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Opening extract from
Seed

Written by
Lisa Heathfield

Published by
Egmont Books Ltd

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First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Electric Monkey,
an imprint of Egmont UK Limited
The Yellow Building, 1 Nicholas Road, London W11 4AN

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ISBN 978 1 4052 7538 5

58762/1

www.egmont.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Typeset by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group

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CHAPTER ONE

Here, crouched beside the toilet, I'm terrified I'm dying. My stomach must be bleeding, or my liver, or my kidneys. Something inside me has somehow got cut. Spots of blood smear my underwear. I wipe myself with toilet paper and there's more blood. Am I being punished for something I have said or done?

'Elizabeth!' I shout, running from the coffin-small room.
'Elizabeth!'

I run from room to room. Kindred Smith is mending a bed in one. Rachel sweeps in another. The children play in the day room.

'Elizabeth!'

I wonder if the bleeding is worse. I look behind, but there are no drops of red following me along the wooden floorboards. I rattle the doors of the rooms that are locked. Elizabeth is not in

the dining room, but in the kitchen she is coming through the back door, her rain-drenched dress clinging to her pregnant belly.

‘What is it, Pearl?’ she asks, putting down a bag of muddied potatoes. ‘Is someone hurt?’

I don’t want to tell her. I don’t want to tell her that I’m dying. Will the shock damage the tiny baby in her tummy?

‘Pearl?’ She stands, looking at me, and I see the worry in her eyes.

‘My stomach is bleeding,’ I whisper.

‘Where? How?’ Elizabeth steps back, looks at my top. ‘Did you cut yourself in the field?’

‘Inside. It’s bleeding inside me.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asks. I’ve never seen someone turn so pale in the time it takes for me to take a breath.

‘I’m sorry, Elizabeth,’ I say. And I can’t stop the tears. Because I don’t want to die. I want to meet her baby. I want more days swimming in the lake. I want more days dancing in the rain.

Then Elizabeth’s face changes and she starts to smile. ‘Why do you think your stomach is bleeding?’

Why is she happy that I might soon die?

‘Is there blood in your underwear?’

As I nod my head, she laughs and wraps her arms around me. I feel the bump of her baby under her skin. It presses against me.

Against my stomach, which is bleeding inside.

Elizabeth steps back and I see that she's crying. So I'm right – I am dying.

She kisses her thumb, presses it to her belly and then puts it onto my forehead, onto my chest and then onto my own stomach.

'Are you trying to heal me?' I whisper. And she smiles.

'You don't need healing. You're not dying, Pearl. You are fifteen years old and you're changing from a child to a woman.'

Then she's hugging me again, and her words slowly sink in. So this is what I've been waiting for? A bleeding stomach?

I look at Elizabeth, but she doesn't seem like she's mocking me.

'Come on,' she says, and she takes my hand.

In the bedroom, she changes my underwear, takes away my old ones which are now heavily lined with a muddy red. I concentrate on the faded yellow wallpaper as she fills my new underwear with a thick, woven slab that makes me waddle like a duck.

'You'll get used to it.' She smiles at me so warmly. 'Now, not a word,' she says and I follow her out onto the landing. I focus on her long blonde hair as we go down the stairs to the kitchen. In silence, she reaches for the lantern and matches on the shelf, and then we walk out the back door.

I'd forgotten it was raining and it hits down on us hard,

soaking us within seconds. I hear nothing but its drumming on the ground as Elizabeth takes my hand again. She leads me through the herb garden with its high brick walls, where the smells have almost been washed away. She opens the rickety door at the other end and we're walking through the strawberry field. The plants are heavy with red fruit.

I feel the slab of linen rubbing my legs as I walk. I imagine the blood dripping onto it. Will I bleed forever now? Will I never be able to walk or run freely again?

I stumble after Elizabeth, confused about wanting to cry when I have waited so long to be a woman. In the distance, I see the figures in the vegetable patch, where I was less than an hour ago, when I was still a child. I see the shape of Heather, her long brown hair stuck with rain down her back. Then I remember. I'll be able to grow my hair. Finally, after all these years of waiting, I'll be able to let my blonde hair grow. I'll look like Elizabeth, with it flowing over my shoulders and down to my waist.

I'm filled with happiness. Suddenly the bleeding and the strange, uncomfortable way of walking are absolutely fine, because now I am a woman.

'Elizabeth,' I say. But the water is falling too loudly for her to hear.

The sound changes as we head into the woods and the rain hits the leaves far above us.

‘Where are we going?’ I ask, but Elizabeth just smiles.

Finally, we get to the clearing where Papa S’s Worship Chair sits in the middle. It has fresh ivy woven around its frame. Elizabeth walks towards it, and then she’s going too close – she’s walking into the forbidden circle. I look around, but no one is here to see. I look up into the branches, but no Kindreds are hidden there.

I hold my breath as she reaches for the chair. ‘No, Elizabeth,’ I whisper.

‘It is bidden,’ she says quietly, as she starts to lift the chair. I can see that it is heavy, but I can’t help. Papa S sees everything and Elizabeth is in the forbidden circle, touching his Worship Chair.

She drags it to the side and begins to kick at the thick leaves underneath. Then she’s on her hands and knees, moving the leaves away until I see a large metal hoop. She pulls it, and it opens a small wooden door flat on the ground.

‘What are you doing?’ I ask.

She is not smiling now. ‘I promise you will be OK,’ she says. She takes the matches from her apron, strikes one and lights the lantern.

And then I understand. I look down into the hole. There are steps that end in blackness. She wants me to go down.

‘I want to go back to the house,’ I say. But I don’t move. I don’t run away.

‘You must trust me, Pearl.’ Her wet hair still shines so blonde. She holds the lantern in one hand, the other hand resting on her pregnant belly.

And I know I love her, so I know I must trust her. I step forwards, into the forbidden circle, and start to go cautiously down the steps. Elizabeth follows me and the light from the lantern shows us the way. At the bottom is a tiny room dug into the earth.

I look at Elizabeth. In the candlelight her cheeks look sunken, her eyes hollow. Is there fear hidden within her?

‘I’ve seen it now,’ I say quietly. My voice sounds flat as it catches in the earth. ‘Can I go?’

‘We have all done this, Pearl. Every woman at Seed. I promise you will be all right.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When you get your first Blessing, when you first start to bleed, you must stay with Nature so that she may give you the gift of a healthy womb,’ she says.

I don’t understand. I just stare at her in the flickering light.

‘You must stay deep in her womb, so your own womb may become fertile.’

‘What do you mean, fertile?’

‘So that when it is your time, you will be able to have children.’

‘I don’t want to be here, Elizabeth.’ My voice cracks as I start

to cry. I look at the earth circling me and I'm suddenly filled with terror. Does she want me to stay here?

She puts the lamp down and wraps her arms around me, her face hidden in the shadows. 'You know that you must not cry. Your life spirit will leave you and without it, you are nothing.'

I can smell the sweetness of her vanilla scent. It masks the smell of the blood and the damp earth that is blocking the air.

'It won't be for long.'

'So you'll shut the trapdoor?' The words fall from my mouth. Elizabeth steps back and nods. She's trying to smile.

'But how will I breathe?'

Elizabeth picks up the lantern and shines it on the bottom of the curved earth walls. Tiny black pipes stick out all around. 'I have been here, Pearl. It's all right.'

'It's not,' I say, and I start to cry again. 'I don't want to stay.' My voice is getting louder and Elizabeth looks up the steps towards the light above.

'Shh, now. Papa S must not hear you cry. And Nature is hearing every word.' Then she puts down the lantern once again and turns to go up the steps.

I can't move. Something holds me to the ground. I want to run after Elizabeth, pull her back, to escape, but I just watch as she goes up towards the air. The last thing I see is her blonde hair as she quickly lowers the trapdoor. It shuts with a muffled thud.

Faintly, I can hear Elizabeth scrabbling about with the leaves.

Then I hear a dragging of something heavy. She must be pushing the wooden Worship Chair back over the top.

Every part of me wants to scream. Every nerve, every cell, wants to run up the steps and bang on that wooden door and scream until my lungs burn. But I don't. I know that Nature is watching me. And Papa S will know.

So I stand and stare at the flickering earth walls, with their overwhelming dank smell. I stand and stare at the mud above me and around me and under me. I stand and listen to the sound of my own breathing.

Surely she will be back soon?

CHAPTER TWO

The candle is burning down so slowly. I don't want to move. The ground is cold through my trousers. I try to imagine that I'm dreaming, but I know I'm not.

Elizabeth does not come. The melting wax makes slippery shapes on the earth wall. The flame bulges and straightens, dancing in the silence.

I must have been here an hour, if not more. There's no one above me. No one is coming. When the candle burns down, I will disappear into the darkness.

'Elizabeth?' I call out softly. Of course she can't hear me. No one can hear me. There's no one there.

My stomach is starting to hurt with hunger, a rumbling pain. It's something I've barely felt before. At Seed, no one is hungry. There is always food, there is always drink.

‘Thank you, Nature,’ I whisper. I kiss my palm, press it flat into the earth. It’s bumpy against my skin. I imagine how deep the earth goes beneath me.

Kate and Jack will notice I’m gone. They will ask about me.

I close my eyes. It can’t be long now.

But I’m finding it difficult to breathe. What if those pipes don’t work? What if they’re blocked and I slowly run out of air? My breath is sticking in my throat. It’s got nowhere to go. Am I going to suffocate? Is this how I am going to die?

‘Help me, Nature,’ I say. She must hear me, because there’s a rustling of leaves above my head, a heavy scraping of the Worship Chair. And as the door is lifted, the sunlight floods in so sharply that I have to cover my eyes.

I am free. So I start to move towards the steps, just as Elizabeth comes down to get me. She is carrying something. When she reaches the bottom, she takes off the cloth covering it. It is a bowl of soup. A spoon and a chunk of bread sink into it.

‘I must be quick,’ Elizabeth says, her voice hushed as she puts the bowl on the floor.

‘But I’m coming with you,’ I reply.

‘I’ll be back in the morning. Just after sunrise.’ She tries to hug me, but I grab at her hands.

‘No, Elizabeth, you can’t leave me here.’ I’m crying, sudden and startling in the quiet circle of earth.

‘Think of the rewards, Pearl. You will have a healthy womb.

And when Papa S says it is the right time, you will have children.'

'No.' I'm trying to stay calm. 'No, I can't stay here.'

'You must.' She's trying to peel my hands away.

'I'll die if you leave me. I can't breathe in here, Elizabeth.' I want her to look at me. I want her to understand, but she wants to go back up the stairs. She's trying to get away.

'Pearl, you must let me go,' she says quietly. Then she looks at me with those eyes of clover green. 'Nature will protect you. There's no harm that can come to you here. You are privileged.' Elizabeth finally frees her hands and kisses me on the head. 'You are safe, Pearl, you are loved.' Then she rushes up the steps. I reach for the material of her skirt, but she's gone.

The trapdoor has closed out the sunlight. There's just the silence and me. Somewhere, there are beetles burrowing, but I can't hear them. All I can hear is the sound of my short breaths and my heart thudding in the cramped air.

I kneel down and reach for the bowl of soup. The smell of it should make my mouth water, but as I bring the spoon to my lips, I feel sick. Still, I force it into my mouth, feel its warmth in my chest. It helps the ache in my stomach and so I gently scrape until every last drop has gone.

The smell of the ancient mud finds me once more. It creeps into my nose and slides down inside me.

I close my eyes and start to count. One, two, three. On and on. But the panic is rising again. *Breathe, Pearl, breathe. Trust in*

Elizabeth. I focus on her smile, on the baby growing in her. Will I have a brother or a sister? I hope for a brother. If it's a girl, she will be forced into this hole. And I couldn't sit by, knowing that she is here.

I will think of the baby. Each little finger. Each little toe. Think about Papa S and all that he gives us. Now I am a woman, maybe I can be his Companion. I imagine his hand in mine. I'm getting cold, but he will keep me warm.

I must sleep.

*

Somewhere there is music. And someone is singing, quietly. I open my eyes to blackness and silence. I am in the earth and the candle has burnt itself out. I move onto my knees as I sweep around with my hands. There's nothing but the rough, damp mud. Then my fingers hit the bottom of what must be the steps and I stumble up them. At the top I feel the closed trapdoor. If I'm desperate enough, I'll be able to open it. I push it with all my strength. I push it until I feel like my wrists will snap in two. But it doesn't move.

I bang it, feeble now. And I'm crying again as I curl myself onto the step. It's so dark that I can't even see my fingers. Darker than the silence in our sleeping room. Darker by far than the night. Nothing exists now, except the sound of my crying,

getting soaked up by the earth. My life force dripping away.

Slowly I feel my way down the steps. I lie at the bottom. My bones ache from the cold and the hard floor.

‘Please come, Elizabeth,’ I whisper. I kiss my palm and hold it above me, into the hollow blackness.

*

I’m woken by the sound of the trapdoor opening. There is light, muffled yet sharp enough to hurt my eyes.

‘I’m here, Pearl.’

It’s Elizabeth. She lights a lamp and I can see again. ‘It’s all right,’ she says. ‘It is over.’ And she smiles at me. ‘You can change into this.’

She hands me a flowing green skirt. It’s beautiful. I reach out to touch its material in the flickering candlelight. It feels so soft.

‘It’s silk,’ she says. ‘I made it for you when you were born.’

I take off my trousers. As I put the skirt on, it feels like water on my bare legs. Elizabeth passes me a new slab of linen.

‘Change this for the one in your underwear. We must leave the old one here for seven days.’

‘Will I have to come back to get it?’ I ask, the panic rising like bile in my throat.

‘You will not have to come back here,’ she says gently.

Elizabeth takes the old slab from me. It’s heavy with my

blood. When she has laid it face down in the earth, she turns to me. ‘You must never speak of this to anyone,’ she says.

She blows out the candle and starts to go back up the steps. I hurry after her.

When we’re outside, she lowers the trapdoor, covers it with leaves and pushes the heavy Worship Chair back into its place.

As we walk away in the early morning air, the birds are singing. The rain has stopped. My emerald-green skirt will tell everyone that now I am a woman.