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opening extract from

Red Sky in the Morning

written by

Elizabeth Laird

published by

Macmillan Publishers

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Red Sky in the Morning was shortlisted for the Children's Book Award. This is what some of the judges, aged ten to sixteen, had to say about Elizabeth Laird's first novel:

'This book is written in an exceptional way, it is incredibly sensitive, and after you have finished reading it, you feel like going out and doing something to help someone'

'I liked this book because it was like a real person was telling the story. I thought it was sad, but it was funny too, when Anna organized a disco for Katie, and Katie was making her best friend jealous and when all the steam was in the kitchen. It was a very good book and I liked it a lot'

'From the very first chapter I realized that the book held a special ingredient that urged me to continue reading. I have to admit to crying at least twice'

'Anna's relationship with Ben, and then with Jackie, reminded me of the attachment that people who know and take time to care for [disabled] people always seem to form'

'I found myself getting deeper into the story and the characters so much that when the dramatic part came I was glad I am who I am now. I felt I had become a friend of Anna's by the end of the book. I liked the characters, especially Anna and Ben, and although the book made me sad, I was sad to put it down'

Preface

I was four years old when my little brother Alistair was born. I can remember the first time I saw him, lying in a cot by my mother's bed, thin wisps of hair on his large head. I lifted the corner of his coverlet and saw his little feet. I was amazed that feet could be so tiny.

I was too young to understand Alistair's many disabilities, or what it might feel like to be him, but I knew how to make him laugh, by pushing my face up against the bars of his cot and sticking my tongue out, or dancing around and waving the skirt of my dress. I knew how to make him cry too, and I regret to say that I did that sometimes, when I felt jealous of all the attention he was getting.

People often ask me if I put real people into my stories. The answer is no. I might borrow a bit here and there – the way someone speaks, or a particular little habit, or a real incident that I remember. But my characters are themselves, made up, with lives of their own. The family in *Red Sky in the Morning* is nothing like my family, and I don't think that either Anna or Katy is much like me. They're just themselves.

But there's one exception to my usual rule. The character of Ben in this book is my brother Alistair.

One

As long as I live, I shall never forget the night my brother was born. For one thing, I didn't get a wink of sleep. I'd only been in bed a few minutes when I heard Dad talking on the telephone. My bedroom's pretty small, and if I lean out of bed far enough I can open the door without actually getting out of bed, so I did, and I heard Dad say,

'That's right, the second house on the left past the shops. And please hurry.'

His voice sounded so urgent I guessed at once he must be calling the ambulance and I knew my time had come. Well, it was Mum's time really, but mine too, in a way, because I was going to be in charge while she was away. I'd practised everything in my mind, so I just got calmly out of bed, and put on my dressing gown, and groped around for my glasses. Then I went calmly out of the room and walked down the hall to Mum and Dad's bedroom. I didn't even run.

'Now just relax, Mum,' I said. 'Everything's under control.' I must have said it too calmly because no one took any notice. Mum's face was screwed up, and Dad was looking at her, standing quite still, with one leg in his trousers and the other out. He looked perfectly ridiculous. Then Mum's face went ordinary again, and she turned her head

and saw me, and she looked quite normal. In fact, she gave me a smile. Then Dad started pulling on his trousers again. It was like starting up a video again after a freeze frame.

After that, everything I'd planned to say was swept out of my head, because things happened too fast. Mum's face screwed up again, and she started taking loud, rasping breaths. I've never seen such an awful look in anyone's eyes, not even in a war film.

Dad grabbed his jacket, and pushed past me out of the room. Then I suppose he must have realized it was me, because he came back and ruffled my hair the way he does when he wants to be nice to me. I hate it, but I don't like hurting his feelings, so I just suffer in silence.

'Be a nice girl,' he said. 'Go and get me a cup of tea. The ambulance won't be here for another five minutes. I've got to go and phone your granny.'

I couldn't believe it. I've never heard anything so callous in all my life. There was his wife, probably dying, in the most awful agony, trying to give birth to his own child, and all he could think of were his own selfish pleasures. I realized how woman has suffered from man's selfishness since time began.

'Sorry, Dad,' I said with dignity. 'I expect Mum needs me. You'll find the tea in the usual place.'

But then Mum gave an awful scream, and Dad rushed back into the bedroom and shut the door in my face. I didn't dare go in. I didn't even want to any more. I felt too small and helpless. Frightful thoughts rushed through my mind, like what would happen if Mum died, and I had to sacrifice

my youth to looking after Dad and bringing up Katy, who was seven, and absolutely horrible.

The minute I thought of Katy, I remembered my responsibilities. It was my job to run the house and family while Mum was otherwise engaged, and I decided I had better start by running Katy. I went back down the corridor to her room.

Katy is an unusually irritating child. Even Mum admits that she's a nuisance. She says it's because Katy's going through a stage, but either Mum's wrong, or else it's a very long stage, because Katy seems to have been in it since she was born. One of the worst things about her is that you can never get her to go to sleep. We all have to creep around the house once she's gone to bed, and I can't even play my own tapes in my own room, which I feel, quite frankly, is a violation of my human rights. And she wakes up in the middle of the night if a moth so much as brushes its wings against her bedroom window. I never would have thought she'd sleep through the noise Mum was making, but that's the maddening thing about Katy. She's so unpredictable. There wasn't a sound coming from her room. I knelt down, and looked through the keyhole. She always has a nightlight on because she thinks she's so delicious that witches are just dying to come and eat her in the night, so I could see clearly enough that she was fast asleep.

'Well,' I thought, 'that gives me one less thing to worry about,' but at the same time I almost wished Katy had been awake, because I hadn't got anything to do. I certainly wasn't intending to betray Mum by making Dad a cup of tea.

Then I realized that I could at least phone Granny, which Dad seemed to have forgotten about, so I went downstairs to the phone in the hall, and was just beginning to dial when the front doorbell went. The ambulance had come.

There were only two ambulancemen but they filled up our small downstairs hall completely. It's so narrow that if two people meet, one of them has to turn sideways and stand against the wall while the other squashes past. I used to think of ways of making sure it wasn't me who had to stand against the wall, like pretending, if I was holding something, that it was very heavy, or being in a hurry for the loo, but I stopped all that kind of childish thing years ago. Still, I've never stopped minding that our hall is so mean and small, not like Debbie's (she used to be my best friend), and suddenly I got worried about it.

How would they get Mum down the stairs on a stretcher? Supposing it stuck, like that time when Dad was fitting units in their bedroom, and he and Mum were trying to get the old wardrobe down the stairs? It got completely wedged between the wall and the banisters, and Dad had to get a saw and cut it in half before it took off any more wallpaper. He was furious, and it took hours to free the wardrobe. But Mum hadn't got hours. If she got stuck on her stretcher, she'd have to have the baby right there on the stairs.

As it happened, Mum didn't need a stretcher at all. Dad came out of the bedroom, looking pale and shaky and awful, and the men ran upstairs, and then one rushed out again and said,

'Where's the telephone, love?'

And he dialled, and when I heard him talking I started to feel trembly myself, and sick.

'This is Alan here,' he said. 'I've got an emergency over on Blythe Road. Lady in labour. Too far gone to get her to hospital. She's started pushing, and the baby's almost there. Stan's doing what he can, but he says it's not looking quite right. Best get a doctor over here quick. We've got the oxygen and stuff, but we haven't got all the neo-natal kit if they need to do full resuscitation.'

He must have forgotten about me, because he started off up the stairs again when he'd put the receiver down. I couldn't bear to let him go. I had to know what was going on.

'Is - is everything all right?' I said. It sounded more feeble than it meant to, but I didn't know what to say. I was frightened.

'Course it is,' he said. He was using that awful cheerful voice they use to children when they want to deceive them. 'Just a precaution. Your Mummy's going to be fine. So's the baby, I expect. It all happened just a bit too quick, that's all.'

He patted my shoulder just as if he'd been a relative. I was only twelve then, but I was mature for my age, and it was not surprising that I felt offended.

'I'm quite prepared to give blood, if necessary,' I said. The idea made me feel sick, but if Mum needed my blood, there was naturally no more to be said. He had the cheek to laugh.

'Oh, we won't need your blood,' he said. 'Best thing you can do is be a good girl and keep out of

the way. Tell you what, do you know how to make a cup? Why don't you put the kettle on, then? Me and Stan could do with a cuppa when we've finished with this lot.'

If he hadn't put it like that, of course, I wouldn't have dreamed of making a cup of tea. But I knew that if I didn't he'd think I didn't know how to, so I went to the kitchen, and filled up the kettle. But all the time it was boiling, and while I was putting mugs and milk and sugar on to the tray, I kept thinking about Mum and the baby.

Up until then, I hadn't thought about the baby much as a real person. Quite honestly, I'd been shocked when Mum told me she was pregnant. I couldn't imagine her and Dad having sex. The whole idea seemed disgusting. Especially in our house. Their bedroom didn't look right for it. It was too ordinary. But I'd got used to her getting bigger, and being tired, and relying on me more for things. In some ways I'd enjoyed it. I got quite good at doing a fry-up for supper, and heating up pizzas in the oven. I could even do lamb chops and two veg, though it took hours to peel the potatoes.

Somehow, though, I hadn't thought much about the baby. I'd wanted a brother, I knew that much, mainly because I didn't want another Katy round the place, and I'd started knitting a cardigan, but I'm not much good at knitting, so I'd pulled it undone and tried to learn to crochet instead. But it got in a tangle, so I never managed to get anything finished. Dad had got the pram down out of the attic, and Mum had lined the cot again in some new flowery material. It looked pretty, waiting there all

clean and empty, beside her bed, but I hadn't been able to imagine a real, live baby in it.

Then I remembered something I'd read about in a Victorian novel. Grandma's got a whole stack of them, that she used to read about a hundred and fifty years ago. They have titles like *Lost in London*, and *Little Faith*, and they're all horribly sad and religious. The children go around barefoot in the snow, selling matches, and their mothers are gin-sodden, and the babies die, and when you read them you cry and cry. I even got sinusitis once, because I cried so much over *Christie's Old Organ*. But I like them too. After I've read one, I feel pure, and refined, and ready to face death.

Anyway, when babies are born in those old books, the mother's poor eldest daughter is always sent to the kitchens to boil gallons of water. It never explained what the water was for, but I knew that was the right thing to do. So I got out the pressure cooker, and the biggest pans I could find, and filled them up, and turned on every burner on the stove. I slopped a bit on the floor, but I managed all right.

It took quite a long time, finding everything, and filling them up, and I was still at work when Dr Randall came. He went up the stairs two at a time, and then another ambulance came, and the men took this funny box thing upstairs. After a while they came down again, holding it carefully, and drove away. The doctor was still there. I could hear him in Mum and Dad's bedroom, which is right above the kitchen. But the rest of the house was quiet. Then I realized that the first ambulance-men, Alan and Stan, had gone too, and they hadn't

even bothered to have their cup of tea. I knew then for certain that they'd just been humouring me, and trying to keep me out of the way. Typical!

It was so quiet upstairs that I began to feel a bit worried. What could they all be doing? Was Mum all right? And shouldn't the baby be crying? Mum had promised that I'd be the first after Dad to see it, but no one had called me. I wanted desperately to know what was going on. But I felt too scared to go up and open the bedroom door and just walk in. Medical things seem kind of holy to me. Bursting in on the doctor doing something would be as bad as jumping up in church and shouting 'Hi there!' to the vicar.

Then I remembered the tea. Surely everyone would really and truly want a cup of tea by this time. After all, it was practically morning. The kitchen window was filling with a sort of greyish light, and there were red streaks across the sky. I'd never seen the dawn before. It was eerie and grand. Suitable for a birth, really. I checked that I'd put out enough mugs, filled the teapot (the kettle had boiled ages ago) and staggered upstairs with the tray. Then I put it down, and opened the door a crack, and picked it up, and went in, holding the tray in front of me so it would be the first thing they all saw.

I could see at once that they'd been having a very deep conversation. Mum was lying back in bed, looking white and tired, and Dad was sitting beside her, holding one of her hands. Dr Randall was on the other side of the bed, looking serious. Mum saw me first.

'Oh Annie!' she said, and gave a wobbly kind of laugh, and then Dad jumped up and came towards me, and made a big fuss about taking the tray. I wasn't fooled. I knew he was trying to stop me seeing Mum cry. I knew quite well that that was what she was doing.

'Where is it? Is it a boy? Can't I see him yet?' I whispered to Dad. He just stood there, not saying anything. Then he turned, with the tray in his hands, and looked over to Dr Randall, and Dr Randall came towards me and said in that stupid voice they never use to each other,

'Yes, Anna, you've got a dear little brother, but he's not very well, and we've had to take him to hospital.'

'That box,' I whispered. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to speak normally. 'He was in that box, wasn't he? Is he . . .?'

Dr Randall smiled for the first time.

'No, he's not dead, Anna. That was only an incubator. It's a special box for babies that need extra warmth and attention. He's not going to die. But . . .'

Now it was his turn to stop and look at Dad, and this time Dad was great. He just put his hands on my shoulders.

'Your brother's not quite right,' he said. 'Dr Randall thinks he may be disabled. We won't be able to tell yet, for a week or two, but it doesn't look . . .'

and then the worst possible thing happened. Dad actually cried. He didn't sob or anything. He just crumpled up a bit. That set me off, of course. I've never been able not to cry if someone else is. It's

infectious, like giggling, or yawning or something. And then Mum started, and we were all crying, and I felt really sad, but one horrible part of me was looking on from outside, and thinking,

'Well, well. Fancy Mum and Dad and me all crying together over a serious family matter, and Katy still being asleep. That makes me feel really one of them.'

I still couldn't imagine the baby. I knew with my brain that it was sad, him being disabled, but I couldn't really feel it, if you know what I mean.

It's funny how you feel when you stop crying, if you've been crying with someone else. It's embarrassing of course, but quite comfortable too, in a way. You feel loving, and close together, and empty, too.

After a bit, I began to think awful thoughts. What did disabled mean? Would he look funny? Would his legs and arms jerk a lot? Somehow, because we'd all been crying together, I felt especially daring, so I came right out with it to Dr Randall.

'What do you mean, disabled?' I said.

Dr Randall shook his head.

'I was just telling your parents, Anna,' he said. 'We don't know yet. We'll have to wait and see.'

'Yes, but will he be blind, or deaf?' I asked.

Mum and Dad were sitting in a specially still kind of way, and I knew they were dying for the answer too. Dr Randall looked more cheerful.

'Oh no, I'm sure he'll be able to see and hear all right,' he said.

'Will he look nice, or will he look funny, and dribble and all that?' I asked. It sounds awful, but I

cared about that more than anything.

'I don't know, Anna,' Dr Randall said. 'I honestly don't know. But all babies are very sweet, you know, even when they're . . .' he stopped.

'Can't you even tell us,' I said, 'if he'll be able to play, and go to school, and talk, and laugh, and everything?'

The cheerful look wiped itself off Dr Randall's face.

'He'll be able to laugh,' he said slowly. 'Oh yes, I'm sure he'll laugh. But for the rest, let's wait and see, shall we? I think we all need some sleep now.' He patted Mum's hand.

'You should try to rest,' he said. 'I'm sure you're very tired. You've done well to manage a home delivery with a birth of this kind. Quite unusual, in fact. I've given you a good strong dose. Make the most of it. You can phone the hospital any time, but there won't be any news until tomorrow morning. The nurse will be here to sort you out at breakfast time. And try not to worry. He's quite stable, you know. There's no danger.'

He picked up his bag and clicked it shut. He seemed suddenly in a hurry to go. The strain, I suppose. Mum always says that emotional upsets are more exhausting than anything else. Still, he didn't have much to upset him. It wasn't *his* baby that wasn't going to run about. All in the day's work for him, I should think.

He'd only been gone half a minute when he poked his head round the door again.

'There seems to be rather a lot of steam coming out of the kitchen,' he said.

Steam! Boiling water! Of course! I'd left the four burners on full blast. I jumped up like a startled rabbit, and squeezed past Dr Randall and was in the kitchen in a flash. There was so much steam I could hardly see the cooker. Fortunately, none of the saucepans had boiled dry, but the walls were streaming with water. I felt such a fool. I was afraid they'd laugh at me. Dr Randall had never even mentioned needing any boiling water. I decided I'd try to empty all the saucepans, and clear up quickly before Dad came down and saw, and then I could say that in my excitement I'd left the kettle on. But it was too late. Dad came into the kitchen right behind me.

'Very sensible, Spanner,' he said, in a matter of fact voice. He's always calling me silly names that rhyme with 'Anna'. It drives me crazy sometimes, especially if he forgets and does it in front of other people. It sounds so weird. But he won't stop. He just laughs, and says, 'You know what they say, "A loved child has many names," so you be grateful, Gloriana.'

I was relieved, anyway, that he didn't laugh.

'Well,' I said, 'I know boiling water is the right thing to do when a baby's born, but quite honestly, I don't know what it's for.'

Dad didn't seem very sure either.

'Oh, sterilizing instruments or something, I suppose,' he said vaguely. 'Anyway, we'd better go to bed now. There's not much of tonight left.'

But I didn't feel tired at all. Not yet, anyway. I knew I'd feel awful the next day. But just now there were too many things I wanted to know.

'Does it always hurt that bad?' I blurted out. I hadn't meant to ask Dad that, but I couldn't help myself.

'Does what hurt?' he said. I excused him for being so thick and insensitive on the grounds that he was an ignorant male and didn't know any better.

'Having a baby, of course,' I said. 'Mum's face, and then the way she screamed . . .'

'You'll have to ask her,' he said. 'I wouldn't know, would I? But Mum seems to think it's worth it. It's how you and Kate were born, after all.'

'And now you've got a son, too,' I said, and then I wished I hadn't said it, because Dad looked very sad.

'Yes,' he said. 'And now I've got a son. Come on Susanna. It's bedtime.'