lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

this strange new life

written by

rachel anderson

published by oxford university press

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Prelude

Ten years ago, Johnnie attempted to account for her elder brothers' blighted lives in a way that might make sense to her. At school, in Creative Expression, she wrote this:

Once, on a fine summer's day, a tall, clever, handsome man aged twenty-two was making his way to the top of the world when suddenly maggots began munching inside his head. They munched with such stealth that he couldn't guess what lay ahead, nor that his troubles would be with him for many years. The doctors he consulted claimed they could find no clinical evidence of any malady in any part of his entire system. So how could something which was invisible through a high-power microscope, and which sceptics of the time said did not exist, cause such hurt?

His younger brother, also tall, talented, and handsome, was soon afflicted with similarly strange symptoms. He consulted astrologers and soothsayers but they were no better able to determine a cause, nor

to predict the extent of the coming devastation which affected the well-being of the entire family. Much of the material fabric of their lives was destroyed, or else rotted away through neglect. The social structure of friendships and work that held them together as a happy family was seriously crippled, (though the father was affected to a lesser extent because he was a feeble chicken and ran off). However, the brothers' beloved younger sister turned out to be made of strong stuff—according to her brothers, merely an indulged schoolgirl but who became a woman of iron. She vowed to stick with them through thick and thin.

Johnnie's English teacher said, 'This isn't exactly a story, is it, Johanna?'

Johnnie said, 'No, Miss Griffiths. It's meant to be about true life. And life isn't a story.'

The teacher said, 'See if you can work in a bit more dramatic development.'

Johnnie decided that home and school should be kept distinct and separate and made no more attempts to make sense, during school hours, of life at home. She wrote the Creative Expression teacher a pointless story about hobgoblins and talking trees. Miss Griffiths was pleased and awarded her an A minus.

Chapter 1

When Trees Were Green

When they were younger and wanted to tease, Christopher and Andrew told their sister that their parents had never intended to have her.

'You were just the afterthought.'

'Which means you only happened by accident.'

'A random occurrence of fate.'

'Why would they have wanted a *girl* when they'd already got us and Peter?'

'That's why they gave you a boy's name.'

Their mother re-told the past differently, implying that it was because of Peter, the third son, that Johnnie had to be born. 'We wanted you, darling, very much, even if you were a bit of a surprise. But a lovely one. Just imagine if Peter had been the youngest! He'd have ended up most dreadfully spoiled.'

According to Christopher and Andy's interpretation of family history, little Johanna had become the spoilt one instead. Yet none of their wrangling and banter

made the slightest difference to Johnnie's total adoration of all three brothers.

In August it was hot and the kitchen ceiling was black with flies. Christopher and Andy were not due home for weeks and weeks. Johnnie missed them desperately. Her mother was no help. She had her own concerns.

'Yes, of course, fundamentally, we're a very happy family,' she was saying in a morose way. 'But bad things *do* happen to good people, just as good things happen to the bad.'

Johnnie knew that her mother was worrying about Peter again. It happened every time their father had to be away on a buying trip.

'You mustn't let yourself think like that, Mum. Peter isn't a bad thing. He is who he is.'

'*You* don't carry the responsibility of having made him,' said Rose.

Johnnie sensed her mother was sinking deeper into her self-made maudlin swamp.

'And what on earth d'you suppose is going to become of him when he's a middle-aged man and your father and I are too doddery to care for him any longer?'

'Please don't be Eeyore-ish, Mum. Here, eat a chocolate digestive.' She handed her the biscuit tin.

Rose shook her head, dislodging two flies which had settled in her hair.

'Go on, Mum. Chocolate's full of endorphins. Good for lifting low spirits. Andy told me.'

Andy was an expert on the mind-altering effects of

many products. Johnnie took a biscuit for herself and went out to her brother Peter. He was lying under an old apple tree dangling his favourite piece of string in front of his eyes.

'Hiya, Peter. What's cooking?' Johnnie flopped down in the grass beside him. He was very beautiful; not just his character, but to look at. Grey eyes like pebbles under water, pale lashes like rushes round the pool, blond-white hair like a curtain of silky willows. Their grandmother said he'd been created good-looking to make up for that other thing.

'I say, Peter, how about we play stone effigies?'

'Effigies,' said Peter, neither questioning nor agreeing.

'In an Italian church, lying on our marble plinth.'

When Peter was sprawled, inactive except for his length of twiddling string, Johnnie often joined him and tried to make it seem they were sharing in a sibling game. It made him seem less odd. But today Peter, flat on his back, was more inert than usual. Perhaps building up to a fit. Maybe Rose had already sensed it and that's what was unsettling her. Johnnie knew how sensitive their mother was to Peter's needs.

'All right then,' Johnnie said. 'You carry on playing with your nice string and I'll see if I can watch the apples ripening.' She tried to imagine the type of weird thoughts Peter had. But she could never work out what was going on in his mind.

If only the others were here they could play cricket (with Peter as Long Stop), or bike to the sea, (with Peter

helmeted on the rear saddle of the tandem) or make music (with Peter on the bean shaker). If only the big brothers weren't so grown-up, so independent, so far away having their fantastic times.

'When Chris and Andy come back, they'll bring us presents,' she said. 'They usually do.' Strange things. Coloured marble eggs from Florence with no function except to be held in the hand, noisy maracas from Brazil, lumps of twisty lava from Iceland.

'Presents,' Peter repeated without interest. 'Presents are gifts. Gifts are given at Christmas and other feast times.' Then he began to flap his hands up and down as though shaking them dry. He disliked change. When anyone went away, he became agitated. When they returned, he was distressed all over again. 'They are away,' he said. 'We cannot see them and we do not know where they are.'

'Yes we do. Just because we can't see them doesn't mean we don't know where they are. Andy's playing with that band. Christopher's in the Alps doing something with a glacier.'

'We cannot see them,' Peter insisted morosely.

An apple rustled down through the foliage and dropped into the grass beside them. Peter reached out for it.

'No! Don't!' Johnnie yelped and snatched it from him just as he put it to his lips. On the rosy side of the apple was a small hole, out of which teetered a drunken wasp. Fructose can be a mind-altering substance. The wasp buzzed around Johnnie's hand. 'Peter, you *know* you don't put anything in your mouth that's off the ground. If that

had stung your tongue or gone down your throat it'd be very dangerous. You could *die*!'

Peter stared at her flatly, unsmiling and so calmly beautiful. He was probably what an angel would look like, if they existed. On his upper lip, Johnnie saw sunlight on the wispy down of an incipient blond moustache. Her lovely strange brother was already beginning to turn into a man.

He said, 'I am not dead. I am never going to die. I will not die.'

'I didn't say you *will* die. I said you *could* die if you do silly things. You never understand the conditional tense, do you?' Perhaps, Johnnie thought, Rose was right and people like Peter *were* at odds with this world if even the simplest thing, like an apple falling from a tree, was a potential hazard to their safety.

Johnnie didn't yet know that her concern was for the wrong brother.

Honey lolloped over the grass to them and began to lick Peter's face. He pushed the dog away. 'Gerroff!' he said. He disliked close physical contact.

Honey was panting hard, her tongue drooping like the pink tiger lilies in the border.

'Come on, Peter. We must give Honey a drink.'

Johnnie led her team of two to the water-butt beside the greenhouse, scooped out a dishful of water, set it on the ground for the dog. Peter leaned over the water-butt, staring. Water could be every bit as fascinating to him as string.

Johnnie noticed the worms. The water-butt was seething like a busy minestrone. Tiny red threads in their hundreds, and grey tubular larvae in their thousands, all wriggling and writhing, and at least twenty in the dish she'd put down for the dog who'd lapped them up.

'Life's rich diversity,' she said, in order to hide her disgust from her brother, for if she revealed revulsion for these simpler forms of life, it would be a step nearer to showing revulsion for some of Peter's classmates who wriggled and writhed. 'Without the larvae we'd have no mosquitoes. Without the mozzies, there'd be nothing for the swifts to eat.'

'Swift is fleet of foot,' said Peter as Johnnie manoeuvred him away from the water-butt before he was tempted to test the water.

And without swifts screaming through the sky at dusk, there'd be no real summer.

'Good girl!' Johnnie patted Honey's head. Her fingers touched a hard pea-like item on Honey's head. Probably a burr. She pushed aside the fur to pull it out but it wouldn't come. Too firmly attached. A tick, dark brown with Honey's blood, already half-buried into Honey's skin, still burrowing.

Summer days weren't always as lovely as they seemed. If only the other brothers could be here. Johnnie had never been to the Alps but she knew what the Matterhorn looked like from the picture on the side of the muesli packet. She tried to imagine what

Christopher was doing. But he was too high and too far away.

Christopher was climbing strenuously. He was nearly at the top of the col, scrambling over the loose scree a good twenty metres above Dr Leaking. The air was cold and thin. It tasted like lager laced with lime. They must reach the lower perimeter of the glacier to collect their samples of meltwater quickly so they could move on and find the next refuge before dusk.

Dr Leaking was the more experienced mountaineer but Christopher was fitter and younger. When Christopher paused to catch his breath, he glanced back to check whether he should wait for his supervisor to catch up. He felt a sudden niggling pain behind his eye. Like maggots chewing in his skull.

While Christopher was reeling from the bugs in his head, and Johnnie was struggling to remove bugs from the top of the dog's head, their brother Andrew was about to throw himself into the type of mess that causes the police to contact parents and parents to go bananas.

Andy, newest member of the SkinniDippers, was too young to share the driving so the rest of the band made him do the loading, unloading, and setting-up for gigs. He didn't mind being dogsbody. That was how you learned about the realities of the music business. The

SkinniDippers needed Andy because he was talented, though hadn't yet got cocky, didn't whine for the solo spots. What they didn't know was that Andy already knew how good he was. He was keeping this knowledge to himself until he'd been to university. Then he'd launch himself on the world. He'd still only be twenty. He'd have his own band, Andy's Gang. To be run on democratic principles, every member to help with the heavy work of setting-up, every player to be a musician of supreme distinction, though he'd be the real head honcho, but in such a subtle, dignified way the others wouldn't get disgruntled.

Johnnie dabbed her mother's Madame Rochas onto the ticks in the hope that the alcohol in the perfume would shock them into releasing their pincer-grip. She listened to her mother taking a phone call in the hall. After she'd heard Rose say, 'Rotterdam?' twice, then 'Wallet?' twice, then, 'Where?' then, 'Felixstowe. Boat—oh, ferry,' then, 'What? When?' and, 'Oh no,' Johnnie guessed it must be her lovely brother Andy. She also deduced from Rose's expression—a mixture of irritation and anxiety—that he was asking her to do something for him, but because she could only hear one half of the conversation, she didn't know what it might be. Most frequently it was a request for money, or a lift to somewhere. However, since her brother was supposedly in Holland, low-lying land famous for dykes, flooded pastures, cheese, browsing

cows, the propagation of wild tulip corms from the Caucasus, and a relaxed attitude towards recreational drugs, he could hardly be asking for a lift.

Rose gabbled into the telephone receiver, 'But what were you *doing* there in the first place?' Then she said, 'Fringe festival. I see.' Then she shrieked, '*Busking!*' as though it were a swear word. Then, 'But, Andrew, you *promised* you weren't going to do any more of that. Yes, I know. But you told your father this tour was EU-funded, properly organized concerts. Busking at a fringe festival doesn't sound very— You were *what*? How could you? I don't believe it. Oh no, please tell me this is a joke.'

Johnnie paused in her canine-welfare activity. 'Mum, what's *happened*?'

Rose flapped her hand. 'Johnnie, do just shush or I can't hear what he's saying.'

So what was up? Had he been in an accident? Lost his trumpet? Been mugged again? Or worse, run out of cash and nicked someone else's wallet? The suspense of not knowing was intense. Finally, Rose put the phone down but wouldn't say precisely what it was all about.

'Never you mind, sweetheart. Least said, soonest mended. They say they're keeping him in overnight.'

Johnnie thought, Ah, so it *is* an accident. Just so long as he hasn't broken his front teeth or he won't be able to play. Or his arms. If it's only his legs, that's not so bad because he could probably play sitting down though I've never heard of a sedentary trumpeter.

Rose said, 'But isn't it ridiculous? He's under-age. I'm

sure they can't do that, though I suppose he'll be claiming he's eighteen.'

Christopher's descent from the glacier was inevitably faster than his ascent. He was leaping over the outcrops and practically skiing down the steep scarps, for he was pursued by a sense of overwhelming dread.

When Dr Leaking caught up with him on the plateau, he reminded him that one must not allow the euphoria of one's apparent weightlessness to distract one from keeping strictly to the planned route. 'Mid-afternoon, even in August, is no time to be lost in this region. Cloud can gather very quickly. I've known of foolhardy colleagues hidden from their rescuers for days.'

As they passed through a narrow gully, black rocks, shiny with ice, pierced through the snow-crust and the long culvert suddenly took on an eerie familiarity. Christopher felt he recognized the shape of the gully from some other era. He said, 'Isn't this where they discovered that prehistoric man? The ice-man?'

'That's it. Oetzi. The shepherd, buried with his spear and arrows. They named him after the area where he was found, over on the Austrian-Italian border. There was quite a dispute at the time, wasn't there, about which nation should claim him as theirs? Everybody wanted a share of the action.'

* * *

Three hours after Andy's first call home, came another. This time it was Johnnie who got to the phone first. She was hoping it would be Andy. It wasn't.

'Mum!' she shouted. 'It's for you. It's the police.'

Rose was there in an instant, seizing the phone from Johnnie's hand and flapping at her to go away. Johnnie knew now that Andy was in trouble bigger than wasps or ticks. When Rose had finished speaking to the police she was angry and panicky.

'Why did Philip have to be away *this* week?'

But, as Johnnie knew, her father's absence wasn't some random occurrence done to annoy. His buying trips abroad were planned months in advance.

'It really is *too* much. First they say they're detaining him overnight. Now they say they're not and he's got to be collected. And with your father away, it's going to be me who has to drive all that way to rescue him from his cell.'

'His *cell*!' Johnnie squeaked. This was far more interesting than some broken teeth. 'Andy's in a cell? What's he *done*?'

'Just don't ask,' Rose growled. 'Why, oh, why is he so irresponsible? Now I'll have to call Gran to babysit you.'

'It's not babysitting!' said Johnnie. 'It's mutual person-sitting. I look out for Gran just as much as she looks after me.'

'*And* I'll have to book Peter into respite,' Rose grumbled on. 'And that'll use up this month's allowance. I just hope there won't be any *more* unnecessary emergencies this summer.'

'Oh no, Mum!' said Johnnie. 'That's so cruel. Peter hates it at Greensleeves.'

'It's important he gets used to it for when the time comes.'

'But they treat them like babies. It's so humiliating.' Johnnie's interest in Andy's predicament was overshadowed by the desire to look out for Peter's.

'Can't be helped. We all know Gran can't cope on her own and he can be so difficult.'

Different words for different brothers. Andy was irresponsible. Peter was difficult. What was Christopher?

Johnnie said, 'You could take him with you. You know he likes going for drives. I wouldn't mind if you take him and not me.'

'No, darling. Not a good idea. I mean, I don't even know how long it takes to bail someone out of custody, I've never done it before. I just hope that boy settles down soon. Perhaps when he goes to university. Thank goodness Christopher never did this sort of thing. If only he were home, he could see to it.'

Aha! So Christopher was the level-headed, dependable brother.

Rose went on grumbling into the air while Johnnie trailed behind her helping to find the things Peter needed for an overnight stay in respite care and packing them into a holdall.

Johnnie had another suggestion. '*I* could look after him. So Gran doesn't have to. She could just be here as chaperone. He does what I say. Well, mostly.'

'No, sweetie. Absolutely no. There is no way your father or I want your life burdened by your brother.'

'Why should Peter be a burden?'

'Maybe you think it's a laugh now when he says funny things. But you wouldn't if you were a teenager and wanted to bring friends home just when Peter was having one of his funny turns.'

Johnnie couldn't imagine that she'd ever particularly want to bring friends home. They'd find it too countrified. No shops, pavements, or street lights. And a telly that didn't get proper reception because Peter preferred to watch a fuzzy screen. 'We're a bit of an isolated family here, aren't we?'

'*That*,' said Rose bitterly, 'is precisely what disability means. Ignorant people keep away because they think it's contagious.'

'Cheer up, Mum. Everything's going to be all right and Dad'll be home by Friday. But you shouldn't go driving off in a sad mood. Here, take the Hob Nobs with you.'

Much later, Johnnie looked back to that innocent time when she'd thought everything could be made all right with a packet of chocolate biscuits.

When Peter had been delivered to Greensleeves, and Rose had set out again to locate a police cell in Felixstowe, and when Gran had settled herself deep into the soft snowdrifts of the sofa with her knitting bag and her g and t, Johnnie launched a subtle offensive to discover

exactly what misdemeanour it was that deliciously bold and wonderfully bad Andy had committed.

'Well, my dear, it's something to do with smoking. Your poor mother certainly seemed rather agitated. I do believe he was caught smoking a cigarette in the street. Some folk are *very* proper. When I was young, we used to smoke all the time and we thought it rather sophisticated. But things have changed since the old days.'

It was not, Johnnie knew, her role to explain to her grandmother how there were some substances you were allowed to smoke and others that you weren't. Besides, she didn't really understand the differences herself, even though Andy had tried to explain to her the positive and negative aspects of recreational drug use.

Christopher remembered where he'd seen that shady snow-filled gully before. At the university resources centre. He'd been searching for glaciation data and come unexpectedly upon a report about the finding of the ice-man. He'd been struck by the disparity of interest between the history of the earth, and the history of this single cadaver who wasn't, in geological terms, even very old. All those palaeontologists were flapping around like carrion crows to investigate the so-called secrets of a fellow who'd been buried a mere five thousand years ago, whereas the rock substance that was the Alps contained knowledge that was at least sixty million years old. Right now, there

were just the two of them, himself and fusspot Leaking, out there looking for clues.

The sun dipped behind the peaks. The valley below darkened.

'Home, James, and don't spare the horses,' said Dr Leaking with an encouraging whoop and went side-stepping down the next scarp like a careful goat.

'So what was it you said you're going to be when you grow up, darling? Vet, was it?' Gran always managed to make it seem as though she was genuinely interested in Johnnie's life.

'Not sure. But I think I'm going to practise really hard at my viola so I can join Andy's band, when he has one.'

'A viola in a rock band! Now that will be original.'

'It's not rock, Gran. It's fusion sound. Sort of jazz.'

'Well, at least he knows what he wants to do. That's the main thing. And as for your Christopher, he always knew too. Forever picking up stones and carrying them about in his pockets. Even as a lad. I used to tease him. I had no idea what was going on inside his clever little mind. And look at him now! My fine grandson, a studier of stones.'

'It's called a geologist, Gran,' said Johnnie.

'Quite so, dear, and that's why I'm knitting him these good thick socks. For his next expedition. So he won't catch frostbite. And I suppose I'd better make some for poor Peter too, though I know he'll only unravel them.'

She took another sip of her g and t. 'Now then, young lady, are you too old for a bedtime story, or shall we have one anyway and blow what people think?'

Johnnie already knew what people thought. How she was young for her age—the result of being a spoilt afterthought. She had to pretend not to care as she snuggled up against her grandmother like a cockle against a rock and breathed in the memory scent of knitting wool, gin, ancient desiccating skin. She sensed that she must be nearing the end of childhood and she felt sad and solemn. Touching the stringy sinews on her grandmother's wrists and the raised blue veins on her hands, she wondered when her grandmother might die. She knew that old people mustn't live for ever or the world would topple over with the weight of them.