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opening extract from

The Wide Window
(A Series of Unfortunate Events)

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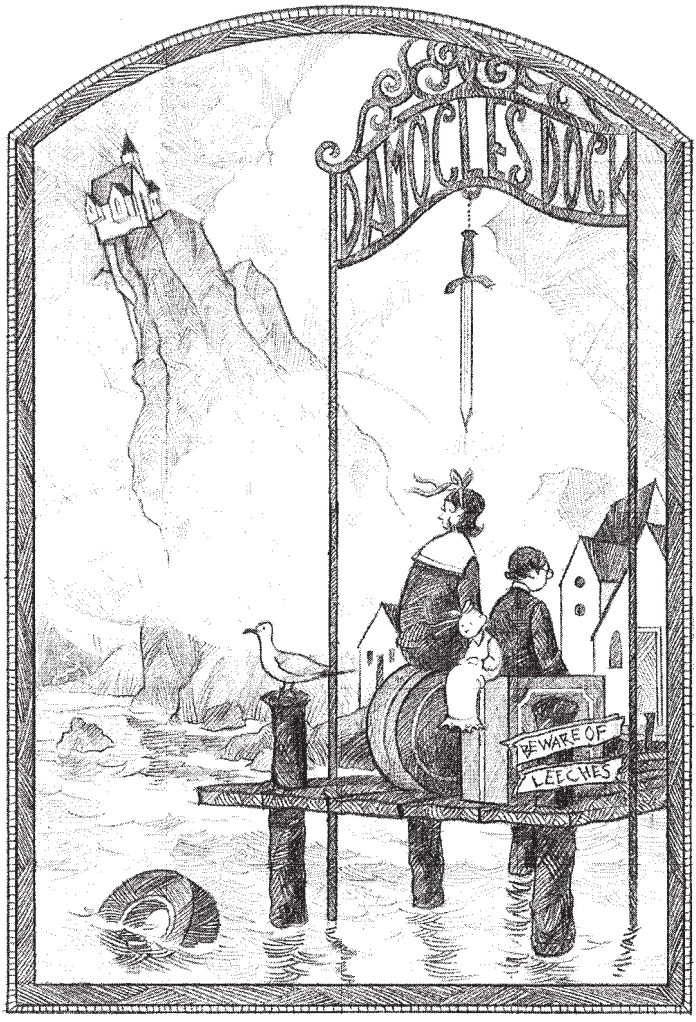
DAMOCLES DOCK
BEWARE OF
LEECHES

CHAPTER
One

If you didn't know much about the Baudelaire orphans, and you saw them sitting on their suitcases at Damocles Dock, you might think that they were bound for an exciting adventure. After all, the three children had just disembarked from the Fickle Ferry, which had driven them across Lake Lachrymose to live with their Aunt Josephine, and in most cases such a situation would lead to thrillingly good times.

But of course you would be dead wrong. For although Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire were about to experience events that would be both exciting and memorable, they would not be exciting and memorable like having your fortune

told or going to a rodeo. Their adventure would be exciting and memorable like being chased by a werewolf through a field of thorny bushes at midnight with nobody around to help you. If you are interested in reading a story filled with thrillingly good times, I am sorry to inform you that you are most certainly reading the wrong book, because the Baudelaires experience very few good times over the course of their gloomy and miserable lives. It is a terrible thing, their misfortune, so terrible that I can scarcely bring myself to write about it. So if you do not want to read a story of tragedy and sadness, this is your very last chance to put this book down, because the misery of the Baudelaire orphans begins in the very next paragraph.

"Look what I have for you," Mr. Poe said, grinning from ear to ear and holding out a small paper bag. "Peppermints!" Mr. Poe was a banker who had been placed in charge of handling the affairs of the Baudelaire orphans after their parents died. Mr. Poe was kindhearted, but it is

not enough in this world to be kindhearted, particularly if you are responsible for keeping children out of danger. Mr. Poe had known the three children since they were born, and could never remember that they were allergic to peppermints.

"Thank you, Mr. Poe," Violet said, and took the paper bag and peered inside. Like most fourteen-year-olds, Violet was too well mannered to mention that if she ate a peppermint she would break out in hives, a phrase which here means "be covered in red, itchy rashes for a few hours." Besides, she was too occupied with inventing thoughts to pay much attention to Mr. Poe. Anyone who knew Violet would know that when her hair was tied up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes, the way it was now, her thoughts were filled with wheels, gears, levers, and other necessary things for inventions. At this particular moment she was thinking of how she could improve the engine of the Fickle Ferry so it wouldn't belch smoke into the gray sky.

"That's very kind of you," said Klaus, the middle Baudelaire child, smiling at Mr. Poe and thinking that if he had even one lick of a peppermint, his tongue would swell up and he would scarcely be able to speak. Klaus took his glasses off and wished that Mr. Poe had bought him a book or a newspaper instead. Klaus was a voracious reader, and when he had learned about his allergy at a birthday party when he was eight, he had immediately read all his parents' books about allergies. Even four years later he could recite the chemical formulas that caused his tongue to swell up.

"Toi!" Sunny shrieked. The youngest Baudelaire was only an infant, and like many infants, she spoke mostly in words that were tricky to understand. By "Toi!" she probably meant "I have never eaten a peppermint because I suspect that I, like my siblings, am allergic to them," but it was hard to tell. She may also have meant "I wish I could bite a peppermint, because I like

to bite things with my four sharp teeth, but I don't want to risk an allergic reaction."

"You can eat them on your cab ride to Mrs. Anwhistle's house," Mr. Poe said, coughing into his white handkerchief. Mr. Poe always seemed to have a cold and the Baudelaire orphans were accustomed to receiving information from him between bouts of hacking and wheezing. "She apologizes for not meeting you at the dock, but she says she's frightened of it."

"Why would she be frightened of a dock?" Klaus asked, looking around at the wooden piers and sailboats.

"She's frightened of anything to do with Lake Lachrymose," Mr. Poe said, "but she didn't say why. Perhaps it has to do with her husband's death. Your Aunt Josephine—she's not really your aunt, of course; she's your second cousin's sister-in-law, but asked that you call her Aunt Josephine—your Aunt Josephine lost her husband recently, and it may be possible that he

drowned or died in a boat accident. It didn't seem polite to ask how she became a dowager. Well, let's put you in a taxi."

"What does that word mean?" Violet asked.

Mr. Poe looked at Violet and raised his eyebrows. "I'm surprised at you, Violet," he said. "A girl of your age should know that a taxi is a car which will drive you someplace for a fee. Now, let's gather your luggage and walk to the curb."

"'Dowager,'" Klaus whispered to Violet, "is a fancy word for 'widow.'"

"Thank you," she whispered back, picking up her suitcase in one hand and Sunny in the other. Mr. Poe was waving his handkerchief in the air to signal a taxi to stop, and in no time at all the cabdriver piled all of the Baudelaire suitcases into the trunk and Mr. Poe piled the Baudelaire children into the back seat.

"I will say good-bye to you here," Mr. Poe said. "The banking day has already begun, and I'm afraid if I go with you out to Aunt

Josephine's I will never get anything done. Please give her my best wishes, and tell her that I will keep in touch regularly." Mr. Poe paused for a moment to cough into his handkerchief before continuing. "Now, your Aunt Josephine is a bit nervous about having three children in her house, but I assured her that you three were very well behaved. Make sure you mind your manners, and, as always, you can call or fax me at the bank if there's any sort of problem. Although I don't imagine anything will go wrong *this* time."

When Mr. Poe said "*this* time," he looked at the children meaningfully as if it were their fault that poor Uncle Monty was dead. But the Baudelaires were too nervous about meeting their new caretaker to say anything more to Mr. Poe except "So long."

"So long," Violet said, putting the bag of peppermints in her pocket.

"So long," Klaus said, taking one last look at Damocles Dock.

"Frul!" Sunny shrieked, chewing on her seat belt buckle.

"So long," Mr. Poe replied, "and good luck to you. I will think of the Baudelaires as often as I can."

Mr. Poe gave some money to the taxi driver and waved good-bye to the three children as the cab pulled away from the dock and onto a gray, cobblestoned street. There was a small grocery store with barrels of limes and beets out front. There was a clothing store called Look! It Fits!, which appeared to be undergoing renovations. There was a terrible-looking restaurant called the Anxious Clown, with neon lights and balloons in the window. But mostly, there were many stores and shops that were all closed up, with boards or metal gratings over the windows and doors.

"The town doesn't seem very crowded," Klaus remarked. "I was hoping we might make some new friends here."

"It's the off-season," the cabdriver said. He

was a skinny man with a skinny cigarette hanging out of his mouth, and as he talked to the children he looked at them through the rearview mirror. "The town of Lake Lachrymose is a resort, and when the nice weather comes it's as crowded as can be. But around now, things here are as dead as the cat I ran over this morning. To make new friends, you'll have to wait until the weather gets a little better. Speaking of which, Hurricane Herman is expected to arrive in town in a week or so. You better make sure you have enough food up there in the house."

"A hurricane on a lake?" Klaus asked. "I thought hurricanes only occurred near the ocean."

"A body of water as big as Lake Lachrymose," the driver said, "can have anything occur on it. To tell you the truth, I'd be a little nervous about living on top of this hill. Once the storm hits, it'll be very difficult to drive all the way down into town."

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked out the window and saw what the driver meant by "all the way down." The taxi had turned one last corner and arrived at the scraggly top of a tall, tall hill, and the children could see the town far, far below them, the cobblestone road curling around the buildings like a tiny gray snake, and the small square of Damocles Dock with specks of people bustling around it. And out beyond the dock was the inky blob of Lake Lachrymose, huge and dark as if a monster were standing over the three orphans, casting a giant shadow below them. For a few moments the children stared into the lake as if hypnotized by this enormous stain on the landscape.

"The lake is so enormous," Klaus said, "and it looks so deep. I can almost understand why Aunt Josephine is afraid of it."

"The lady who lives up here," the cabdriver asked, "is afraid of the lake?"

"That's what we've been told," Violet said.

The cabdriver shook his head and brought

the cab to a halt. "I don't know how she can stand it, then."

"What do you mean?" Violet asked.

"You mean you've never been to this house?" he asked.

"No, never," Klaus replied. "We've never even met our Aunt Josephine before."

"Well, if your Aunt Josephine is afraid of the water," the cabdriver said, "I can't believe she lives here in this house."

"What are you talking about?" Klaus asked.

"Well, take a look," the driver answered, and got out of the cab.

The Baudelaires took a look. At first, the three youngsters saw only a small boxy square with a peeling white door, and it looked as if the house was scarcely bigger than the taxi which had taken them to it. But as they piled out of the car and drew closer, they saw that this small square was the only part of the house that was on top of the hill. The rest of it—a large pile of boxy squares, all stuck together like ice cubes—

hung over the side, attached to the hill by long metal stilts that looked like spider legs. As the three orphans peered down at their new home, it seemed as if the entire house were holding on to the hill for dear life.

The taxi driver took their suitcases out of the trunk, set them in front of the peeling white door, and drove down the hill with a *toot!* of his horn for a good-bye. There was a soft squeak as the peeling white door opened, and from behind the door appeared a pale woman with her white hair piled high on top of her head in a bun.

"Hello," she said, smiling thinly. "I'm your Aunt Josephine."

"Hello," Violet said, cautiously, and stepped forward to meet her new guardian. Klaus stepped forward behind her, and Sunny crawled forward behind him, but all three Baudelaires were walking carefully, as if their weight would send the house toppling down from its perch.

The orphans couldn't help wondering how a woman who was so afraid of Lake Lachrymose could live in a house that felt like it was about to fall into its depths.