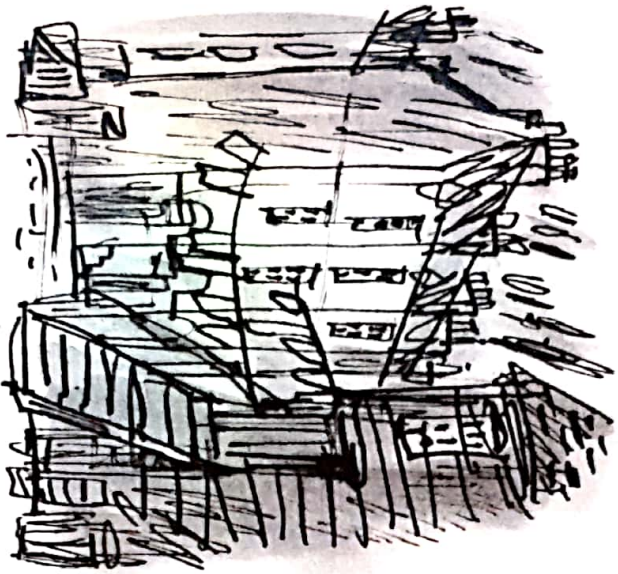


Chapter 1
**COCKROACHES
FOR
BREAKFAST**



One bleak winter night, in the back streets of London, a tiny baby was left on the steps of an orphanage. There was no note, no name, no clue as to who this little person was. Just

the potato sack in which she was wrapped, as snow fell around her.

In Victorian times, it was not uncommon for newborn babies to be abandoned outside

orphanages, hospitals or even the homes of upper-class folk. Their poor, desperate mothers hoped their children would be taken in and given a better life than their birth families could provide.



However, it was hard to imagine a **WORSE** start in life for this baby than at **WORMLY HALL: Home for Unwanted Children.**



Cockroaches for Breakfast

Twenty-six orphans lived there, all crammed into a room that should have slept eight at the absolute most. The children were locked up, starved and beaten. On top of that, they were forced to work day and night. They had to assemble gentlemen's pocket watches from tiny pieces until they went blind.

All the children were painfully thin, with filthy rags for clothes. The orphans' faces were black with soot, so all you could see in the gloom were their hopeful little eyes.

ACATHA
BESSIE
CLARENCE
DOROTHEA
ELISIE
FELIX
GERTRUDE
HUMPHREY
IRIS
JOE
KENNETH
LILLIAN
MABEL
NANCY
OLIVE
PERCIVAL
QUEENIE
RUPERT
STANLEY
THEODORE
URSULA
VIOLET
WILF
XANDRA
YORICK
ZACHARY

The Ice Monster

When a new baby arrived at the orphanage, all the older children would come up with a name for them. They liked to work their way through the alphabet so their names would be as different as possible. The night the baby in the potato sack was left on the steps, they had reached E. If she had been found the day before, she might have been called "Doris". A day later, she could have been a "Frank". Instead, she was named "Elsie".

This prison of an orphanage was run by an evil old boot named Mrs Curdle. Her face was usually fixed in a permanent grimace, and she was covered from head to toe in warts. She had so many warts even her warts had warts. The only thing that made her smile was the sound of children sobbing.

Mrs Curdle would scoff all the food donated for the orphans, so the children in her care had to eat cockroaches for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"Creepy-crawlies are good for you!" she would chuckle.

If any of the orphans spoke after "candles out",

Cockroaches for Breakfast

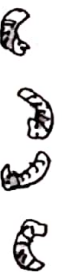
she would stuff one of her pus-sodden old stockings in their mouth. They would have to keep it there for a week.



"That'll keep you quiet, windy wallet!"

When the children were sleeping on the cold stone floor, she would put wiggly worms down the backs of their shirts so they would wake up screaming.

"ARGH!"



"HO! HO! HO! HORNSWOGGLER!"



Mrs Curdle would sneeze over the orphans...

"HACHOOOOO!"

...and blow her nose on their hair.

"HOOMPH! GONGOOZLER!"

A weekly "bath" involved her dunking the orphans one by one into a barrel full of maggots. "The maggots will nibble off the dirt, you muck snipes!" Mrs Curdle would snigger.

To dry off afterwards, she would peg the children to the washing line by their ears.

TWANG!

Once, when Elsie was found with a pet rat in her pocket that she had befriended, Mrs Curdle used it as a ball in a game of cricket.

THUD!

"EEEEEEK!"

WHIZZ!

"HOWZAT!"

If she felt one of the orphans had given her a funny look, Mrs Curdle would poke them in the eye with her dirty, stubby finger.

"OUCH!"

"TAKE THAT, GIBFACE!"

As a special treat at Christmas, the orphans would line up for their present, a whack on the bottom with *The Bumper Book of Carols*.



BASH!

"Merry Christmas, child!" Mrs Curdle would exclaim with glee on each strike.

Elsie endured ten long, hard years at **WORMLY HALL**. The only thing that kept her going was the dream that one day her ma would magically appear and whisk her away. But she never did. As the girl grew up, she would invent more and more incredible stories about her.

Perhaps her ma was a jungle explorer?

Or an acrobat with a travelling circus?

The Ice Monster

Even better, a lady pirate off having adventures on the high seas?

Every night, Elsie would make up bedtime stories for her fellow orphans. Over time, the girl became a magnificent storyteller. She had all the other children in the palm of her grubby little hand.



Cockroaches for Breakfast

"Then Ma found herself in a dark, dark place. It was the belly of a **huge** blue whale..."

"Ma escaped from the tribe of cannibals, which wasn't easy as they had already gobbled up her left leg..."

"**Boom!** Ma had thrown the bomb into the Thames just in time, so no one was killed. It was all in a day's work for a secret agent. The end."

When that night's story finished, the other orphans would cry out...

"Another!"

"We don't want to go to sleep yet!"

"PLEASE, ELSIE, JUST ONE MORE!"

One night, the children cheered so much at Elsie's story that they woke up Mrs Curdle.

**"NO! MORE! STORIES!
YOU! NASTY! LITTLE! BEAST!"**

raged the woman, beating Elsie with a broomstick on every word. The pus-sodden stocking she stuffed in the girl's mouth only half muffled her screams.

“ARGH! ARGH! ARGH!”

The beating was so severe that Elsie wasn't sure she was going to survive. Her little body was black and blue with bruises, and the girl knew she had to escape or die.



Chapter 2

MONKEY FEET

Elsie loved all the rats and pigeons that would find their way inside **MORLEY HALL**. If she had any food, she would share it with them, and tend to any broken wings and legs. In return, they would snuggle up to her, which made her feel less lonely. In her heart, Elsie felt a deep connection to these animals that Mrs Curdle called “vermin”. To her, they were little creatures all alone in the world just like her.

