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Opening extract from

Poppy Pym and the Pharaoh's Curse

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CHAPTER ONE

"What you need, Poppy, is a bit of stability, some *structure*," cried Madame Pym, clapping her hands together, as we hung upside down, forty feet above the ground. She shifted her weight slightly on the trapeze, her frizzy cloud of black hair crackling and sticking out as if she had jammed a wet finger inside a toaster. My own long, mousy pigtails hung straight down like climbing ropes, and I scrunched my mouth into an angry line. I didn't want to talk about this again.

"You need to be spending more time with people your own age. You need to go to a proper school where you can learn about normal things – things it's important for an eleven-year-old to learn about,"

she carried on. I groaned an enormous groan, a groan that stretched all the way down from the top of my toes to the bottom of my head.

"I do learn normal things," I sulked, and reaching up to scratch my knee, I started to tell her that Chuckles the clown had been lecturing me in the ancient and glorious history of mime and its beautiful melancholy only this morning, when Pym interrupted again.

"Now, you see! I don't think that counts as a history lesson, dear one. You are almost twelve now, and there's only so much we can teach you here at the circus. It's time we got serious about school."

And that was the beginning of this story. I haven't written a real story before, but it seems to me like the beginning is a good place to start. Actually, I suppose I should say it's a bit of a wonky, back-to-front story because in most of the books I've read, children run away from school to join the circus instead of the other way around. I guess you might be thinking that this bit at the circus should be the *end* of my story, not the beginning. Well, stories, like worms, are tricksy things, and you can't always tell the beginning from the end. And anyway, this is *my*

story, and if you want a different beginning you can just write your own at the top of the page, I can't do all the work for you. It's no joke being an author, you know.

Now, let's go to the beginning of the beginning and I will tell you about Madame Pym's Spectacular Travelling Circus and the time a beautiful and precious baby was found there. On that fateful night, the circus crew were busy doing one of their late-night rehearsals in the big-top tent after all the crowds had gone home. The Magnificent Marvin, magician extraordinaire, was leaning over his shining black top hat. He pushed his arm deep inside the hat and felt around for a moment, before pulling out a rather grumpy-looking chicken.

"Oh, Marvin, not another one," sighed Marvin's wife – and assistant – Doris. "We'll have to put another wing on the henhouse."

The grumpy chicken shook its ruffled feathers and skulked off, squawking huffily to let everyone know that it didn't much appreciate being pulled out of a magic hat, thank you VERY much.

"Hang on," said Marvin slowly, one arm still inside his hat. "There's something else in here. Something . . . bigger."

"Oh dear," said Doris. "I do hope it's not another turkey; they make such a row."

Marvin leaned over the hat and peered inside. "No, I don't think so. . ." He trailed off as he plunged both arms into the hat, bending down until the top half of his body had disappeared inside it. "Good gracious!" His voice echoed from somewhere far away, and a moment later he emerged with a bundle of blankets in his arms.

"What is it, dear?" asked Doris, peering short-sightedly from behind her thick glasses.

"Well, it's . . . it's . . . COME QUICK, EVERYBODY!" Marvin started shouting, which brought everyone else running. There was Chuckles, the sad clown; BoBo, the happy clown; Tina and Tawna, the horse-riding gymnasts; Luigi Tranzorri, the lion tamer; Sharp-Eye Sheila, the knife thrower; and Boris Von Jurgen, the muscly strongman. Even Fanella, the glamorous Italian fire-eater, came slinking over with Otis, a long orange snake, wrapped around her shoulders like a feather boa. And last of all came Madame Pym herself: ringleader, fortune teller and daring trapeze artist.

"What on earth is the matter?" demanded Pym, who was very tough and very small and had to

stretch her neck to look up at Marvin. "What's all the commotion?" she groaned. "Don't say you've pulled another octopus out of there. We had such a job getting the last one back in."

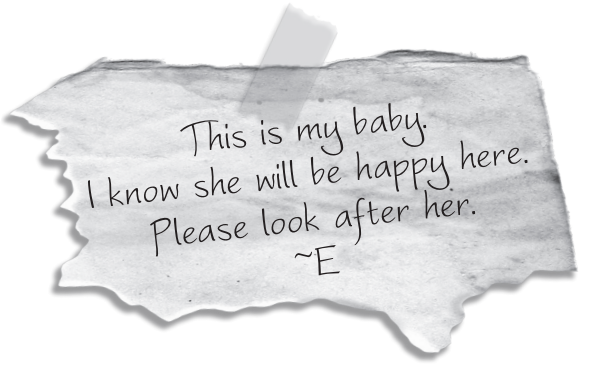
"That was ONE TIME," said Marvin, hotly, but then he remembered the important matter at hand. "Anyway, it's nothing like that," he added nervously, still holding the bundle in his arms.

"Hopefully not another—"

"—chicken," sang Tina and Tawna, who liked to finish each other's—

sentences and who didn't much like all the omelettes they had to eat every time Marvin's hat spilled over with chickens.

Pym looked closer at the bundle in Marvin's arms. Everyone gathered around it in a circle, then gasped when she pulled back the edge of the blanket, revealing the big, blinking eyes of a baby rudely awoken from a very nice nap. A scrap of paper was pinned to the blanket and there was a pause as Pym unpinned the note and read it out.



Then, as if to say "What are you all looking at?" the baby started crying. And kept crying. Very loudly.

Pym lifted the baby out of Marvin's arms and everyone crowded around, trying to talk the loudest.

"What in blue blazes shall we do with it?" cried Luigi, whose real name was Lord Lucas, the fourteenth earl of Burnshire, but who felt that Luigi was a much better name for a lion tamer.

"Poor little mite," muttered Doris. "Here, Marvin, fetch another blanket for the little dear."

"We must call police," drawled Fanella regally, waving a graceful arm in the direction of the twinkling town lights in the distance. "This not our problem."

"Yes! Yes!" exclaimed Tina. "We should—"

"—call the authorities," finished Tawna.

"No," said Pym very fiercely, and everyone – including the baby – fell silent. "You heard what the

note said. It is our job to look after her and make her happy. She will be one of us." Pym got one of those spoony looks in her eye that meant she had had A Vision of the Future, and everyone who knows Pym knows there's no arguing with A Vision of the Future.

With that, everyone sprang into action.

"I have a lovely crate that will make a splendid cot," said Luigi. "My own dear Buttercup used to sleep in it when she was but a tiny lion cub." He wiped a small tear from his eye.

"I'll go and warm up some milk," said The Magnificent Marvin, as he disappeared in a flash of light and a puff of smoke.

"But what shall we call her?" asked Sharp-Eye Sheila, fixing the baby with her steely glare.

The baby hid her face in Pym's shoulder but peeked out again to see Sharp-Eye Sheila's steely glare had changed into a very nice smile.

"She is very red. We call her Tomato," said Fanella firmly. "Is beautiful name." And she brushed her hands against each other with two short, sharp smacks, to indicate that the decision was made.

There was a moment of tense silence before Pym broke in. "What a lovely idea, Fanella. . . But perhaps a different red thing would be better,

maybe . . . Poppy? A poppy is a very beautiful red flower, you know."

(And yes, if you haven't guessed by now, that baby was me, the same Poppy as is telling you this story.)

Fanella shrugged languidly. "I think Tomato is better name for her, but is up to you."

"Yes, yes, Poppy!" cried the others hastily.

Which is how I became Poppy Tomato Pym.

After some nice warm milk, Pym took me back to her trailer and there I slept next to her bed, in a small lion's crate full of straw.

And that's the story of my first night at the circus, which is where I've lived ever since. Pretty good, eh? I just let Marvin read this first chapter and he thinks I'm a born storyteller, even if he was a bit upset about me mentioning the octopus incident. I told him that it was an important bit of the story and he said, "Yes, important according to Fanella, because she CLAIMS the octopus stole one of her earrings, but that was NEVER proven." And then he got quite cross and his face got quite red, and he started pretending to be a lawyer and saying "I OBJECT" very loudly, so I left him to it.

Anyway, the most important bit of this first

chapter is that it finishes with me finding my way into the circus.* I had a name, and I had a family. I was home.

*Marvin would like me to say that another important bit is that you know no octopuses or earrings were harmed in the performing of this trick.