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Opening extract from
A Wrinkle in Time

Written by
Madeleine L'Engle

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I. Mrs Whatsit

IT WAS a dark and stormy night. In her attic bedroom Margaret Murry, wrapped in an old patchwork quilt, sat on the foot of her bed and watched the trees tossing in the frenzied lashing of the wind. Behind the trees clouds scudded frantically across the sky. Every few moments the moon ripped through them, creating wraith-like shadows that raced along the ground.

The house shook.

Wrapped in her quilt, Meg shook.

She wasn't usually afraid of weather. – It's not just the weather, she thought. – It's the weather on top of everything else. On top of me. On top of Meg Murry doing everything wrong.

School. School was all wrong. She'd been dropped down to the lowest section in her grade. That morning one of her teachers had said crossly, 'Really, Meg, I don't understand how a child with parents as brilliant as yours are supposed to be can be such a poor student. If you don't manage to do a little better you'll have to stay back next year.'

During lunch she'd fooled around a little to try to make herself feel better, and one of the girls said scornfully, 'After all, Meg, we aren't babies any more. Why do you always act like one?'

And on the way home from school, walking up the road with her arms full of books, one of the boys had said something about her 'dumb baby brother'. At this she'd thrown the books on the side of the road and tackled him with every ounce of strength she had, and arrived home with her blouse torn and a big bruise under one eye.

Sandy and Dennys, her ten-year-old twin brothers, who got home from school an hour earlier than she did, were disgusted. 'Let *us* do the fighting when it's necessary,' they told her.

A delinquent, that's what I am, she thought grimly. – That's what they'll be saying next. Not mother. But them. Everybody else. I wish father –

But it was still not possible to think about her father without the danger of tears. Only her mother could talk about him in a natural way, saying, ‘When your father gets back –’

Gets back from where? And when? Surely her mother must know what people were saying, must be aware of the smugly vicious gossip. Surely it must hurt her as it did Meg. But if it did she gave no outward sign. Nothing ruffled the serenity of her expression.

Why can’t I hide it, too? Meg thought. – Why do I always have to *show* everything?

The window rattled madly in the wind, and she pulled the quilt close about her. Curled up on one of her pillows a grey fluff of kitten yawned, showing its pink tongue, tucked its head under again, and went back to sleep.

Everybody was asleep. Everybody except Meg. Even Charles Wallace, the ‘dumb baby brother’, who had an uncanny way of knowing when she was awake and unhappy, and who would come, so many nights, tiptoeing up the attic stairs to her – even Charles Wallace was asleep.

How could they sleep? All day on the radio there had been hurricane warnings. How could they leave her up in the attic in the rickety brass

bed, knowing that the roof might be blown right off the house, and she tossed out into the wild night sky to land who knows where?

Her shivering grew uncontrollable.

You asked to have the attic bedroom, she told herself savagely. – Mother let you have it because you're the oldest. It's a privilege, not a punishment.

'Not during a hurricane, it isn't a privilege,' she said aloud. She tossed the quilt down on the foot of the bed, and stood up. The kitten stretched luxuriously, and looked up at her with huge, innocent eyes.

'Go back to sleep,' Meg said. 'Just be glad you're a kitten and not a monster like me.' She looked at herself in the wardrobe mirror and made a horrible face, baring a mouthful of teeth covered with a brace. Automatically she pushed her glasses into position, ran her fingers through her mouse-brown hair, so that it stood wildly on end, and let out a sigh almost as noisy as the wind.

The wide wooden floorboards were cold against her feet. Wind blew in the crevices about the window frame, in spite of the protection the storm sash was supposed to offer. She could hear wind howling in the chimneys. From all the way downstairs she could hear Fortinbras, the big

black dog, starting to bark. He must be frightened, too. What was he barking at? Fortinbras never barked without reason.

Suddenly she remembered that when she had gone to the post office to pick up the mail she'd heard about a tramp who was supposed to have stolen twelve sheets from Mrs Buncombe, the constable's wife. They hadn't caught him, and maybe he was heading for the Murrays' house right now, isolated on a back road as it was; and this time maybe he'd be after more than sheets. Meg hadn't paid much attention to the talk about the tramp at the time, because the postmistress, with a sugary smile, had asked if she'd heard from her father lately.

She left her little room and made her way through the shadows of the main attic, bumping against the ping-pong table. – Now I'll have a bruise on my hip on top of everything else, she thought.

Next she walked into her old doll's house, Charles Wallace's rocking horse, the twins' electric trains. 'Why must everything happen to me?' she demanded of a large teddybear.

At the foot of the attic stairs she stood still and listened. Not a sound from Charles Wallace's

room on the right. On the left, in her parents' room, not a rustle from her mother sleeping alone in the great double bed. She tiptoed down the hall and into the twins' room, pushing again at her glasses as though they could help her to see better in the dark. Dennys was snoring. Sandy murmured something about baseball and subsided. The twins didn't have any problems. They weren't great scholars, but they weren't bad ones, either. They were perfectly content with a succession of B's and an occasional A or C. They were strong and fast runners and good at games, and when remarks were made about anybody in the Murry family, they weren't made about Sandy and Dennys.

She left the twins' room and went on downstairs, avoiding the creaking seventh step. Fortinbras had stopped barking. It wasn't the tramp this time, then. Fort would go on barking if anybody was around.

But suppose the tramp *does* come? Suppose he has a knife? Nobody lives near enough to hear if we screamed and screamed and screamed. Nobody'd care, anyhow.

I'll make myself some cocoa, she decided. – That'll cheer me up, and if the roof blows off at least I won't go off with it.

In the kitchen a light was already on, and Charles Wallace was sitting at the table drinking milk and eating bread and jam. He looked very small and vulnerable sitting there alone in the big old-fashioned kitchen, a blond little boy in faded blue pyjamas, his feet swinging a good six inches above the floor.

‘Hi,’ he said cheerfully, ‘I’ve been waiting for you.’

From under the table where he was lying at Charles Wallace’s feet, hoping for a crumb or two, Fortinbras raised his slender dark head in greeting to Meg, and his tail thumped against the floor. Fortinbras had arrived on their doorstep, a half-grown puppy, scrawny and abandoned, one winter night. He was, Meg’s father had decided, part Llewellyn setter and part greyhound, and he had a slender, dark beauty that was all his own.

‘Why didn’t you come up to the attic?’ Meg asked her brother, speaking as though he were at least her own age. ‘I’ve been scared stiff.’

‘Too windy up in that attic of yours,’ the little boy said. ‘I knew you’d be down, I put some milk on the stove for you. It ought to be hot by now.’

How did Charles Wallace always know about her? How could he always tell? He never

knew – or seemed to care – what Dennys or Sandy were thinking. It was his mother’s mind, and Meg’s, that he probed with frightening accuracy.

Was it because people were a little afraid of him that they whispered about the Murrays’ youngest child, who was rumoured to be not quite bright? ‘I’ve heard that clever people often have subnormal children,’ Meg had once overheard. ‘The two boys seem to be nice, regular children, but that unattractive girl and the baby boy certainly aren’t all there.’

It was true that Charles Wallace seldom spoke when anybody was around, so that many people thought he’d never learned to talk. And it was true that he hadn’t talked at all until he was almost four. Meg would turn white with fury when people looked at him and clucked, shaking their heads sadly.

‘Don’t worry about Charles Wallace, Meg,’ her father had once told her. Meg remembered it very clearly because it was shortly before he went away. ‘There’s nothing the matter with his mind. He just does things in his own way and in his own time.’

‘I don’t want him to grow up to be dumb like me,’ Meg had said.

‘Oh, my darling, you’re not dumb,’ her father answered. ‘You’re like Charles Wallace. Your development has to go at its own pace. It just doesn’t happen to be the usual pace.’

‘How do you *know*?’ Meg had demanded. ‘How do you know I’m not dumb? Isn’t it just because you love me?’

‘I love you, but that’s not what tells me. Mother and I’ve given you a number of tests, you know.’

Yes, that was true. Meg had realized that some of the ‘games’ her parents played with her were tests of some kind, and that there had been more for her and Charles Wallace than for the twins. ‘IQ tests, you mean?’

‘Yes, some of them.’

‘Is my IQ okay?’

‘More than okay.’

‘What is it?’

‘That I’m not going to tell you. But it assures me that both you and Charles Wallace will be able to do pretty much whatever you like when you grow up to yourselves. You just wait till Charles Wallace starts to talk. You’ll see.’

How right he had been about that, though he himself had left before Charles Wallace began to speak, suddenly, with none of the usual baby

preliminaries, using entire sentences. How proud he would have been!

‘You’d better check the milk,’ Charles Wallace said to Meg now, his diction clearer and cleaner than that of most small children. ‘You know you don’t like it when it gets a skin on top.’

‘You put in more than twice enough milk.’ Meg peered into the saucepan.

Charles Wallace nodded serenely. ‘I thought mother might like some.’

‘I might like what?’ a voice said, and there was their mother standing in the doorway.

‘Cocoa,’ Charles Wallace said. ‘Would you like a liver-wurst-and-cream-cheese sandwich? I’ll be happy to make you one.’

‘That would be lovely,’ Mrs Murry said, ‘but I can make it myself if you’re busy.’

‘No trouble at all.’ Charles Wallace slid down from his chair and trotted over to the refrigerator, his feet padding softly as a kitten’s. ‘How about you, Meg?’ he asked. ‘Sandwich?’

‘Yes, please,’ she said. ‘But not liverwurst. Do we have any tomatoes?’

Charles Wallace peered inside. ‘One. All right if I use it on Meg, Mother?’

‘To what better use could it be put?’ Mrs Murry smiled. ‘But not so loud, please, Charles. That is, unless you want the twins downstairs, too.’

‘Let’s be exclusive,’ Charles Wallace said. ‘That’s my new word for the day. Impressive, isn’t it?’

‘Prodigious,’ Mrs Murry said. ‘Meg, come let me look at that bruise.’

Meg knelt at her mother’s feet. The warmth and light of the kitchen had relaxed her so that her attic fears were gone. The cocoa steamed fragrantly in the saucepan; geraniums bloomed on the window sills and there was a bouquet of tiny yellow chrysanthemums in the centre of the table. The curtains, red, with a blue and green geometrical pattern, were drawn, and seemed to reflect their cheerfulness throughout the room. The furnace purred like a great, sleepy animal; the lights glowed with steady radiance; outside, alone in the dark, the wind still battered against the house, but the angry power that had frightened Meg while she was alone in the attic was subdued by the familiar comfort of the kitchen. Underneath Mrs Murry’s chair Fortinbras let out a contented sigh.

Mrs Murry gently touched Meg’s bruised cheek. Meg looked up at her mother, half in loving

admiration, half in sullen resentment. It was not an advantage to have a mother who was a scientist and a beauty as well. Mrs Murry's flaming red hair, creamy skin, and violet eyes with long dark lashes, seemed even more spectacular in comparison with Meg's outrageous plainness. Meg's hair had been passable as long as she wore it tidily in plaits. When she went into high school it was cut, and now she and her mother struggled with putting it up, but one side would come out curly and the other straight, so that she looked even plainer than before.

'You don't know the meaning of moderation, do you, my darling?' Mrs Murry asked. 'A happy medium is something I wonder if you'll ever learn. That's a nasty bruise the Henderson boy gave you. By the way, shortly after you'd gone to bed his mother called up to complain about how badly you'd hurt him. I told her that since he's a year older and at least twenty-five pounds heavier than you are, I thought I was the one who ought to be doing the complaining. But she seemed to think it was all your fault.'

'I suppose that depends on how you look at it,' Meg said. 'Usually no matter what happens people think it's my fault, even if I have nothing

to do with it at all. But I'm sorry I tried to fight him. It's just been an awful week. And I'm full of bad feeling.'

Mrs Murry stroked Meg's shaggy head. 'Do you know why?'

'I *hate* being an odd man out,' Meg said. 'It's hard on Sandy and Dennys, too. I don't know if they're really like everybody else, or if they're just able to pretend they are. I try to pretend, but it isn't any help.'

'You're much too straightforward to be able to pretend to be what you aren't,' Mrs Murry said. 'I'm sorry, Meglet. Maybe if father were here he could help you, but I don't think I can do anything till you've managed to plough through some more time. Then things will be – easier for you. But that isn't much help right now, is it?'

'Maybe if I weren't so repulsive-looking – maybe if I were pretty like you –'

'Mother's not a bit pretty; she's beautiful,' Charles Wallace announced, slicing liverwurst. 'Therefore I bet she was awful at your age.'

'How right you are,' Mrs Murry said. 'Just give yourself time, Meg.'

'Lettuce on your sandwich, Mother?' Charles Wallace asked.

‘No, thanks.’

He cut the sandwich into sections, put it on a plate, and set it in front of his mother. ‘Yours’ll be along in just a minute, Meg. I think I’ll talk to Mrs Whatsit about you.’

‘Who’s Mrs Whatsit?’ Meg asked.

‘I think I want to be exclusive about her for a while,’ Charles Wallace said. ‘Onion salt?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘What’s Mrs Whatsit stand for?’ Mrs Murry asked.

‘That’s her name,’ Charles Wallace answered. ‘You know the old shingled house back in the woods that the kids won’t go near because they say it’s haunted? That’s where they live.’

‘They?’

‘Mrs Whatsit and her two friends. I was out with Fortinbras a couple of days ago – you and the twins were at school, Meg. We like to walk in the woods, and suddenly he took off after a squirrel and I took off after him and we ended up by the haunted house, so I met them by accident, as you might say’

‘But nobody lives there,’ Meg said.

‘Mrs Whatsit and her friends do. They’re very enjoyable.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me about it before?’ Mrs Murry asked. ‘And you know you’re not supposed to go off our property without permission, Charles.’

‘I know,’ Charles said. ‘That’s one reason I didn’t tell you. I just rushed off after Fortinbras without thinking. And then I decided, well, I’d better save them for an emergency, anyhow.’

A fresh gust of wind took the house and shook it, and suddenly the rain began to lash against the windows.

‘I don’t think I like this wind,’ Meg said nervously.

‘We’ll lose some shingles off the roof, that’s certain,’ Mrs Murry said, ‘but this house has stood for almost two hundred years and I think it will last a little longer, Meg. There’s been many a high wind up on this hill.’

‘But this is a hurricane!’ Meg wailed. ‘The radio kept saying it was a hurricane!’

‘It’s October,’ Mrs Murry told her. ‘There’ve been storms in October before.’

As Charles Wallace gave Meg her sandwich Fortinbras came out from under the table. He gave a long, low growl, and they could see the dark fur slowly rising on his back. Meg felt her own skin prickle.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked anxiously. Fortinbras stared at the door that opened into Mrs Murry’s laboratory which was in the old stone dairy right off the kitchen. Beyond the lab a pantry led outdoors, though Mrs Murry had done her best to train the family to come into the house through the garage door or the front door and not through her lab. But it was the lab door and not the garage door towards which Fortinbras was growling.

‘You didn’t leave any nasty-smelling chemicals cooking over a Bunsen burner, did you, Mother?’ Charles Wallace asked.

Mrs Murry stood up. ‘No. But I think I’d better go see what’s upsetting Fort, anyhow.’

‘It’s the tramp, I’m sure it’s the tramp,’ Meg said nervously.

‘What tramp?’ Charles Wallace asked.

‘They were saying at the post office this afternoon that a tramp stole all Mrs Buncombe’s sheets.’

‘We’d better sit on the pillow cases, then,’ Mrs Murry said lightly. ‘I don’t think even a tramp would be out on a night like this, Meg.’

‘But that’s probably why he *is* out,’ Meg wailed, ‘trying to find a place *not* to be out.’