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0-5



5-7



7-9



9-12



12+

opening extract from

Storm

written by

**Kevin Crossley-
Holland**

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STORM

KEVIN CROSSLEY-HOLLAND



ILLUSTRATED BY ALAN MARKS

Yellow Bananas

For Kate, soon

K C-H



Chapter One

'S EVEN SWANS A-SWIMMING,' sang Annie,
'six geese a-laying . . .'

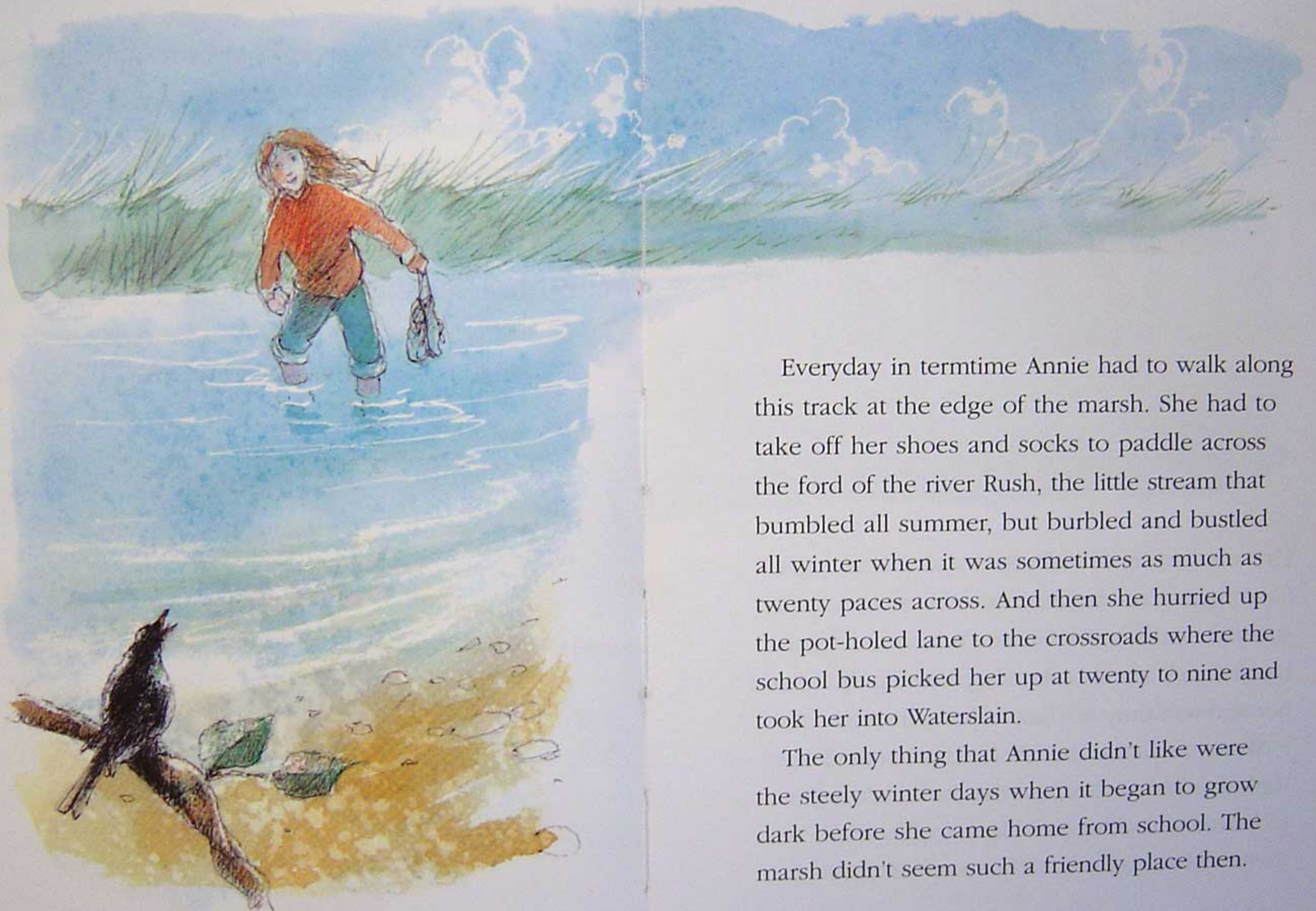
Annie was walking along the edge of the marsh, in no particular hurry because it was the first day of the Christmas holidays. After a while she began to practise clicking her fingers in time with the numbers. 'Three,' – CLICK! – 'three French hens, two,' – CLICK! – 'two turtle doves . . .'

Annie was used to being on her own. She was used to talking and singing to herself, and playing games like two-handed poohsticks and patience and solitaire. She really had no choice because her sister Willa was already grown up and married to Rod and expecting a baby and, anyhow, she lived fifty miles away.

Annie's parents, Mr and Mrs Carter were rather old and not too well. Every day her mother complained that she felt as stiff as a whinging hinge. 'It's that marsh,' she kept saying. 'The damp gets into my bones.' And since his stroke, her father was only able to walk with the help of two sticks. He had become quite mild and milky, like grain softened by mist.

Their cottage stood on its own at the edge of the great marsh, two miles away from the village of Waterslain. That marsh! Empty it looked and silent it seemed, but Annie knew better. She knew about the nests among the flags and rushes, she knew where to find the dark pools teeming with shrimps and scooters. She knew the calls of the seabirds, the sucking sound of draining mud, the wind hissing in the sea lavender.





Everyday in termtime Annie had to walk along this track at the edge of the marsh. She had to take off her shoes and socks to paddle across the ford of the river Rush, the little stream that bumbled all summer, but burbled and bustled all winter when it was sometimes as much as twenty paces across. And then she hurried up the pot-holed lane to the crossroads where the school bus picked her up at twenty to nine and took her into Waterslain.

The only thing that Annie didn't like were the steely winter days when it began to grow dark before she came home from school. The marsh didn't seem such a friendly place then.