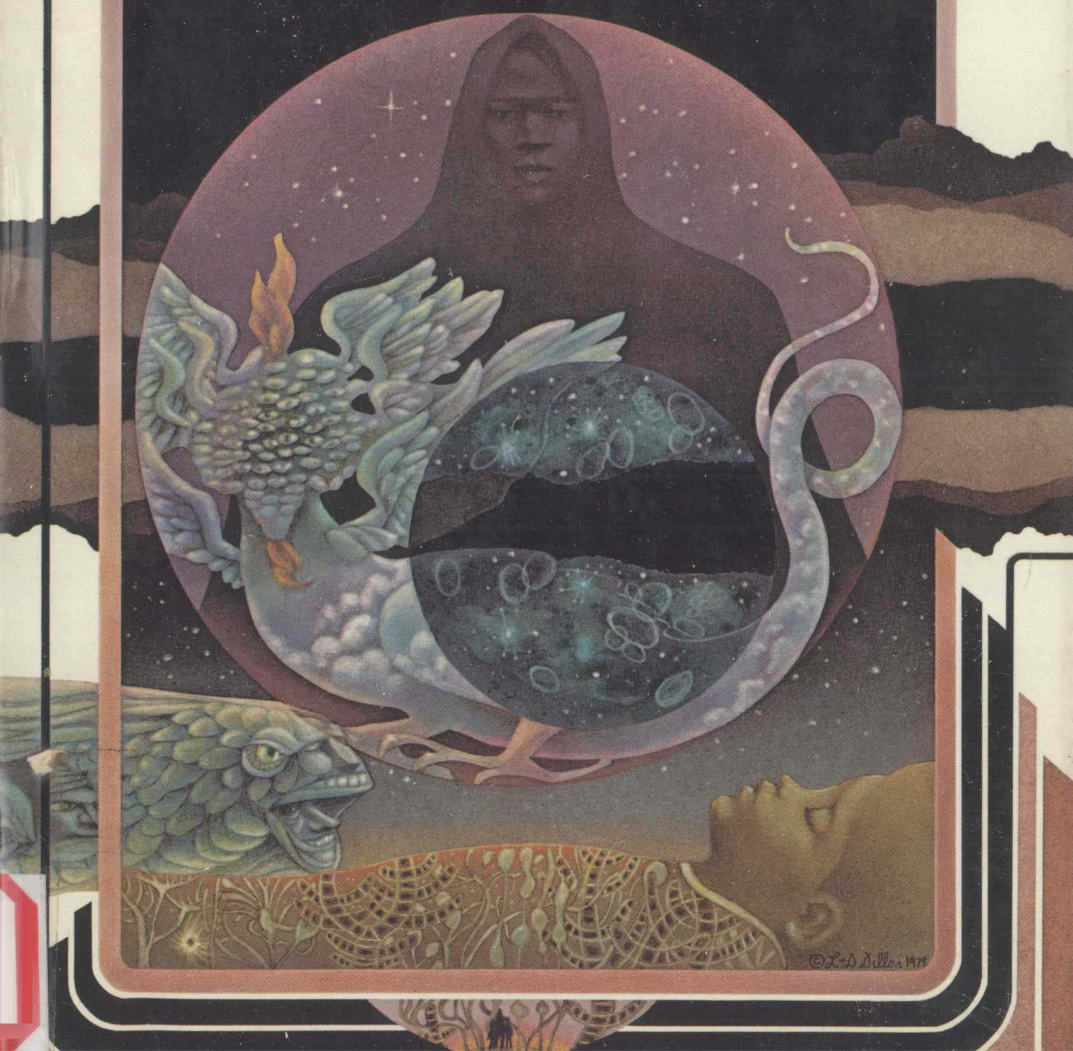


A WIND IN THE DOOR

MADELEINE L'ENGLE



Madeleine L'Engle

IN THE DOOR

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**A
WIND
IN
THE
DOOR**

**“What, nephew,” said the king,
“is the wind in that door?”**

SIR THOMAS MALORY
Le Morte d'Arthur

1 Charles Wallace's Dragons

"There are dragons in the twins' vegetable garden."

Meg Murry took her head out of the refrigerator where she had been foraging for an after-school snack, and looked at her six-year-old brother. "What?"

"There are dragons in the twins' vegetable garden. Or there were. They've moved to the north pasture now."

Meg, not replying—it did not do to answer Charles Wallace too quickly when he said something odd—returned to the refrigerator. "I suppose I'll have lettuce and tomato as usual. I was looking for something new and different and exciting."

"Meg, did you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you. I think I'll have liverwurst and cream cheese." She took her sandwich materials and a bottle of milk and set them out on the kitchen table. Charles Wallace waited patiently. She looked at him, scowling with an anxiety she did not like to admit to herself, at the fresh rips in the knees of his blue jeans, the streaks of dirt grained deep in his shirt, a darkening bruise on the cheekbone under his left eye. "Okay, did the big boys jump you in the schoolyard this time, or when you got off the bus?"

“Meg, you aren’t listening to me.”

“I happen to care that you’ve been in school for two months now and not a single week has gone by that you haven’t been roughed up. If you’ve been talking about dragons in the garden or wherever they are, I suppose that explains it.”

“I haven’t. Don’t underestimate me. I didn’t see them till I got home.”

Whenever Meg was deeply worried she got angry. Now she scowled at her sandwich. “I wish Mother’d get the spreadable kind of cream cheese. This stuff keeps going right through the bread. Where is she?”

“In the lab, doing an experiment. She said to tell you she wouldn’t be long.”

“Where’s Father?”

“He got a call from L.A., and he’s gone to Washington for a couple of days.”

Like the dragons in the garden, their father’s visits to the White House were something best not talked about at school. Unlike the dragons, these visits were real.

Charles Wallace picked up Meg’s doubting. “But I saw them, Meg, the dragons. Eat your sandwich and come see.”

“Where’re Sandy and Dennys?”

“Soccer practice. I haven’t told anybody but you.” Suddenly sounding forlorn, younger than his six years, he said, “I wish the high-school bus got home earlier. I’ve been waiting and waiting for you.”

Meg returned to the refrigerator to get lettuce. This was a cover for some rapid thinking, although she couldn’t

count on Charles Wallace not picking up her thoughts, as he had picked up her doubts about the dragons. What he had actually seen she could not begin to guess. That he had seen something, something unusual, she was positive.

Charles Wallace silently watched her finish making the sandwich, carefully aligning the slices of bread and cutting it in precise sections. "I wonder if Mr. Jenkins has ever seen a dragon?"

Mr. Jenkins was the principal of the village school, and Meg had had her own troubles with him. She had small hope that Mr. Jenkins would care what happened to Charles Wallace, or that he would be willing to interfere in what he called 'the normal procedures of democracy.' "Mr. Jenkins believes in the law of the jungle." She spoke through a mouthful. "Aren't there dragons in the jungle?"

Charles Wallace finished his glass of milk. "No wonder you always flunk social studies. Eat your sandwich and stop stalling. Let's go and see if they're still there."

They crossed the lawn, followed by Fortinbras, the large, black, almost-Labrador dog, happily sniffing and snuffling at the rusty autumnal remains of the rhubarb patch. Meg tripped over a wire hoop from the croquet set, and made an annoyed grunt, mostly at herself, because she had put the wickets and mallets away after the last game, and forgotten this one. A low wall of barberry separated the croquet lawn from Sandy's and Dennys's vegetable garden. Fortinbras leaped over the barberry, and Meg called automatically, "Not in the garden, Fort," and the big dog backed

out, between rows of cabbage and broccoli. The twins were justly proud of their organic produce, which they sold around the village for pocket money.

“A dragon could make a real mess of this garden,” Charles Wallace said, and led Meg through rows of vegetables. “I think he realized that, because suddenly he sort of wasn’t there.”

“What do you mean, he sort of wasn’t there? Either he was there, or he wasn’t.”

“He was there, and then when I went to look closer, he wasn’t there, and I followed him—not really him, because he was much faster than I, and I only followed where he’d been. And he went to the big glacial rocks in the north pasture.”

Meg looked scowlingly at the garden. Never before had Charles Wallace sounded as implausible as this.

He said, “Come on,” and moved past the tall sheaves of corn, which had only a few scraggly ears left. Beyond the corn the sunflowers caught the slanting rays of the afternoon sun, their golden faces reflecting brilliance.

“Charles, are you all right?” Meg asked. It was not like Charles to lose touch with reality. Then she noticed that he was breathing heavily, as if he had been running, though they had not been walking rapidly. His face was pale, his forehead beaded with perspiration, as though from overexertion.

She did not like the way he looked, and she turned her mind back to the unlikely tale of dragons, picking her way around the luxuriant pumpkin vines. “Charles, when did you see these—dragons?”

"A dollop of dragons, a drove of dragons, a drive of dragons," Charles Wallace panted. "After I got home from school. Mother was all upset because I looked such a mess. My nose was still very bloody."

"I get upset, too."

"Meg, Mother thinks it's more than the bigger kids punching me."

"What's more?"

Charles Wallace scrambled with unusual clumsiness and difficulty over the low stone wall which edged the orchard. "I get out of breath."

Meg said sharply, "Why? What did Mother say?"

Charles walked slowly through the high grass in the orchard. "She hasn't *said*. But it's sort of like radar blipping at me."

Meg walked beside him. She was tall for her age, and Charles Wallace small for his. "There are times when I wish you didn't pick up radar signals quite so well."

"I can't help it, Meg. I don't try to. It just happens. Mother thinks something is wrong with me."

"But what?" she almost shouted.

Charles Wallace spoke very quietly. "I don't know. Something bad enough so her worry blips loud and clear. And I know there's something wrong. Just to walk across the orchard like this is an effort, and it shouldn't be. It never has been before."

"When did this start?" she asked sharply. "You were all right last weekend when we went walking in the woods."

"I know. I've been sort of tired all autumn, but it's been worse this week, and much worse today than it was yes-

terday. Hey, Meg! Stop blaming yourself because you didn't notice."

She had been doing precisely that. Her hands felt cold with panic. She tried to push her fear away, because Charles Wallace could read his sister even more easily than he could their mother. He picked up a windfall apple, looked it over for worms, and bit into it. His end-of-summer tan could not disguise his extreme pallor, nor his shadowed eyes; why hadn't she noticed this? Because she hadn't wanted to. It was easier to blame Charles Wallace's paleness and lethargy on his problems at school.

"Why doesn't Mother have a doctor look at you, then? I mean a real doctor?"

"She has."

"When?"

"Today."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was more interested in dragons."

"Charles!"

"It was before you got home from school. Dr. Louise came to have lunch with Mother—she does, quite often, anyhow—"

"I know. Go on."

"So when I got home from school she went over me, from top to toe."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing much. I can't read her the way I can read Mother. She's like a little bird, twittering away, and all the time you know that sharp mind of hers is thinking along on

another level. She's very good at blocking me. All I could gather was that she thought Mother might be right about—about whatever it is. And she'd keep in touch."

They had finished crossing the orchard and Charles Wallace climbed up onto the wall again and stood there, looking across an unused pasture where there were two large outcroppings of glacial rock. "They're gone," he said. "My dragons are gone."

Meg stood on the wall beside him. There was nothing to see except the wind blowing through the sun-bleached grasses, and the two tall rocks, turning purple in the autumn evening light. "Are you sure it wasn't just the rocks or shadows or something?"

"Do rocks or shadows look like dragons?"

"No, but—"

"Meg, they were right by the rocks, all sort of clustered together, wings, it looked like hundreds of wings, and eyes opening and shutting between the wings, and some smoke and little spurts of fire, and I warned them not to set the pasture on fire."

"How did you warn them?"

"I spoke to them. In a loud voice. And the flames stopped."

"Did you go close?"

"It didn't seem wise. I stayed here on the wall and watched for a long time. They kept folding and unfolding wings and sort of winking all those eyes at me, and then they all seemed to huddle together and go to sleep, so I went home to wait for you. Meg! You don't believe me."

She asked, flatly, "Well, where have they gone?"

"You've never not believed me before."

She said, carefully, "It's not that I don't believe you." In a strange way she did believe him. Not, perhaps, that he had seen actual dragons—but Charles Wallace had never before tended to mix fact and fancy. Never before had he separated reality and illusion in such a marked way. She looked at him, saw that he had a sweatshirt on over his grubby shirt. She held her arms about herself, shivered, and said—although she was quite warm enough—"I think I'll go back to the house and get a cardigan. Wait here. I won't be long. If the dragons come back—"

"I think they will come back."

"Then keep them here for me. I'll be as fast as I can."

Charles Wallace looked at her levelly. "I don't think Mother wants to be interrupted right now."

"I'm not going to interrupt her. I'm just going to get my cardigan."

"Okay, Meg," he sighed.

She left him sitting on the wall, looking at the two great glacial deposits, waiting for dragons, or whatever it was he thought he'd seen. All right, he knew that she was going back to the house to talk to their mother, but as long as she didn't admit it out loud she felt that she managed to keep at least a little of her worry from him.

She burst into the laboratory.

Her mother was sitting on a tall lab stool, not looking into the microscope in front of her, not writing on the clip-

board which rested on her knee, just sitting thoughtfully.

“What is it, Meg?”

She started to blurt out Charles Wallace's talk of dragons, and that he had never had delusions before, but since Charles Wallace himself had not mentioned them to their mother, it seemed like a betrayal for her to do so, though his silence about the dragons may have been because of the presence of Dr. Louise.

Her mother repeated, a little impatiently, “What is it, Meg?”

“What's wrong with Charles Wallace?”

Mrs. Murry put the clipboard down on the lab counter beside the microscope. “He had some trouble with the bigger boys again in school today.”

“That's not what I mean.”

“What do you mean, Meg?”

“He said you had Dr. Colubra here for him.”

“Louise was here for lunch, so I thought she might as well have a look at him.”

“And?”

“And what, Meg?”

“What's the matter with him?”

“We don't know, Meg. Not yet, at any rate.”

“Charles says you're worried about him.”

“I am. Aren't you?”

“Yes. But I thought it was all school. And now I don't think it is. He got out of breath just walking across the orchard. And he's too pale. And he imagines things. And he looks—I don't like the way he looks.”

“Neither do I.”

“What is it? What’s wrong? Is it a virus or something?”

Mrs. Murry hesitated. “I’m not sure.”

“Mother, please, if there’s anything really wrong with Charles I’m old enough to know.”

“I don’t know whether there is or not. Neither does Louise. When we find out anything definite, I’ll tell you. I promise you that.”

“You’re not hiding anything?”

“Meg, there’s no use talking about something I’m not sure of. I should know in a few days.”

Meg twisted her hands together nervously. “You really are worried.”

Mrs. Murry smiled. “Mothers tend to be. Where is he now?”

“Oh—I left him on the stone wall—I said I was coming in for a cardigan. I’ve got to run back or he’ll think—” Without finishing she rushed out of the lab, grabbed a cardigan from one of the hooks in the pantry, and ran across the lawn.

When she reached Charles Wallace he was sitting on the wall, just as she had left him. There was no sign of dragons.

She had not really expected that there would be. Nevertheless, she was disappointed, her anxiety about Charles subtly deepened.

“What did Mother say?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

His large, deep-seeing blue eyes focused on her. “She didn’t mention mitochondria? Or farandolae?”

“Hunh? Why should she?”

Charles Wallace kicked the rubber heels of his sneakers against the wall, looked at Meg, did not answer.

Meg persisted, “Why should Mother mention mitochondria? Isn’t that—talking about them—what got you into trouble your very first day in school?”

“I am extremely interested in them. And in dragons. I’m sorry they haven’t come back yet.” He was very definitely changing the subject. “Let’s wait a while longer for them. I’d rather face a few dragons any day than the kids in the schoolyard. Thank you for going to see Mr. Jenkins on my behalf, Meg.”

That was supposed to be a deep, dark secret. “How did you know?”

“I knew.”

Meg hunched her shoulders. “Not that it did any good.” She had not really had much hope that it would. Mr. Jenkins had been, for several years, the principal of the large regional high school. When he was moved, just that September, to the small grade school in the village, the official story was that the school needed upgrading, and Mr. Jenkins was the only man to do the job. The rumor was that he hadn’t been able to handle the wilder element over at Regional. Meg had her doubts whether or not he could handle anybody, anywhere. And she was completely convinced that he would neither understand nor like Charles Wallace.

The morning that Charles Wallace set off for first grade, Meg was far more nervous than he was. She could not concentrate during her last classes, and when school was fi-