Opening extract from

Angel Blood

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Published by

Puffin Books

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CHAPTER 1

Hypo for Lights Out

1

Lights Out is squealing and we're all watching and trembling.

Tin Lid, the nurse, is pulling at her. She's dragging something out of her arms.

'Let go, you stupid girl,' she is saying.

Lights Out won't. She is clinging on and screaming: 'Pippi. Pippi. No. No.'

I've never heard Lights Out scream before. None of us have. Not even Chicken Angel.

But Tin Lid is too strong.

By now she has almost dragged Lights Out off the bed. Lights Out clings and clings and screams and screams.

Another nurse comes rushing in.

The two of them tear Pippi away and Tin Lid throws the little baby doll on the floor.

And Lights Out is screaming and screaming and her thin white arms are stretching out for Pippi and the two

nurses are pulling her back and holding her down and forcing her face into the pillow.

Then Security arrive – two Hyena Men.

They take over.

Tin Lid rushes out.

I can still hear Lights Out screaming into the pillow.

We are all shaking.

It's like in *The Natural World.* On TV. When the leopard came.

Last time we watched he got one of the little monkeys.

And the whole colony fitted, racing and jabbering and squealing all over.

No one told Lights Out about the baby monkey, limp and blooded out, little head bouncing in the dust.

I look across at Chicken Angel. She's stuffing her mouth with the sheet. She's shaking and staring at Lights Out.

Suddenly the door swings open and Tin Lid runs back in.

She has a hypo.

She's going to give Lights Out trank. She'll give her double dozie. I know it. I know it. They don't like fuss and mess in the Bin. None of the nurses do.

Then Chicken Angel starts screaming. She's seen the hypo too. She knows how much it hurts her friend Lolo.

Why? Why are they taking Pippi?

'No. No,' wails Chicken Angel.

Tin Lid shakes the hypo at her.

Chicken Angel stops her noise but her mouth is still calling out.

For Lolo.

Cough Cough sits hunched. He's wheezing, wheezing hard. Not because of Lights Out but because climbing on to bed is hard for him. He hasn't got the lung for it.

Tin Lid is leaning over Lights Out now. The Hyena Men are holding her down.

Lights Out has started to fit.

Lights Out is jumping and jumping like something is shaking her. The leopard has got Lights Out too.

They pull her tracksuit down, crush her still and jab in the needle.

Chicken Angel screams.

Lights Out squeals and squeals.

Suddenly Lights Out stops.

Her legs shudder for a bit and then go still.

We all wait, swallowing the silence and shivering.

'Lolo. Lolo. Poor Pippi,' sobs Chicken Angel.

Tin Lid waves the hypo at her again but this time it doesn't stop Chicken Angel.

As she leaves Tin Lid picks up Lolo's baby and puts it in a sterilized bag.

She stares at Chicken Angel. Chicken Angel stares back. Chicken Angel is too upset to be scared.

'It's full of germs,' says Tin Lid. 'It's not safe. You know what Doctor Dearly says. Hygiene. Hygiene. Hygiene.'

She leaves.

She's going to take it to the incinerator. When Chicken

Angel's hair falls out that's where she has to put the bits.

Tin Lid is going to INCINERATE Pippi.

2

For the rest of the afternoon Cough Cough and I stay on beds. With Tin Lid, bed is where we have to go whenever there's trouble. First sign of her and we run and crouch there like those skinny monkeys.

When it's not her duty we huddle on the same bed. When one of us is cold or sick or has a big squeal we huddle. We wrap arms round and round like in cosy cosy. We've always done it, huddle together. We breathe to each other and our hearts beat together. A huddle is one big heart. Tin Lid doesn't like us huddling. That's why she makes us sit on our own. On our own is cold. Huddling is like having fur all over you, it makes you warm inside and out.

Sometimes we do Jesus Hands like Mrs Murdoe told us. We all put our hands together and make the roof of the Jesus House. This protects us from leopards and trank sometimes. We don't do Jesus Hands so often now because of Cough Cough. He thinks the Jesus House is daftie. But I think it's a bit like huddling, only it makes you warm in your heart.

After a bit Chicken Angel gets up and kneels beside Lolo and holds her hand and strokes her hair and quietly sings to her.

Lolo will be coma-ed till tomorrow now. Moosed out.

Moose is a stuffed head hanging on the wall in the

day-room above the fireplace. He never moves, that's why when we're tranked we say we are moosed because like him we never move after hard shot. Trank is the same as hard shot.

On the fireplace someone has carved words in the stone. They say BIN LINNIE LODGE and just underneath there's a shield with some more words. Mrs Murdoe said it was a shield and the words were Latin but she didn't know what they said but it means the Lodge is very old. Cough Cough didn't know what it said either, which is strange because he knows everything round here. That's because he reads a lot in the library.

The library has wooden panelling like in the dormie here. And it covers the windows here too because the light's not good for us, especially me with my skin.

The nurses call this place the Bin and it's where we live. We have a day-room where we eat and do fizzio and drink from the waterhole. The nurses call it a water dispenser. When they're not around we call it the waterhole. That's OK because the nurses can't see the animals like we do.

The television is on one side of the fireplace and the nurse's office is on the other side right next to Moose. We can only watch *The Natural World*. Doctor Dearly says it's good for us. Which is OK because it's our favourite programme anyway. It's where the animals drink at waterholes and that's why we call the day-room dispenser the waterhole.

Opposite the fireplace there's a double door that leads to the dormie with our four beds and then there's the

washes where we shower and pee and pitch. Sometimes we pitch in the bed and the nurses hate that so now we have to strip them ourselves and put the sheets in the soil tub. It's all the dozie they give us that makes us pitch. Peeing is OK. That's why we have the water dispenser. We're supposed to drink a lot so we pee out the dozie and the chemicals and the tox inside us otherwise we'd all be ill and maybe go takeaway.

We don't think the nurses are any good any more. They're not like Mrs Murdoe. She was our best nurse. She used to pull my sheets so smooth I could slide on them. Now I have to do the smoothing myself.

Mrs Murdoe never gave us dozie either. She told us stories instead – about giants and beans and pumpkins. And then we all went to sleep on our magic carpets. One day Mrs Murdoe said she was a big bad wolf but we didn't believe her. Then she turned us into little piggies and that was like being a pippi at first but then we got the wolf stuck in the chimney and we all laughed, Mrs Murdoe too. Cough Cough didn't. He said being a piggie was daftie, but he only said that because he couldn't grunt like Mrs Murdoe said because of his lungs.

She's gone now, Mrs Murdoe, and there are just the four of us left: Chicken Angel, Lights Out, Cough Cough and me. I'm X-Ray.

Some of the nurses, Tin Lid for example, call us 'spooks' but they're not supposed to. Doctor Dearly says they have to use the proper names. I'm G4. Chicken Angel is G2. Lights Out is G3 and Cough Cough is G1. They're our new numbers. I've changed from 19 to 4. It's because we are only four and it makes it easier for

the nurses to remember who we are if we are 1 to 4. That's what Doctor Dearly says anyway.

Why are we G this and G that?

When we were littles G was for Giraffe but Mrs Murdoe said it didn't stand for that any more. It stood for Gemini, which means twins. Which makes sense because Cough Cough and I share things – I help him and he helps me. And Lights Out and Chicken Angel are close and Chicken Angel does Lolo's hair just like her own. Mirror images of each other Mrs Murdoe used to say. Of course, we only have mirrors in the washes because of Lights Out not having eyes.

I don't know when we got our real names, X-Ray and stuff. I think it was when Mrs Murdoe was here because she taught us our words and things, short words mostly. We don't use our real names with the nurses, especially Tin Lid. We keep them for ourselves. It's our secret. Only Mrs Murdoe really knew who we were. She never called us 'spooks' like Tin Lid does. We are 'spooks' to her and always will be says Tin Lid.

We don't like Tin Lid.

She and Doctor Dearly don't like germs.

So they say.

They make you ill they say. Germs are very dangerous when your immune systems are JEOPARDIZED.

Jeopardized!!

I asked Cough Cough what Doctor Dearly meant by that.

Cough Cough said it meant our bodies weren't strong enough to fight germs.

We're OK I said to him. None of us have been ill for ages.

Cough Cough smiled. But we will. One day germs will pounce. Catch us he said. Pull us down. Remember what happened to the others. They got the lumpies and they went takeaway.

But that wasn't germs. That was . . . I stopped. I'd no idea why the others all went takeaway. If it wasn't germs, what was it?

What did kill them? I asked CC. But he said nothing.

He can be such a MISERY can Cough Cough.

Mrs Murdoe taught us misery. 'You're a wee misery,' she used to say.

Well, I think it was germs I said. I suppose we'll all be leopardized sooner or later.

I think Tin Lid and Doctor D are trying to scare us, put the squeal on us. Yesterday at first tuck-in I found egg on my fork. Old egg, all crusty. We're supposed to have forks and knives sealed in germ-free packs. And that old egg means no one is doing the STERILIZING. And that means germs are getting in. And that means Doctor D is lying – about not liking germs.

3

Cough Cough teaches me and Chicken Angel big words. He gets them from the library. He's the only one allowed there. It's because he's a GENIUS and because he has to sit all the time because of his pulmonaries. They take him there because then he's out of the way and no trouble. They know he can't go far. Three or four steps and he's wheezing.

Before they took away the pencils that was one of the first words he made me write down. PULMONARY. It's to do with your lungs. Cough Cough has very low-grade lungs and reading's good for them because he doesn't have to breathe much with books. While he reads we do fizzio.

Just to show how clever Cough Cough gets, here's some of the words he's taught us: RETINAL, OCCLUSION, LONDON. And the very latest is DEGRADATION. Things are getting degraded round here he says. But that's just an example. He doesn't really mean it. Next he's going to teach me SUBCUTANEOUS and INCONTINENCE. These are the biggest words so far.

Chicken Angel says it's daftie learning big words. Why do we need such big words? she says. Because they use them, Tin Lid and Doctor Dearly, and we need to know what they are saying says Cough Cough. Why? says Chicken A. If we are IGNORANT says Cough Cough, they will MANIPULATE us. It will be like people whispering about you behind your back. Cough Cough means Chicken Angel and how she and Lights Out are always having PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS and EXCLUDING everybody else.

Everybody else is just me and him.

The cameras are off so I lean across and whisper to Cough Cough.

'Why did they take Pippi?' I ask him. 'It's not because of germs, is it?'

After all, they could have sterilized baby Pippi and given her back to Lights Out.

Cough Cough half opens his eyes and peers at me like I was nearly too small to see.

'No,' he says. 'Not germs.'

'Then why?'

'Because they want to kill baby Lolo.'

Lolo is our other name for Lights Out. She's the only one with two names.

I stare at Cough Cough. He can't be serious.

'But Lolo is growing properly, apart from her eyes that is. She's not a baby.'

Cough Cough doesn't mean arm and leg growing. He means inside growing, right inside.

'You mean in her pulmonaries?' I say.

He frowns, leans back, looks at me and shakes his head like I'm a bulb that needs fixing.

'In her head she's still a baby,' he says.

I'm staring at him. He's very clever but is he going mad?

'Pippi is Lolo. Lolo is Pippi,' he says. He tells me about Siamese twins and sometimes doctors have to let one die so the other can live.

I begin to think.

At tuck-in Lolo and Pippi always sit together and Lolo feeds Pippi and Pippi feeds Lolo. Even Chicken Angel feeds Pippi. In bed Lolo hugs Pippi and Pippi hugs Lolo. Chicken Angel, Lolo and Pippi do everything together.

Cough Cough could be right.

'If you don't kill the baby, the baby kills you,' says Cough Cough. 'You can't hang on to cosy cosy all your life, huddling and noo nooing forever,' he says.

'But huddling's important,' I say. 'Mrs Murdoe said so. You used to like huddling.'

'Huddling's for noo noos,' said Cough Cough. 'We're not baby monkeys any more!'

Is he right, I wonder?

I shake my head. All this stuff about killing and baby monkeys is just leopard talk.

I look over to Chicken Angel. She's still kneeling next to Lolo's bed and is morsing her arm, tapping her fingertips gently up and down. I can't see what's she saying.

Morsing is how Lolo talks. She taps out letters with her fingers on your hand or on your face. Sometimes she draws pictures on my back when she massages me with the skin spray. She has very gently hands.

Lights Out can talk with her mouth like us if she wants but Chicken Angel says she's just got used to finger talking. I think she just likes morsing because it keeps her in touch. It's like cosy cosy for her. Mrs Murdoe used to say that hugging and stroking and spooning, cosy cosy as she called it, were very important for us. When we were younger Mrs Murdoe used to let us cosy cosy a lot. Cough Cough said it was good for our EMOTIONAL BALANCE. Without cosy cosy said Mrs Murdoe, we would die. And look at us now. We're still alive, so she must be right. I think it's because cosy cosy kills germs. I don't say this to Cough Cough because he would probably laugh at me.

Chicken Angel's wasting her time. Lights Out will be light out till first tuck-in tomorrow.

4

'Chicken Angel's going lumpy.'

It's Cough Cough. His voice all breath. It's coming out of his throat not from his mouth. That's why he's Cough Cough. Because he's got these depressed pulmonaries, when he was little the fizzio nurse used to make him cough and cough and blow up balloons.

Since Doctor Dearly came we don't have a fizzio nurse to help make Cough Cough bigger.

Mrs Murdoe said he'd always be little. I suppose it's because he doesn't breathe a lot. You see, according to CC you need OXYGEN to grow. I told this to Chicken Angel. Oxygen gets in your blood and blows you up so you get bigger and bigger like CC's balloons. If they took all the blood out of you you'd go thin, you'd DEFLATE like a wrinkly balloon. Huh said Chicken A, you're forgetting about bones. Bones hold us up. Without bones we'd just be blobs.

Cough Cough takes a dozie from his squirter.

'Did you hear me, X-Ray?' he says.

I nod.

I'm ignoring him. I don't want to think about lumpies. Especially Chicken A going lumpy like I said.

Mrs Murdoe warned us about lumpies. There used to be more of us here in the Bin and some of them got lumpy and went takeaway. That's why there are only four beds left and why there's a big space in the dormie. Every time someone got lumpied they took the bed away with the lumpy in it.