Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

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

opening extract from

Angel

written by

Cliff Mcnish

published by

Orion Publishing

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Prologue

Freya Harrison had always wanted to be an angel. Ever since she could remember she'd wanted wings instead of arms and a halo instead of toys. And perhaps dreams come true, because when she was barely eight years old an angel paid her a fleeting visit.

It was at least seven feet tall, with creamy-white skin, displaying itself in what she later recognized as the classic style: shining, fully-robed, its halo like a mane of golden sunshine.

And male. Definitely a man. Or was it?

Freya had to look twice to be sure. The body was certainly male, and so was the face-structure, but weren't those lips curiously soft and full, the contour of the eyes almost feminine? Six years later, having devoured everything she could find about angels, Freya knew the term to apply: *androgynous*. An appearance neither exclusively male nor female, but somehow both.

The visitation took place on a warm spring night. Freya had been fast asleep in her open-windowed bedroom when the curtains slowly swirled and there he was, like the perfection of a dream – a glorious angel in the dead of night. He was huge. He seemed too big for her room, or any room for that matter. Despite which, awakening, she hadn't been alarmed, not afraid at all. On the contrary, it was as if some part of her had been waiting her whole life for him to deftly lift aside

that thin bedroom curtain.

An angel. An actual angel.

To gaze in wonder upon such a thing.

She fell in love with his wings at once. Supple feathers. Tips as smooth as the afterglow of sunsets. Just seeing them had made Freya hunger for wide spaces. And when she reached out to touch them it was like dipping her fingers inside light itself.

But the way the bulky, complex wing-joints entered the shoulder-blades scared her. Creeping behind him to sneak a peek, she'd seen how twisted and gnarled it was back there. Didn't his shoulders hurt? Surely they must ache from having to hold up such big wings all the time?

'No,' the angel had replied. A subtle, airy voice. A dying eagle on a last flight over one more mountain might have sounded like this.

But it was what the angel did next that shocked her. For years afterwards Freya had trouble controlling her emotions whenever she recalled it. Because tears had sprung from his eyes. Tears that poured freely over his unblemished cheeks, across his sculpted lips and down his smooth throat.

'Are you sad?' It was all Freya could think to say at the time. 'What's the matter?' And wanting to comfort him, but not knowing how, she'd taken one of his wings, draping it around her. But it was too heavy to hold. That particular detail stuck in her mind – attempting to lift the wing, but unable to; hauling it up, but feeling it forever slipping away

from her grasp.

Freya always berated herself for her childish fixation with those wings. Instead of the important questions she might have asked (Are you a messenger? Are you from God?) her eight-year-old self had simply put her cheek up against that sunset-drenched wing and doggedly hugged away.

In the end the angel had turned his broad back, preparing to leave.

'Don't go!' Freya had screamed, unable to bear the thought of losing him. 'What are you doing? Don't go without me.'

'I cannot remain,' the angel had answered. 'Someone is calling. I am needed elsewhere.'

'But *I* need you! Please! Stay with me!'

And perhaps if the angel had just flown away then, done nothing else, Freya might have been able to forget him. She might have been able to convince herself that his visit was merely the product of an overactive imagination or a peculiarly vivid dream. But how could she have dreamed up what happened next? For the angel had knelt – actually knelt – before her, lowered his proud, beautiful head to the level of her heart and peered inside there. It was such a physical experience that she'd almost felt the small bones of her ribs being moved aside. The gaze was direct, the way a knife is direct. Those eyes: eyes, she realized afterwards, that might have beheld God.

And then the angel had said this: 'There is greatness

there, or could be. I see it. My brother is wrong about you. But I should not have come. You are too young. And even if you were older I was wrong to expect anything of you. Forgive me, Freya.'

A gentle kiss on the forehead, and he was gone.

She'd rushed to the window, of course, to see him fly, but he was already out of sight, those wings too fast for her.

All patience, Freya had waited for him to come back. She still remembered the exact spot under the window where she'd knelt down, her toes digging into the carpet. But as the hours lengthened, and he didn't return, a new worry had crept into her mind. It was dark out there. Maybe he was lost. Did angels have special eyes to see at night? Concerned that he might bump into things and hurt himself, she'd forced herself to stay awake so she could guide him if he got into trouble. All night she waited there, scrunched up inside her quilt. And when dawn arrived a neighbour saw her shivering at her window, a cold little girl calling softly and forlornly into an empty sky.

Six years on, Freya was still waiting. There had been no second visit from the angel. For the first few weeks she'd opened her window wide every night, fully expecting him to return. Then she'd tried enticing him back, drawing colourful angel pictures and displaying a new one prominently on her pillow each night for him to see. When that didn't work either she borrowed a book from her local library. It

contained a long list of angelic names. Perching it precariously on her knees, Freya spent an evening with her head stuck out of her bedroom window, doing her best to pronounce the long, tricky words.

If one of the names was his, he never answered.

In desperation, she finally took to placing squares of chocolate on her window sill, in case she could tempt him back that way. Did angels get hungry? But the night skies remained empty and every morning Freya woke up next to her window, alone.

A sort of madness set in then. An obsession. It was that last tantalizing remark. *There is greatness there, or could be.* It was hard to forget those words. Freya secretly sat in her room, entreating the angel to come back and tell her what he had meant by them.

Soon nothing would stop her leaning dangerously out of her window. When locks were installed, she smashed them. When sturdier locks were fitted she screamed at the top of her lungs until they were removed. For a while her dad could distract her by playing happy flying games – she'd run all over the house with him, arms wide, whooshing about – but soon even such diversions stopped working. Would the presence of a mother have made a difference? Her dad often wondered about that. But there was no way of telling. Freya never knew her mother. She died of cancer in the first year of Freya's life.

It was just after her ninth birthday that Freya finally refused to leave her spot by the window altogether. The crazy

times started around then: the visits to the doctor, the specialist clinics, the endless child counsellors. But she only got worse. By the time all the cognitive and other therapies had been tried and had failed Freya had locked herself tight inside a private fantasy realm. It was a world where only the angels could reach her. And inside it, she wasn't just visited again by her angel. (Her guardian angel, she thought of him now. What else could he have been?) It went far beyond that. In her imagination, for over three years, Freya *was* an angel. Her mind constructed all the trappings: the wings, the velvety feathers, the male-female duality, the halo, everything.

Nothing could break her out of it.

Except that her dad had finally done so. His voice, both at home and in the various hospitals, kept tirelessly reaching out to her. Until one day, long after the doctors had given up hope, she'd heard him murmur her name and opened her eyes to find tubes extending into her arms and her dad blinking at her from the foot of a small metal-framed bed.

That was last summer. Another life, it seemed now. For here she was, fourteen years old, back at home again, hopefully for good this time. 'A brand spanking new girl,' as one of the merrier doctors put it. Generally clearer in her mind, anyway. Certainly it had been a long time since she'd flapped her arms around a hospital ward seriously intending to take off.

No more hospitals were needed, in fact, except the occasional outpatient visit. And if she still sometimes imagined herself becoming an angel – if that desire still burned like a hot little stake in her heart – so what? She was more in control of the urge now. Often she could go for hours at a stretch, days even, without thinking about angels at all.

She didn't leave her bedroom window ajar at night any more, either. The pane of glass remained permanently shut. She never opened it. Never. Not ever. Not even a fraction. Not even the tiniest crack for an angel to get its bright, strong fingers beneath.



Seven-fifteen, Monday morning. Definitely time to get up.

Freya yawned and threw the quilt off her bed. Hurrying to the bathroom before her sixteen-year-old brother Luke could beat her to it, she had a good soak under the shower, then concentrated on her hair. Her old waist-length dark brown locks, perfect for angel dressing up, were history. These days Freya kept it strictly cropped and dyed blonde. The most recent cut, a month or so ago, had been expensive – designer hairdresser's no less – but the new style, Dad said, was all part of putting the past behind her, and he'd insisted she got exactly what she wanted.

Back in her bedroom Freya experimented, trying something new, curling the hair ends under slightly. Then she got out her make-up case. By the time she finished, dreary morning November light was entering her window and Luke's alarm clock was jangling in the room next door. He let it ring and ring.

'Luke!' Dad yelled from downstairs.

Freya heard a great groan as Luke woke from his usual coma-like sleep, smashed his arm on the alarm and told it to shut up. Freya's own alarm clock was new. The one with the

buzzing angel wings was safely lying on a rubbish tip somewhere.

'Hey!' Luke bashed the wall between their rooms. 'You seen the time? Get up.'

'I *am* up, you idiot!'

He grunted, then traipsed to the bathroom. A few minutes later Freya wandered downstairs, joining him at the breakfast table.

Before she could even reach for the muesli Luke leaned over and prodded at her still-drying hair.

'Leave it alone,' she told him.

'Very fetching.' Luke shook his head. 'All bouncy. Amy's going to love it.'

Amy Carr was one of Freya's new friends. Well, the beginnings of a friendship anyway. Recently she'd been attending school full-time again. Ashcroft High. A huge comprehensive where only a handful of teachers knew what she'd been like before, and none of the other students considered her a misfit or freak – or, at least, she didn't think they did. There was no more talk of angels, either. Freya was careful to make sure not one word on that topic passed her lips.

To begin with she'd just stayed in the background, studying how the other students behaved, especially the more popular girls. It was only when she was ready that she started cautiously bringing up subjects they were interested in – boys, music, TV, whatever. Things she'd missed out on and

should have liked herself. Things, in fact, she *was* starting to like herself. It wasn't just an act any more. Boys were definitely interesting.

And in the last month, there'd been another new development – she'd been accepted into one of the more select social circles at school. She wasn't quite a fixture yet, but she was working on it. Amy Carr, just about the most admired Year 10 student, had made it obvious she liked her. And if Amy liked you, others found that they did, too.

Freya's dad entered the kitchen, a piece of toast dangling from his mouth. He narrowed his eyes at her. 'What have you done to your hair, then?'

'It's just a bit of a bob,' she said. 'Nothing special.'

'It looks really good.'

Luke yawned. 'Yeah, lovely.'

Dad poked him in the back of the head. 'You can talk. What do you call this scruff look, anyway?'

Luke wore his hair in a kind of long black tumble to shoulder level. There was no particular style that Freya could discern, though annoyingly it did suit him.

'It's called natural,' Luke answered.

Freya grunted. 'Oh, right. Natural. Like Tarzan. Should have seen the resemblance.' She reached across the table and picked at the wispy sideburns Luke was trying to grow. 'You might try combing it once in a while. Just to see what it looks like. Weird idea, I know.'

Luke scooped cereal into his mouth. 'I spend hours on this

messed-up look, Freya.'

'The girls love it, huh?'

'You bet.'

They did, too.

Freya flicked a bran flake at him. He flicked it back.

'Don't take any notice of him,' Dad said to her. 'Your hair looks great.'

Freya was used to Dad's compliments. Every single moment of her recovery had been filled with them, deserved or not. This morning, as her gaze lingered over him, she thought he looked weary. Lately he often did. And after years of looking less than his age, hadn't he also started looking *old*? His sandy hair was thinning, and he wasn't as trim as he had been. Or had she been so preoccupied with her own recovery that she hadn't noticed the changes? The possibility shocked her a little.

'What's wrong?' Dad asked, seeing her pensive look.

'Nothing.' She touched his cheek. 'You look tired, that's all.'

A warning glance passed between Dad and Luke, obviously not meant for her.

'What's going on?' she asked.

For a second Dad shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Then Luke came to his rescue. 'Freya, why don't you just leave what's left of your hair alone? Isn't that the point of having short hair – so you don't have to bother with it? Hey,' he added, laughing, 'remember all that talcum powder you

used to sprinkle on your head, pretending it was angel glitter?'

Dad looked up slowly, guardedly. There was an unwritten rule of the house that angels were never mentioned. Recently, though, Freya had been deliberately nudging the boundaries, and Luke, aware of her growing confidence, had started joining in. Freya was glad. The angel stuff had kept her and Luke apart for years. It felt good being able to share a joke with him about them, chatting as if angels were nothing special at all. Freya felt secure enough to do that now. She wanted her dad to feel the same way as well, to see how well she was recovering.

'I saw an angel gift set last week,' Luke said. 'Did I tell you? A kind of portable toolkit. You're supposed to use it to get all connected with your own guardian angel. There were some crazy things inside, like fluffy invocation poetry and cheapo incense and candles. And also – get this – a titchy plastic cushion to sit on. I could just see some paunchy middle-aged bloke, scented candle in hand, trying to park his backside on it, invoking away.'

Dad laughed. 'That'll be me.'

'It was expensive, too,' Luke said. 'Real expensive.'

Freya propped her chin in her hands. 'Did you buy it?'

'Of course I did! I need all the spiritual help I can get!'

Freya grinned. Dad did as well, but only half-heartedly. He was clearly made uneasy by all the talk of angels. Freya didn't want him feeling that way. Taking his hand across the table,

she told him seriously, 'You don't need to protect me any more. I'm all right now, you know.'

'I know,' he said, equally serious. He walked across to the calendar on the kitchen wall, tapped a date there. 'It's over six months since you started at Ashcroft High. Did you realize that?'

Freya knew exactly how long it had been. Until this year, occasional visits from a home tutor was all she'd been able to handle. Being stable enough to attend regular school had seemed an impossible dream. Looking at Dad, Freya thought back to the grimness of her last hospital stay. Most of it had been spent tied down with straps, heavily sedated, with a drip in her arm. The hospital staff had no choice about the drip. Freya had refused to eat. Angels don't need food, she'd explained. They live off the stars. Off light itself. Off twinkling sunshine.

Had that really been only a year ago?

'I'll never go back to the way I was,' she said, surprising herself with how emotionally it came out. 'I promise I'll never put you through that again. Are you listening?'

'Yes,' Dad said, gazing at her steadily.

'I mean it.'

'I know you do.' His look was confident, but also said don't commit yourself to such a promise yet.

Freya laughed to get the mood back to normal and finished off her muesli. Shortly after, Dad set off for work and Freya went back to her room. She spent some time gazing critically

at her reflection in the dressing-table mirror. A hint of lip-gloss was in order. Most of the other girls were using it, so she'd started dabbing her lower lip before she left the house. Not too much. Just enough to lighten the naturally dark shade of her lips. After that she inserted some ear studs. It was a pair Amy Carr had picked out for her recently, and Freya was careful as she poked them in because her lobes were still sensitive. She liked the discomfort, though. Angels didn't wear jewellery. It was another sign of how much she'd put behind her.

A few minutes later Luke caught her standing in the hallway, checking her profile, eyeing the studs. He didn't say anything, but Freya knew what he thought of Amy Carr.

'Hey, do what you like,' he said as she waved him away. 'Just make sure you don't turn yourself into her clone, that's all.'

'There's nothing wrong with Amy Carr,' Freya said. It came out more defensively than she wanted.

Luke shrugged. 'If you say so. I just can't help noticing the way the others in that little gang of hers follow her around like a bunch of lapdogs. Amy'll have you doing it soon as well if you don't watch out. Pirouetting. Licking the ground she walks on.'

'No way.'

'Yes, she will. It's all part of the entry criteria to join her nitwit gang. Do as she says, or you're out.' After a warning glare from Freya, he backed off. But he couldn't resist a final

comment. 'Better make sure you don't smudge that make-up, Freya. Amy Carr won't like you if you don't look perfect.'

'Luke?' Freya said sweetly.

'Yeah?'

'Shut up.'