

# Jakob Wywialowski and the Angels

*by* AUDREY NIFFENEGGER

The attic was infested with angels again. I could hear them bumping around above the dining room ceiling, plus the harp music made it pretty obvious. I got bad knees, I don't go up there much. But I hauled the ladder down anyway and climbed up, just to be sure.

When I stuck my head through the trap door, they all stopped singing and looked at me. They seemed annoyed, like it wasn't my attic, like those antique carved wooden chairs they were sitting on didn't belong to my Great-Aunt Rachel. The attic was all lit with nice golden light, very heavenly-like, but the angels had stuck-up expressions on their faces that kind of spoiled the effect. They looked at me like I was gum on a sidewalk, like I might get on their shoe or something. "S'cuse *me*," I said, and went down the ladder. As soon as I pushed the door into place they started right back again with the music. It burned me up.

I went into the kitchen, I got out the Yellow Pages and found the number for Nate's Speedy

Pest Control. He was the guy who got rid of them last time. But Nate's number had been disconnected. So then I tried everybody from Acme Animal Annihilation to Nature Bob's No-Kill Relocation Service. But they all hung up on me when I said I needed some angels removed from my attic. So then I got smart. When I called Mister Death's Compleat Exterminators, and the guy asked me what the problem was, I said: “Squirrels.”

The guys from Mister Death's showed up the next day, and I was impressed with them from the get-go. Three of the biggest thick-necked, scowling, stogie-smoking guys I've ever seen arrived in a huge black truck, and they had some pretty serious tools: pitchforks, baseball bats, and tranquilizer guns, too.

I opened the trap door and pulled down the ladder. The attic was silent. The biggest exterminator climbed partway up the ladder and stood there looking around. “Squirrels, huh?” he said. “I'd say you've got yourself a little angel problem, mister.” He took his head out of the attic and stood on the ladder, looming over me. “We charge extra for angels.”

“How much extra?” I asked.

“You gotta ask, you can't afford it.”

“Forget it, I'll do it myself.”

The exterminators all laughed. “He's gonna do it himself.” “What, you gonna set traps?” “He's gonna wrestle with 'em.” That made me mad. But they were right, I wasn't going to get the angels out of the attic by myself. So I just shrugged and said, “Okay, okay, fine. Go ahead. I'll pay for it.”

So then they went back to the truck and got some more tools. They put on chain-metal and leather armor-type outfits. They came back with a machine that looked like a vacuum cleaner. I asked them what it was, and they said, “Flamethrower,” as though it shoulda been obvious. I got

kind of worried then, because I didn't want them burning the house down just to get rid of a few angels. But when I started to say something the big exterminator said, “Shut up, old man,” and I did. All three of them climbed the ladder and disappeared into the attic. I didn't hear anything for a few minutes. Then, pardon the expression, all hell broke loose.

There was roaring and clanging and clouds of smoke that billowed out of the trap door like a chimney going backwards. I was coughing so I went downstairs and stood on the front sidewalk in the snow to watch. There were bright flashes of light. Flames shot out the attic window. Pretty soon fire trucks showed up. Firefighters and paramedics scrambled to the sidewalk. “This your house?” one of them asked. “It's okay,” I said. “It's just the exterminators, getting some angels out of the attic.” Right then there was a big crash, and one of the smaller exterminators went flying out the attic window. “Get thee from me, Satan!” an angel yelled after him. The paramedics swarmed around the exterminator. Suddenly a whole host of angels flew through the roof. They were sort of smudged, but you could tell that underneath the soot they were real pretty. I felt bad about throwing them out of the attic, but what was I supposed to do? One thing leads to another, and before you know it you've got seraphim.

The paramedics put the smashed-up exterminator on a stretcher, loaded him into the ambulance and drove away. The other two exterminators came out with their tools and loaded up their truck. They were kind of the worse for wear. The bigger one's hair was all burned off, and the smaller one had a black eye. Both of them were still puffing away on their cigars like nothing happened. The big one wrote out the bill. “We Angel-Proofed yer attic,” he said. “That's so they won't get back in again.”

I wrote them a check for their services, and when I handed it to the big exterminator he said, “Thanks for the Merry Christmas,” and smirked at me. The exterminators piled into their

black truck and drove away.

I went back inside. The house was cold, but it smelled like burnt hair, so I opened some windows. The exterminators had closed the trapdoor behind them. The walls of the hallway were sooty. I put some hot, soapy water in a bucket and started to wash the walls. Every time I leaned over to wash the baseboards I could hear my knees cracking. Then I heard something else. There was a fluttering noise in the attic. I stood there for a minute, with the wet rag in my hand. I was kind of scared. Finally I put the rag in the bucket and pulled down the trap door and the ladder. I climbed up slow, ready to duck. But when I got my head through the trap door, at first I couldn't see nothing. The attic was wrecked. All the boxes and chairs and the parts for the artificial Christmas tree were thrown all over the place, and there were feathers everywhere. Then I did see it. It was just a little one. It was trying to hide behind the rowing machine. I could see that one of its wings wasn't working right. It tried to fly when I climbed into the attic, but instead of going up it just fell over.

I stood there, looking down at this little angel, feeling real sorry. It was a plump one, with blond curls and everything. It was scared, and I could see that wherever the rest of them went, this one wasn't gonna get there. Its wing hung at a funny angle. Then it started to cry.

Well, you can probably guess the rest. I pulled the angel out from behind the rowing machine, real careful, and brought it downstairs. I fixed up the spare bedroom for it, and you know, it makes a real nice pet. It likes to sing, and even though it can't fly it likes to go out in the back yard and flap its wings a little. When it sees wild angels it cries, and holds out its hands, but they always fly right by. So I guess it's mine, now. You might think it's funny, but I've gotten real fond of the little thing.

And that Angel-Proofing the exterminators put in must really work, because I haven't had

any more problems with angels in the attic. Now I got squirrels.

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## AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

Audrey Niffenegger is a visual artist living in Chicago, where she teaches at the Columbia College Chicago Center for Book and Paper Arts. Her graphic novels have won critical acclaim, and her first novel, *THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE*, was a New York Times Bestseller and was nominated for the Orange Prize. She collects taxidermy and comic books. Her most recent book is the novel-in pictures *THE THREE INCESTUOUS SISTERS*.

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