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Opening extract from

Annie

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Published by

Puffin Books

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CHAPTER ONE

LONG ago. The still and dark early hours of the morning of the first of January 1933. A light snow was falling in the chill, deserted streets of downtown New York. Time slowly passed, and then the wintry quiet was broken by the clanging of the bells, tolling four a.m., in the steeple of St Mark's in the Bowery.

A couple of blocks from the church, on St Mark's Place, in the second-floor dormitory of the New York City Municipal Orphanage, Girls' Annex, an eleven-year-old girl stood

alone at a frosty window. Shivering in a thin white cotton nightgown, she listened to the tolling of the bells as she watched the snow swirling downward in the light of a streetlamp. From time to time, she looked yearningly one way up the street and then the other way down. She was waiting for someone to come for her. To take her away from the orphanage. But no one came. Thin, somewhat short for her age, the girl had a slightly upturned nose and an unruly mop of straightish, short-cut red hair. But her most striking features were shining blue-gray eyes that seemed strangely to reflect at the same time a deep sadness, irrepressible joy, and a sharp intelligence. Her name was Annie.

In the cold, drafty dormitory, the other girls – seventeen of them – had long been asleep, mumbling and occasionally crying out in their dreams as they turned restlessly in narrow beds under scratchy, drab army blankets. But Annie had been awake all night.

Earlier, trying to fall asleep, she'd been kept awake by the street sounds of New Year's Eve revellers – shouting voices, drunken singing, the honking of car horns, and the raucous blowing of noisemakers. Long after midnight, though, when all had grown quiet on St Mark's Place and the snow had begun to fall, Annie still hadn't been able to sleep. And at last she'd got up from her bed to stand at the window, to keep a silent vigil through the snowy night, to wait.

For as long as she could remember, Annie hadn't been able to sleep on New Year's Eve. Because New Year's Eve marked the anniversary of the night eleven years earlier, when she'd been left as a two-month-old baby in a tan wicker basket on the front steps of the orphanage. Someone had rung the doorbell and then run off into the night. Annie had been wrapped in a faded pink woolen blanket and had been wearing a broken half of a silver locket around her neck. And there had been

an unsigned note pinned to the blanket. 'Please take good care of our little darling,' the note had read. 'Her name is Annie and we love her very much. She was born on October 28th. We will be back to get her soon. We have left half of a locket around her neck and kept the other half so that when we come back for her you will know that she's our baby.'

Because she'd been left at the orphanage on a New Year's Eve, Annie had gotten it into her head that somehow her mother and father would come back to get her on another New Year's Eve. So, each year, while other children counted the days until Christmas, Annie instead counted the days until New Year's Eve. But year after year, she'd been disappointed. Her father and mother hadn't come for her. And now it seemed pretty certain that they weren't coming for her this year, either. As the snow began to fall more heavily now, Annie sighed and rubbed her eyes to keep from crying. 'They said they loved me and

were comin' back for me – it's in my note,' whispered Annie to herself in the dark. 'Where are they? Why haven't they come for me?' Annie clasped the broken silver locket that hung around her neck, always, night and day, and squeezed it tightly to her breast.

'Mama, Mama, Mommy!' The littlest of the orphans in the orphanage, six-year-old Molly, had wakened from a nightmare and was crying out for her mother. But Molly's mother had died two years before, in a car accident, and her father had been killed in the same crash. So although she was an extraordinarily beautiful child, Molly was an orphan whom nobody wanted to adopt. An orphan like all of the other girls in the orphanage. Except Annie. Annie was different because *she* had a father and a mother. Somewhere. 'Mama, Mommy!' cried Molly again, waking up the girls in the beds around her.

'Shut up,' shouted Pepper from the next bed.

'Yeah, can't nobody get any sleep around here,' grumbled Duffy.

'Mama, Mommy!' screamed Molly again.

'I said, shut your little trap, Molly,' said Pepper, getting angrily out of bed, picking Molly up, and shoving her down on the floor. At fourteen, Pepper was the oldest and the biggest of the orphans, a pug-nosed rapscallion with a face full of freckles and long, tousled hair that was even redder than Annie's.

'Ahhh, stop pushin' the poor little kid around,' said July. 'She ain't done nothin' to you.' Twelve years old, the sweetest of the orphans – if not exactly the prettiest – July had received her name because, simply enough, she'd been abandoned as a baby at the orphanage on the Fourth of July.

'She's keepin' me awake, ain't she,' Pepper snapped back at July.

'No, *you* are keepin' *us* awake,' said July.

'You wanna make somethin' out of it?' said Pepper, walking over to July's bed.

'Oh, the Jack Dempsey of the orphanage,' said July, and in a moment she and Pepper were rolling on the floor in a shrieking, punching, hair-pulling fight that woke up eight-year-old Tessie in her bed at the far end of the dormitory.

'Oh, my goodness, oh, my goodness, they're fightin' and I won't get no sleep all night,' whined Tessie, a pale, frightened girl with blonde pigtails, a thin beaked nose, and scarcely any chin at all. 'Oh, my goodness, oh, my goodness!'

Annie had been silently watching from the window. But now she stepped forward and broke up the fight between Pepper and July. 'C'mon, you two, cut it out and go back to bed,' commanded Annie, pulling the fighting girls apart.

'Aw, nuts to you, Annie,' muttered Pepper, glowering as she stomped back to her bed. But Pepper didn't try to pick a fight with Annie. Although she was a good deal smaller

than Pepper, Annie was recognized by all the orphans as the toughest among them. Even Pepper was afraid of her. The smartest of the orphans, too, and their acknowledged leader, especially in their never-ending battles with the headmistress of the orphanage, Miss Agatha Hannigan.

'Pepper started it, Annie,' said July, 'pushin' Molly down.'

'I know,' said Annie, patting July on the shoulder. 'But you gotta go back to sleep, all of you.'

'Okay, Annie,' said July, climbing back into her bed as Annie went to comfort Molly, who was still crouched on the floor. Kneeling beside Molly, Annie pulled the child into her arms.

'It's all right, Molly, Annie's here,' said Annie, gently stroking Molly's long, black hair.

'It was my mama, Annie,' said Molly, tears streaming down her flushed cheeks. 'We was ridin' on the ferryboat and she was holdin' me up to see all the big ships. And then she

was walkin' away, wavin', and I couldn't find her no more. Anywhere.'

'It was only a dream, honey,' said Annie, drying Molly's eyes with the sleeve of her nightgown. 'Now, you gotta get back to sleep. It's after four o'clock.'

'Annie,' said Molly, 'read me your note.'

'Again?' said Annie.

'Please,' said Molly.

'Okay, Molly,' said Annie, and from the battered wicker basket under her bed – the same basket in which she'd been left at the orphanage and in which she kept her few belongings – Annie took out the note and started to read it aloud by the pale light that slanted in from the streetlamp outside. Annie had folded and unfolded the note so many times that it was nearly falling apart. It was written in a round, feminine hand on a square of pale-blue cardboard. 'Please take good care of our little darling,' Annie began. 'Her name is . . .'

'Oh, no, here it comes again,' groaned Pepper. In the years that they'd been together in the orphanage, Annie had read her note aloud to the orphans an average of perhaps two or three times a week. 'Her name is Annie,' said Duffy in a mocking, singsong voice. A tubby thirteen-year-old with a pudding face and scraggly blonde hair, Duffy was Pepper's best friend. 'She was born on October twenty-eighth,' Duffy went on. 'We will be back to get her soon.' And now all the orphans began laughing at Duffy's rendition of the note. All, that is, but Molly and Tessie. 'Oh, my goodness, now they're laughin' and I won't get no sleep at night,' whined Tessie. 'Oh, my goodness, oh, my goodness.'

Annie angrily stood up, put her hands on her hips, and faced the laughing girls. 'All right,' said Annie, 'do you wanna sleep with your teeth inside your mouth or out?' Silence. Everyone, including Pepper, lay quietly back down in bed. Annie finished reading the note

and then, folding it with great care, put it back in her basket. Now Annie picked Molly up and carried her to bed. She tucked the little girl in under the covers and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

'Good night, Molly,' whispered Annie.

'Good night, Annie,' said Molly. 'You're lucky, Annie, I dream about havin' a mother and father. But you really got 'em.'

'I know,' said Annie softly. 'Somewhere. Somewhere.' In a few minutes, Molly and the other orphans had fallen back to sleep. But Annie still couldn't sleep. And she went again to the window to look out on the falling snow. At the window, she drifted into a waking dream about her father and mother. They were maybe real nearby, she thought, or maybe far away. Her father, she knew, was a big, strapping man who laughed and smiled all the time, and who'd pick her up in his arms, give her a big bear hug, and whirl her about the room. He was a lawyer, or maybe

even a doctor, who helped poor people. And her mother was a kind, gentle woman with golden-blonde hair who played songs on the piano and sewed even better than a professional dressmaker. She'd made dozens of beautiful dresses for Annie. The dresses, all the colours of the rainbow, were hanging in a closet, waiting for the day when Annie came home. Annie and her parents lived in the country, in a vine-covered house on a hill. There was a broad front lawn, and from the porch, you could see for miles across green meadows to a distant winding river. On summer afternoons, Annie, her mother, and her father, the three of them together, would walk across the meadows to the river and have a picnic of deviled eggs and lemonade while they watched swans gliding by. In her room in the house, Annie had a canopy bed and a three-story dollhouse and a red-and-white hobbyhorse and . . . A horse-drawn milk wagon came clattering around the corner

of St Mark's Place, waking Annie with a start from her reverie. She'd heard the sound of the milk wagon outside the window in the early morning ever since she could remember. Annie began thinking back now on all of her long years in the orphanage. And almost none of her memories of those years were happy ones.