

Opening extract from
**Waterslain
Angels**

Written by
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Published by
Orion Children's Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2008
by Orion Children's Books
a division of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette Livre UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the
environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library.

ISBN 978 1 84255 691 7

This bookproof printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

www.orionbooks.co.uk

for Jessica and Ashmole

CHARACTERS

Annie Carter	<i>aged 10</i>
Margie Carter	<i>her mother</i>
Tom Carter	<i>her father</i>
Willa	<i>her half-sister</i>
Storm	<i>her nephew, aged 3</i>
Sandy Boroff	<i>aged 11</i>
Gracie Boroff (née Dune)	<i>his mother</i>
Reverend Peter Potter	<i>rector of Waterslain</i>
Miss McQueen	<i>retired school teacher</i>
Alan Leppard	<i>garage mechanic</i>
Josie Sidebottom	<i>Sariel Chisel's aunt</i>
Peter Chisel	<i>wood carver, descendant of John Chisel</i>
Doctor Grant	<i>general practitioner</i>
The Bishop of Norwich	
William (Smasher) Dowsing's men	

Waterslain is a huddle of flint-and-chalk-and-brick cottages and outlying farms, with a round-towered church, on the north Norfolk coast. It stands on the edge of the wild saltmarshes, where samphire and sea-peas and purslane grow, and where at night the black dog Shuck and the ghost Storm roam. Although this village is no more than one hundred miles from London and the heart of the Midlands, it feels remote. This is partly because you can only travel to (and from) it, not through it, and also because the villagers have old stories and beliefs, and use their own local words. Waterslain is half-actual and half-imaginary.

Waterslain Angels takes place in 1955, two years after Queen Elizabeth's coronation, and ten years after the end of the Second World War. During this war, beaches, dunes and fields were strewn with rolls of barbed wire, concrete gun emplacements and the like, in case the Germans tried to land on the east coast of England.

Very many American troops were stationed at airbases in Norfolk and throughout East Anglia during and after the war, and no fewer than 30,000 Norfolk girls married US servicemen. So there are still strong ties of family and friendship between East Anglians and Americans today.

On the edge of the marsh, there was a stand of poppies, poppies white as talcum powder and pink as peardrops and scarlet as new blood. The skins of their petals were so delicate. Annie was amazed at the way they withstood the withering wind that swayed the singing reeds and raced ripples down the black-and-silver creeks and rubbed salt into everyone and everything.

Poppies, thought Annie, they may look flimsy, but they're tough as old boots.

Old boots, as it happened, old Wellington boots were what Annie found as soon as she had crossed the saltmarsh and reached the beach. First she saw one lying in a warm rockpool, surrounded by dozens of nervy, see-through shrimps, and then she saw another standing on its own, jampacked with gravel. A third was sticking out of a hummock of dry sand, and Annie kicked at it just to make sure it wasn't attached to a body or anything. And then she found two more at the water's edge, with the sea dancing in them.

As Annie began to line these boots up, she realised with a shock that they were all for left feet.

Where have they come from, she wondered. Were they

dumped off some ship? Who left them here? A troop of one-legged men?

Then Annie saw more boots were waiting for her in the marram clumps and the glistening saltstreams. And one she only rescued by wading into the water up to her waist. In all, she lined up twenty-eight Wellington boots – twenty-eight boots for left feet.

Offshore, shadows moved across the sunlit water. They grew towards Annie like spreading dark sails, like underwater shapes, she didn't know what. Then they passed right through her and Annie was left in sunlight again, standing on one leg and shivering.

Living in Waterslain is weird, thought Annie. I mean weird things happen and it's full of weird people. Old Rachel has a moustache and catches her breakfast in the creek with her toes, and the beachcomber Jessie says his shoulder bag's full of sunlight and moonlight. Moonshine, more like. And everyone still keeps talking about the Great Flood, and how water poured in through keyholes, and chained bulls were up to their necks and almost drowned.

And then, thought Annie, some people in Waterslain are more dead than alive, and they move around like sloths. Actually, I think this is a village where no one ever forgets anything and no one ever goes away, even when they die. I mean, what about those two soldiers who were drowned in Dead Man's Pool? Everyone still talks about them. And sometimes I can see the rotting corpse swinging on top of Gallow Hill, and his eyes have been pecked out, and he stares right through me. And what about the rector who lived around here and used to preach from inside a lion's cage, until the lions got fed up and ate him? If that's not weird, I

don't know what is.

As Annie picked her way home along the cockle-path, wearing a black boot on her left hand like a giant's glove, she knew her mother would be impatient.

'I told you an hour at the most,' complained Mrs Carter, tapping the top of Annie's head with her wooden stirring spoon. 'Your dad wants to go up to the hall.'

'That's why I didn't hurry,' Annie replied.

'Come on,' Mrs Carter said.

'A load of old junk,' said Annie.

'Don't spoil things for him. Anyhow, it might be interesting.'

'Like cows can fly,' Annie retorted.

'You don't know,' Mrs Carter said. 'You never can tell. In any case, he's put in the old windlass and bucket from our well.'

'I wish it still worked,' said Annie. 'Our well.'

'And the black snuff-box,' Mrs Carter went on. 'The one I had from my mother when she died, with Admiral Nelson's face on it.'

'You told me that before,' said Annie, waving the Wellington boot on her left hand.

'Take that out of my face,' exclaimed Mrs Carter, and she grabbed the end of the boot and pulled it off.

Annie grinned. 'It's for the show.'

'What nonsense you do talk.'

'There are twenty-seven more out there, and they're all left-footed.'

Mrs Carter snorted. 'Talk,' she said, 'and make up.'

'There are!' protested Annie.

Since he'd had his stoke three years before, when he was

only thirty, Mr Carter had only been able to get around on sticks, so he and Annie had to drive up to the village hall although it was less than a mile away.

‘What’s this show about, anyway?’ Annie asked him.

‘Our village, Annie,’ her father replied. ‘Our village is telling its own story.’

‘How?’

‘Through bits and pieces. Through evidence, you’d call it, if you were a detective.’

‘Like what?’

‘You’ll see,’ said Mr Carter told her.

‘You could put this old car in,’ suggested Annie. ‘It’s old enough. Half bald on the inside, grey on the outside.’

‘My Hillman Imp,’ said Mr Carter solemnly, ‘me and my Hillman are indi... indi...’

‘You always say that.’

‘I always try to,’ Mr Carter replied. ‘Some words I can’t get my tongue round. Not since my stroke.’

‘You can,’ said Annie. ‘The ones that matter, you can.’

There was a power of people in the village hall. At least twenty. And the show wasn’t as boring as Annie had expected. There was the unexploded bomb the Germans had dropped on the beach, now defused, and a hideous-looking gas mask, and a map showing how much land had been swallowed by the sea during the last five hundred years, and Edwardian parasols, and Victorian games and silver coins, as well as a little statue of a half-naked lady sitting on a rock; and there were all kinds of mementoes of Admiral Nelson, England’s greatest naval hero, who had been born at Burnham Thorpe only a couple of miles away, and who had often walked over to Waterslain to watch the barges sailing

in and out of the creek and tying up at the staithe.

‘Look!’ said Mr Carter. ‘Here your mother’s snuff-box.’

‘That’s odd, seeing it here,’ Annie replied. ‘As if it doesn’t belong to us anymore.’

There was a piece of paper next to the snuff-box, with spindly words on it, written in black ink:

Pastures soaked with moon-white dew.

Dear Waterslain. The holy view.

Let me hear my childhood bells.

The saltmarsh silver-grey and bleak,

And a fresh tide swarming into the creek.

Reek of herring and tar and rope

And the island lanced by golden hope.

Let me hear my childhood bells.

The great gong tolling atop the lane,

And barges set for the staithe again.

Let me hear my childhood bells.

‘Who wrote that, then?’ asked Annie.

Tom Carter shrugged. ‘That’s old-fashioned writing,’ he said.

‘It’s true,’ observed Annie, ‘about everything being silvery-grey and then the island’s suddenly lit up and golden. What does “childhood bells” mean?’

Mr Carter slowly shook his head. ‘I think it’s about remembering,’ he replied.

‘Like we all are,’ said a voice in Annie’s ear.

Annie gave a start. 'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'Mr Pitter.'

'Potter,' said the rector, smiling. He was pink as a baby and hadn't got much hair, but his eyebrows made up for that. They were red and bushy, and the right one kept twitching.

'Yes,' said the Reverend Potter. 'We're all remembering in here. Remembering all the ages of Waterslain. Have you seen my wing?'

Annie stared at the Reverend Potter, amazed. His wing?

Mr Potter smiled. 'You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

'I have, actually,' said Annie. 'Anyhow, you haven't got a wing.'

'Not of my own,' the Reverend Potter agreed. 'I'd have to be an angel for that. Well, half-an-angel!' The rector took Annie's arm and the two of them shuffled along to the next showcase.

'Oh!' cried Annie. 'Dad! Where are you?'

There, in front of her, lay the most beautiful wing. A right wing. It was made of lots of little wooden struts or paddles shaped to look like feathers, all of them overlapping, and the longest ones curved and stretching out to the wing-tip.

'It's beautiful,' breathed Annie. 'Dad!' she called out again. 'Where are you?'

'Do you see how some of the feathers are still vermilion?' the rector asked.

'What's that?'

'Bright red. Scarlet.'

'They're not really,' said Annie.

'No, well, they've faded. But that's the original paint, all right, five hundred years old.'

'Some are marsh-green,' said Annie.

‘That’s original too,’ the rector told her. ‘And the brownish feathers were once painted yellowy-orange. Ochre.’

Annie couldn’t take her eyes off the wing. ‘Where does it come from?’ she asked.

‘Where do you suppose?’

Annie looked up. Her eyes were round and dark as two Nelson snuff-boxes.

‘It doesn’t!’ she exclaimed.

The Reverend Potter nodded and his right eyebrow worked overtime. ‘From our church roof,’ he said. ‘Our own church roof. It must do.’

‘How did you get it?’ Annie demanded.

‘Alan Leppard was clearing out my attic last week. He’s been doing odd jobs for me and my wife, and he found it right at the back. Jammed behind the chimney breast. It must have been there for generations.’

‘Wow!’ exclaimed Annie.

‘Good thing I went up there when I did,’ the Reverend Potter told her. ‘Alan said he was just about to chuck it out with all the rubbish.’

‘Where’s the left wing, then?’

The rector shook his head.

‘And all the others?’

‘I don’t know any more than you do, Annie. No more than it says on this note here. Look!’

The Reverend Potter peered into the showcase, and screwed up his eyes a bit. ‘You read it,’ he told her.

‘There were once fourteen angels...’ Annie began, but then she stopped. ‘Fourteen!’ she exclaimed.

‘What’s so strange about that?’ asked the rector.

‘Twice fourteen is twenty-eight,’ she said, frowning. And there were twenty-eight boots on the beach, she thought. I said Waterslain is weird.

‘True enough,’ said the rector. ‘And there are four rows of seven feathers on each wing, and four sevens are twenty-eight. So what do you make of that?’

‘Weird,’ said Annie.

‘Go on, then,’ said the rector.

‘There were once fourteen angels,’ Annie began again, ‘in the hammerbeam roof of Waterslain church. The angels in many East Anglian churches were destroyed during the Ref...’

‘Reformation,’ said the rector. ‘During the Reformation and the time of Cromwell.’

‘There’s a strong belief in the village,’ Annie read, ‘that our angels were hidden to save them but that, years later, no one could remember where. What is certain is that the name of the woodcarver who made the angels, and how much he was paid, is recorded in the business accounts in the Black Book in the church. He was one John Chisel, and, after five hundred years, some of his descendants still live in Norfolk.’

Annie looked up at the Reverend Potter. ‘Did you write that?’ she asked.

‘I did.’

‘Is it still there? The Black Book?’

‘It certainly is.’

‘Can I see it?’

The rector shook his head and closed his eyes. ‘The Black Book’s locked in the vestry chest,’ he said. ‘One day, maybe, Annie. Now have a good look round, won’t you.’

‘I’m going to find our angels,’ Annie told him. ‘I am.

I'm going to find out where they were hidden.'

At this moment, Annie's father swung round the corner of the showcase on his sticks. Then Annie saw he was talking to a boy and a woman, and he was grinning from ear to ear.

'By all the angels in heaven!' Mr Carter exclaimed.

Annie looked puzzled.

'Annie,' her father said. 'This is Sandy.'

Annie stared at Sandy. She thought she had never seen such a delicate creature in all her life. He had fine hair as sandy as his name, and spectacles with rims so thick they looked more like goggles, and his skin was pale and shiny, even slightly pearly, like the inside of a mussel shell.

'Hi!' said Sandy.

'Hello,' said Annie cautiously.

'And this is Gracie,' Tom Carter went on, quite unable to stop smiling. 'My! Oh my! Who'd have thunk I'd ever see Gracie Dune again?'

'Boroff,' the woman corrected him. 'Gracie Boroff.'

'I know,' said Mr Carter.

Gracie Boroff nodded pleasantly at Annie. 'You all right, then?' she asked.

Gracie was blonde. Her hair was as rough as a rook's nest, her clothes were too tight-fitting, and she was quite brassy. In fact, thought Annie, she looks as if she's stepped out of one of them naughty postcards.

'Gracie's just back from the U. S. of A.,' her father told Annie. 'But you're a Waterslain girl, aren't you, Gracie?'

'Will you let me speak for myself, Tom Carter?'

'You never had no trouble with that.'

Gracie smiled gaily, and light danced in her hazel-and-

green eyes. 'Still the same old Tommy,' she said.

'Wish I was,' said Mr Carter. 'Not since my stroke.'

'I heard about that,' Gracie said. 'And very sorry I was.' She draped an arm round Tom Carter's shoulder. 'And you... you heard about Bruce?'

'We did,' said Mr Carter.

'Bruce was Sandy's dad,' Gracie told Annie. 'Bruce Boroff.'

Annie didn't know quite what to say. She was thinking Gracie wore much too much eye-liner.

Gracie Boroff took a deep breath and ballooned her cheeks and squirted out all the air. 'The point is, Sandy and I have come back to live in Waterslain.'

'Quite right too,' said Mr Carter.

Sandy stood very still. Behind his spectacles, he blinked.

Gracie smiled at Annie. 'Your dad and I were at school together. Here, and then in Lynn. We always sat on the train together.'

'Gracie!' said Tom Carter.

'Well, we did, didn't we, Tommy?'

Annie made a face at her father. She wasn't sure she really wanted to know.

'That's enough, Gracie,' Tom Carter said.

Annie inspected Sandy. 'Are you coming to school, then?'

'We don't know yet,' his mother jumped in. 'Sandy's always gone to Catholic school but there isn't one near here. The closest is in Dereham, and that's twenty miles away.'

'But aren't Catholic schools the same as normal schools?' asked Annie.

'Oh no!' said Gracie. 'At Catholic school, the teachers

are penguins.'

'Penguins!'

'Well, nuns. But that's what all the sisters look like. Sister Mercedes and Sister Winifred and Sister Generose. All of them. Sandy's very clever, though, so he had extra lessons in math and history and Latin from Father Gabriel.'

'Who?'

'Father Gabriel. He was our priest.'

Annie half-looked at Sandy and wondered whether that was the real reason. Or was it because he looked so weedy he'd get bullied and broken to pieces?

'How old are you?' she asked him.

'Eleven,' said Sandy.

'Eleven!' exclaimed Annie, and then she blushed. 'I mean... well, you don't look older than me.'

'It's all right,' said Sandy.

'Yes,' said Gracie Boroff. 'You're both war babies.'

Annie suddenly felt sorry for Sandy – sorry because he had such a noisy mother, sorry because he looked like such a dismal shrimp.

'Have you seen the wing?' she asked him.

Sandy blinked.

'The angel's wing?'

'Nope.'

'I'll show you. It's amazing.'

Then Annie led Sandy round to the showcase with the angel's wing in it, and she just wondered for a moment whether it would still be there.

Gracie Boroff sighed. 'You'll help me, won't you, Tommy? If your Annie could take him under her wing.'

'You know kids,' Tom Carter said with a shrug. 'You

know what they're like.'

'But you'll have a word with her,' Gracie said.

'That's up to her,' Tom Carter replied.

When they got home, Annie wanted to tell her mother about the amazing wing and the American boy, and her father wanted to tell her about Gracie...

'That piece of work!' exclaimed Mrs Carter.

'Margie!' said Mr Carter.

'Throwing herself at all the G.I.s.'

'That's history,' said Mr Carter. 'Anyhow, you know he was killed.'

'Who?' asked Annie.

'Gracie's husband,' her father replied. 'Bruce Boroff. B'off! That's what we called him.'

'Tom!' objected Mrs Carter.

'B'off and F'off! Boroff and Flintoff. Strutting around, the two of them, handing out chocolates and cigarettes and bars of soap, chatting up the girls. Yes,' her father told Annie, 'Bruce was a pilot, and he got killed, flying a mission after the war was over. Anyhow, Annie, you and Sandy...'

'What?' Annie asked suspiciously.

'He could come round ours.'

'Why?'

'You could show him the marsh.'

'I don't think so,' said Annie.

'No,' said Mr Carter. 'No, well, he is rather a miserable specimen. Gracie would be pleased, though.'

Annie wrinkled up her nose. 'He's half-transparent,' she said. 'More like an elf than a human boy.'

'That woman!' Margie Carter complained. 'Turning up like a bad penny. I really thought we'd seen the back of her.'

The ladder was so long. So heavy. Really, it needed two people to carry it.

By mistake Annie banged the leading end into the oak door, and the door swung open, and if the congregation had been inside, they would have thought it was Doomsday.

Inside the gloomy church, Annie tried to swing the ladder round, but then she tripped on the hem of her nightie. She staggered, and the back end of the ladder swiped all the leaflets off the table inside the door.

Annie dragged the ladder across the polished tiles, and it left two dirty lines. But all the same, she somehow managed to lean it against the pulpit, and slowly push it upright. Then, holding it in front of her, she waltzed it across to the flinty church wall. She could hear how loudly she was panting.

Only then did Annie realise there were other people in the church. She couldn't see them, but she could hear them. The whisperers.

‘Smasher...’

‘Smasher says the stone dish, you know, the water stoup...’

‘And the big painting, the one of Mary suckling baby Jesus.’

‘Smasher says don’t forget the roof angels.’

‘The roof angels, yes.’

‘Get them. Gut them. Hack them into pieces.’

‘How will we get up there?’

‘What if there isn’t a ladder?’

‘Shoot at them. Pepper them. Puncture them like colanders.’

‘Blow their eyes out.’

Annie knew she had to rescue the roof angels, and she knew how little time there was. So little time before the whisperers started their foul work.

As she began to scale the long ladder, it seemed to Annie that she was climbing from darkness to light. From earth to heaven, almost. She rose above the pews, above the pretty pulpit from which the Reverend Potter preached each Sunday, above the old stone tablets affixed to the wall, above the leaded windows...

The ladder quivered. Once it shuddered, and Annie gripped the bar in front of her nose very tightly, and moaned.

Below her, she could hear the whisperers, the whisperers. And above her, she could hear a strange trembling, singing sound, all on one high note, a sort of crying that hadn’t broken into tears.

‘Smasher says...’

‘We’ll never reach them.’

‘Not up there.’

‘We need a ladder.’

Annie held her breath. She held it for so long she was afraid she would gasp out loud.

Up she climbed. Up. But when she reached the very top

rung, and stood with her palms pressed against the sharp, flinty wall, Annie realised her ladder wasn't long enough. She still couldn't reach the first roof angel.

Annie shivered. She had strained every sinew and fallen short. She had failed the angels, and she knew the time of Eden had come to an end and the time of evil had begun.

'Look!'

'Look! There's a ladder!'

'God provides!'

'We'll get them.'

'And gut them.'

'We'll hack them into pieces.'

Up the ladder swarmed the dark whisperers. They still hadn't seen Annie standing at the top.

Annie looked up into the face of the angel just above her. True, it wasn't wearing goggles but there was no mistaking him. None at all. It was Sandy.