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opening extract from

Heaven Eyes

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One

My name is Erin Law. My friends are January Carr and Mouse Gullane. This is the story of what happened when we sailed away from Whitegates that Friday night. Some people will tell you that none of these things happened. They'll say they were just a dream that the three of us shared. But they did happen. We did meet Heaven Eyes on the Black Middens. We did dig the saint out of the mud. We did find Grampa's treasures and his secrets. We did see Grampa return to the river. And we did bring Heaven Eyes home with us. She lives happily here among us. People will tell you that this is not Heaven Eyes. They'll say she's just another damaged child like ourselves. But she is Heaven Eyes. You'll know her easily. Look at her toes and fingers. Listen to her strange sweet voice. Watch how she seems to see through all the darkness in the world to the joy that lies beneath. It is her. These things happened. January, Mouse and I were there to see them all. Everything is true. So listen.

We are damaged children. Each of us has lost our parents. That's why we live in this home called Whitegates, which is

in St Gabriel's Estate. January, for instance, was left as a day-old baby on the steps of a hospital. He's called January because that's the bitter month in which he was found. The place was Carr Hill Hospital, and that's why he's called Carr. You will not see January here now, and you'll know why when you come to the end of the tale. Mouse is an abandoned boy. His mother died, like mine did, and then his father disappeared. Mouse will tell you that his father's in Africa, but even Mouse isn't certain that this is true. He's named Mouse because of the pet he carries in his pocket, which he used to say was his one true friend. This pet is called Squeak, because he squeaks.

Whitegates is a three-storeyed place with a garden laid to concrete and a metal fence around it. The home is run by a woman named Maureen. Before we sailed away that night, her heart had been disappointed by years of dealing with children like ourselves. She used to tell us we were damaged. She said that, right from the start, our opportunities were more limited than those of other children. She said we'd have to work very hard to make our way in the world. She smiled and stroked our shoulders. She said that if we co-operated with her, there was no reason why we shouldn't turn out to be the finest of folk. Sometimes we saw in her eyes that she really wanted to believe this. Sometimes we saw that she yearned to believe. She gazed from the windows and watched us whispering together in the concrete garden. She stood in the doorway of the pool room and watched us with her fingers on her cheeks and the yearning in her eyes.

She has a flat behind her office and she was often heard whimpering in there. She found it difficult to sleep in those days. Sometimes we saw her wandering the corridors in the dead of night with tears running from her eyes. There were many tales and rumours about her: she'd never been able to have children of her own; yes, she did have a child, and it was very beautiful, but it died as a baby in her arms; there were several children, but they'd been snatched away by the father and had never been seen again. No one knew the truth, but we made up the tales and told them to each other and tried to explain the strange mixture of love and bitterness we saw in Maureen's eyes. Those eyes so often were cold, cold, cold. Those eyes wanted to love us and trust us, but so often they saw us as simply damaged, and beyond repair.

A dozen or so children live here. Some of us, like Maureen, are filled by sadness, or eaten up with bitterness. Some of us have broken hearts and troubled souls. But most of us love each other and look out for each other. We always knew that if we cared for each other, we could put up with the psychiatrists who came, the psychologists, the social workers, the care workers, the play workers, the drugs workers, the health workers, the welfare workers. We knew we could put up with Maureen with her assistants. We could put up with her questions and her coldness and her circle times. We knew that we could find a tiny corner of the Paradise that we'd all lost.

Sometimes we were asked to go back to that Paradise. We were asked to try to imagine how things were for us before

we were in Whitegates. We had circle times. We sat together in the lounge. Maureen told us what was known about each of us: who our mothers were, who our fathers were, what happened to separate us from them. For some of us, of course, very little was known. She asked us to tell what we remembered. Her assistants, Fat Kev and Skinny Stu, paced the floor behind us and encouraged us to speak. Maureen asked us to imagine the things that weren't remembered or known. She said it was important that each of us could tell the story of our life, even if it was a mixture of fact and memory and imagination. Each of us had a Life Story book with photographs, drawings, facts and stories in them. Some children played this game very well. They could imagine a different story every time. Their books were filled with possible stories and possible lives. Some children were sullen and would not play, and their books were almost empty.

January quickly became one of those who wouldn't play. But once he told the story of a frantic woman in a stormy winter night. She was very young and very beautiful and very desperate. She carried a tiny baby wrapped in blankets in an orange box. She loved the baby very much but knew she couldn't care for him. She kept in the shadows as she approached the hospital. She waited for deepest night, trembling with cold, with pain, with love. Then she hurried through the storm and laid him on the wide doorstep before rushing back into the night.

'That was beautiful,' Maureen said.

She reached out and stroked his brow.

'It could well be true,' she whispered.

January stared at her. His eyes were glittering.

'She loved me,' he said. 'She left me there because she loved me. But she was young, and poor, and desperate. She knew she couldn't care for me.'

'Yes,' said Maureen. 'Yes. It could well be true.'

She smiled at us all. But there was the tiredness in her eyes, like she'd heard all of this before. She told us to thank January for sharing so much with us. Then she asked him if he had imagined his father, too. He lowered his eyes. He shook his head.

'No,' he said.

'It may be helpful for your progress,' she said.

She looked at us, as if she wanted us to help January in his task. We said nothing.

'No,' said January. 'He didn't love her. He didn't love me. That's all there is to know.'

His eyes were sullen. She smiled gently. She nodded.

'And she'll come back for me,' he whispered.

'Sorry, dear?'

He stared at her.

'She will. She'll come back for me.'

Fat Kev spat breath. He rolled his eyes.

'She will,' said January. 'She still loves me and wants me. One day she'll come back for me.'

Maureen nodded again. She smiled again. We saw it in her eyes: Damaged, Beyond Repair.

Mouse Gullane is a gentle and timid boy. He wants to

please everyone, so he always tried to play the game. His mother died soon after he was born. His father cared for him for a few years. He showed the photograph of his father playing football with many other men in boiler suits on the banks of the river. Sometimes he pointed to one of the men and said this one was his father. Sometimes it was another of the men. The men in the photograph were so small that he couldn't be certain. He said his father went away because he couldn't care for him.

'He loved me,' he said. 'He must have.'

He showed the blue words his father tattooed on his arm before he went away.

pLeAse LoOk aFter mE.

'See?' he said. 'He was worried about me, even though he knew he was going away.'

Then Mouse just cried and cried.

As for me, I didn't need to play. Maureen said I was stubborn, that if I didn't change, my heart would harden and I'd be filled with bitterness. Once, when I refused to share my memories with her, her eyes glared, her smile disappeared, her voice sharpened. She told me that if I didn't change my ways I'd turn out just like my Mum. And I didn't want that, did I?

'Yes!' I spat at her. 'Yes! Yes!'

I yelled that she knew nothing about my Mum, nothing about her strength and tenderness. I ran out of the room, out of the house, out of the estate. Behind me I heard Maureen

at the gate, calling my name, but I took no notice of her. I ran to the river and sat there among the ruins of the past and watched the water flowing towards the sea. I burned with happiness. Despite everything, I burned with happiness. Yes, I know about pain and darkness. Sometimes I go so far into the darkness that I'm scared I'll not get out again. But I do get out, and I do begin to burn again. I don't need to imagine my life. I don't need the stupid circle times. I don't need to build a stupid Life Story book. My head is filled with memories, is always filled with memories. I see my Mum and me in our little house in St Gabriel's Estate. I feel her touch on my skin. I feel her breath on my face. I smell her perfume. I hear her whispering in my ear. I have my little cardboard treasure box, and at any moment I can bring my lovely Mum back to me.