



I believe in angels

Sophie and Thomas watched as the lights flashed on the Christmas tree in the church. They had been chosen to go with Mrs. Tomlinson, their teaching assistant, to decorate the tree, ready for tomorrow's Carol Service. For the first time for many days the sun was shining and the church was filled with glorious rainbow colours from its many stained-glass windows which joined the tree lights, like hundreds of little stars shining out.

Thank goodness they worked first time, said Mrs. Tomlinson. Now we've just the angel and the star. We'll have the star on the top of the tree. She clambered stiffly on to a high chair in front of the tree. I'll do it. We don't want you falling off the chair.

Why can't we have the angel on the tree? Sophie asked as she picked up a big white angel in a frilly dress and see-through, gossamer wings. Because I've got a better place for the angel, Mrs. Tomlinson pointed up above the tree. The children followed her finger to a wooden beam jutting out just a few feet above the tree. When it's up there, there's a light behind it that will shine right through it, and everyone will notice and remember how important angels are in the Christmas story. Now you two finish putting tinsel round the tree. Try to cover the wires where they show. I'm just going to find a step-ladder.

Sophie and Thomas had just about used up all the tinsel and other decorations when Mrs. Tomlinson returned with the step-ladder and placed it beside the tree and in front of the beam.

Shall I go up? Thomas volunteered.

I can't let you do that, said Mrs. Tomlinson. Stuffing the angel in the front of her coat, she climbed the steps, very stiffly. You two sit there in the front seat, she called down to Sophie and Thomas, You can tell me if I've got the angel in the right place.

Thomas had used up most of his enthusiasm by this time and was assuming a more familiar moroseness. *Why couldn't she put the angel with the star on the tree? It would have been much easier. She told you why.* Sophie sounded as though she had already learned that patience was a feminine attribute. *Mrs. Tomlinson said the angel is important and has to have a special place where everyone can see. She can't reach!* Thomas sounded almost triumphant as Mrs. Tomlinson came back down the ladder. She put down the angel and rubbed her arm. *It went stiff,* she said. *I'll have another try. I was only an inch or two away from the beam.* She brushed a cobweb from her sleeve and began to climb again.

What a fuss about a silly doll angel! I don't believe in angels anyway. Thomas had a disruptive mood coming on. *You must believe in angels!* Sophie turned round in the pew to stare at him. *The Christmas story is full of angels! The angel Gabriel visited Mary, and another one went to see Joseph, and the shepherds had a whole sky-full of them!* *She's not going to do it!* As Thomas spoke, they both looked forward to see Mrs. Tomlinson leaning over the top of the ladder. She was almost touching the beam with the pin in the angel's string. Then she pulled back, pushed the angel in her coat and rubbed her stiff arm again.

They were both looking up now, afraid to take their eyes off Mrs. Tomlinson, but Sophie was not finished talking about angels. *Surely, you know about angels at Christmas?*

That's just a story.

But it's true!

But it was a long time ago. Thomas was resolved not to be persuaded. *There may have been angels then, but not now. Have you ever seen an angel?*

Not a real one, Sophie conceded.

Well, there you are. They aren't real! I don't believe in angels.

I do!

The children's heads spun round. The man's trainers were silent on the carpet and they had not heard him come in.

I believe in angels, he smiled at them and in the bright sunlight, his face shone above the cream t-shirt under his open jacket.

Before he could say anymore, Mrs. Tomlinson with her back to them, called out. *There's a nail just where I want it. I'll have one more try. Careful,* Sophie called out. She saw the ladder wobble. The young man went forward to steady it. He did not stop there. As Thomas and Sophie watched, he climbed the ladder behind Mrs. Tomlinson so quickly he seemed to glide up it. The sunlight was so bright now through the clear window to the side of them that the children could not make out what actually happened, but it seemed as though the young man was on the same step as Mrs. Tomlinson. He was holding her arm up and guiding it so she could loop the string over the nail. Then just as quickly he was down the ladder and walking to the side of the church as though he wanted to see if the angel was in the right place. The ladder wobbled again and this time the children ran forward to steady it.

Mrs. Tomlinson came down slowly, beaming proudly. *Well that's done.* She rubbed her arm again. *It doesn't hurt now.*
What a good thing the man came just then! said Sophie.
Man? said Mrs. Tomlinson. She laughed. *I could have done with one! If there was anyone around it must have been my guardian angel! I thought I was never going to be able to get the angel up there, but I prayed and asked God to help me and, just for a moment the pain went out of my arm so I could lift it up easily.*

But the man! Thomas tried again. *He's over....* He raised his hand to point, but the man had gone. In any case Mrs. Tomlinson wasn't listening. She looked at her watch. *It's nearly dinner time. Just wait while I put the ladder away and we'll get back to school.*

While they waited, Sophie and Thomas made sure the man was not in the church. Sophie looked behind the organ to see if he was there. *She really didn't see him,* she called.
But he was there, holding her arm! protested Thomas.
Perhaps he was an angel. Sophie had been wanting to say it ever since Mrs. Tomlinson had gone out with the ladder.
Thomas did not reply, and when Sophie turned round she saw he was staring at a stained glass window. It was lit up by the sun. Thomas stood, looking bemused, with his mouth wide open. *The angel!* He pointed to the window. *That's the face of the man who was here!*
Sophie felt a cold shiver down her back. *Now do you believe in angels? It was just like when the angel Gabriel visited Mary!*

Come on children, called Mrs. Tomlinson. *We'll be late.*
As they walked to the door, Thomas stared straight ahead of him. *It could have been a trick of the light, he said. Anyhow, he wasn't all in white. And he didn't have wings!*