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opening extract from

A Series of Unfortunate Events 9: The Carnivorous Carnival

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published by

Egmont Books

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First published in the USA 2002
by HarperCollins Children's Books
First published in Great Britain 2003
by Egmont Books Limited
239 Kensington High Street
London W8 6SA

This edition published 2010
by Egmont Books Limited

Published by arrangement with
HarperCollins Children's Books
A division of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.
1350 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York, USA

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Inside illustrations © 2002 Brett Helquist
Cover illustration © 2003 Brett Helquist

ISBN 978 1 4052 5384 0
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Group

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C H A P T E R

One

When my workday is over, and I have closed my notebook, hidden my pen, and sawed holes in my rented canoe so that it cannot be found, I often like to spend the evening in conversation with my few surviving friends. Sometimes we discuss literature. Sometimes we discuss the people who are trying to destroy us, and if there is any hope of escaping from them. And sometimes we discuss frightening and troublesome animals that might be nearby, and this topic always leads to much disagreement over which part of a frightening and troublesome beast is the most frightening and troublesome. Some say the teeth of the beast, because teeth are used for eating children, and often their parents, and

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gnawing their bones. Some say the claws of the beast, because claws are used for ripping things to shreds. And some say the hair of the beast, because hair can make allergic people sneeze.

But I always insist that the most frightening part of any beast is its belly, for the simple reason that if you are seeing the belly of the beast it means you have already seen the teeth of the beast and the claws of the beast and even the hair of the beast, and now you are trapped and there is probably no hope for you. For this reason, the phrase “in the belly of the beast” has become an expression which means “inside some terrible place with little chance of escaping safely,” and it is not an expression one should look forward to using.

I’m sorry to tell you that this book will use the expression “the belly of the beast” three times before it is over, not counting all of the times I have already used “the belly of the beast” in order to warn you of all the times “the belly of the beast” will appear. Three times over

the course of this story, characters will be inside some terrible place with little chance of escaping safely, and for that reason I would put this book down and escape safely yourself, because this woeful story is so very dark and wretched and damp that the experience of reading it will make you feel as if you are in the belly of the beast, and that time doesn't count either.

The Baudelaire orphans were in the belly of the beast—that is, in the dark and cramped trunk of a long, black automobile. Unless you are a small, portable object, you probably prefer to sit in a seat when you are traveling by automobile, so you can lean back against the upholstery, look out the window at the scenery going by, and feel safe and secure with a seat belt fastened low and tight across your lap. But the Baudelaires could not lean back, and their bodies were aching from squishing up against one another for several hours. They had no window to look out of, only a few bullet holes in the trunk made from some violent encounter I have not found the

courage to research. And they felt anything but safe and secure as they thought about the other passengers in the car, and tried to imagine where they were going.

The driver of the automobile was a man named Count Olaf, a wicked person with one eyebrow instead of two and a greedy desire for money instead of respect for other people. The Baudelaires had first met Count Olaf after receiving the news that their parents had been killed in a terrible fire, and had soon discovered he was only interested in the enormous fortune their mother and father had left behind. With unceasing determination—a phrase which here means “no matter where the three children went”—Count Olaf had pursued them, trying one dastardly technique after another to get his hands on their fortune. So far he had been unsuccessful, although he’d had plenty of help from his girlfriend, Esmé Squalor—an equally wicked, if more fashionable, person who was now sitting beside him in the front seat of the

automobile—and an assortment of assistants, including a bald man with an enormous nose, two women who liked to wear white powder all over their faces, and a nasty man who had hooks instead of hands. All of these people were sitting in the back of the automobile, where the children could sometimes hear them speaking over the roar of the engine and the sounds of the road.

One would think, with such a wretched crew as traveling companions, that the Baudelaire siblings would have found some other way to travel rather than sneaking into the trunk, but the three children had been fleeing from circumstances even more frightening and dangerous than Olaf and his assistants and there had been no time to be choosy. But as their journey wore on, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny grew more and more worried about their situation. The sunlight coming in through the bullet holes faded to evening, and the road beneath them turned bumpy and rough, and the Baudelaire

orphans tried to imagine where it was they were going and what would happen when they got there.

“Are we there yet?” The voice of the hook-handed man broke a long silence.

“I told you not to ask me that anymore,” replied Olaf with a snarl. “We’ll get there when we get there, and that is that.”

“Could we possibly make a short stop?” asked one of the white-faced women. “I noticed a sign for a rest station in a few miles.”

“We don’t have time to stop anywhere,” Olaf said sharply. “If you needed to use the bathroom, you should have gone before we left.”

“But the hospital was on fire,” the woman whined.

“Yes, let’s stop,” said the bald man. “We haven’t had anything to eat since lunch, and my stomach is grumbling.”

“We can’t stop,” Esmé said. “There are no restaurants out here in the hinterlands that are in.”

Violet, who was the eldest of the Baudelaires, stretched to place her hand on Klaus's stiff shoulder, and held her baby sister, Sunny, even tighter, as if to communicate with her siblings without speaking. Esmé Squalor was constantly talking about whether or not things were in—a word she liked to use for “stylish”—but the children were more interested in overhearing where the car was taking them. The hinterlands were a vast and empty place very far from the very outskirts of the city, without even a small village for hundreds of miles. Long ago the Baudelaire parents had promised they would bring their children there someday to see the famous hinterlands sunsets. Klaus, who was a voracious reader, had read descriptions of the sunsets that had made the whole family eager to go, and Violet, who had a real talent for inventing things, had even begun building a solar oven so the family could enjoy grilled cheese sandwiches as they watched the dark blue light spread eerily over the hinterlands

cacti while the sun slowly sank behind the distant and frosty Mortmain Mountains. Never did the three siblings imagine that they would visit the hinterlands by themselves, stuffed in the trunk of a car of a villain.

“Boss, are you sure it’s safe to be way out here?” asked the hook-handed man. “If the police come looking for us, there’ll be no place to hide.”

“We could always disguise ourselves again,” the bald man said. “Everything we need is in the trunk of the car.

“We don’t need to hide,” Olaf replied, “and we don’t need to disguise ourselves, either. Thanks to that silly reporter at *The Daily Punctilio*, the whole world thinks I’m dead, remember?”

“You’re dead,” Esmé said with a nasty chuckle, “and the three Baudelaire brats are murderers. We don’t need to hide—we need to celebrate!”

“We can’t celebrate yet,” Olaf said. “There

are two last things we need to do. First, we need to destroy the last piece of evidence that could send us to jail.”

“The Snicket file,” Esmé said, and the Baudelaires shuddered in the trunk. The three children had found one page of the Snicket file, which was now safe in Klaus’s pocket. It was difficult to tell from only one page, but the Snicket file seemed to contain information about a survivor of a fire, and the Baudelaires were eager to find the remaining pages before Olaf did.

“Yes, of course,” the hook-handed man said. “We have to find the Snicket file. But what’s the second thing?”

“We have to find the Baudelaires, you idiot,” Olaf snarled. “If we don’t find them, then we can’t steal their fortune, and all of my schemes will be a waste.”

“I haven’t found your schemes to be a waste,” said one of the white-faced women. “I’ve enjoyed them very much, even if we haven’t gotten the fortune.”

“Do you think all three of those bratty orphans got out of the hospital alive?” the bald man asked.

“Those children seem to have all the luck in the world,” Count Olaf said, “so they’re all probably alive and well, but it would sure make things easier if one or two of them burned to a crisp. We only need one of them alive to get the fortune.”

“I hope it’s Sunny,” the hook-handed man said. “It was fun putting her in a cage, and I look forward to doing it again.”

“I myself hope it’s Violet,” Olaf said. “She’s the prettiest.”

“I don’t care who it is,” Esmé said. “I just want to know where they are.”

“Well, Madame Lulu will know,” Olaf said. “With her crystal ball, she’ll be able to tell us where the orphans are, where the file is, and anything else we want to know.”

“I never believed in things like crystal balls,” remarked a white-faced woman, “but when this

Madame Lulu started telling you how to find the Baudelaires every time they escaped, I learned that fortune-telling is real.”

“Stick with me,” Olaf said, “and you’ll learn lots of new things. Oh, here’s the turn for Rarely Ridden Road. We’re almost there.”

The car lurched to the left, and the Baudelaires lurched with it, rolling to the left-hand side of the trunk, along with the many items Olaf kept in his car to help with his dastardly plots. Violet tried not to cough as one of his fake beards tickled her throat. Klaus held his hand up to his face so that a sliding toolbox wouldn’t break his glasses. And Sunny shut her mouth tightly so she wouldn’t get one of Olaf’s dirty undershirts tangled in her sharp teeth. Rarely Ridden Road was even bumpier than the highway they had been traveling on, and the car made so much noise that the children could not hear any more of the conversation until Olaf pulled the automobile to a creaky stop.

“Are we there yet?” the hook-handed man asked.

“Of course we’re here, you fool,” Olaf said. “Look, there’s the sign—Caligari Carnival.”

“Where is Madame Lulu?” asked the bald man.

“Where do you think?” Esmé asked, and everyone laughed. The doors of the automobile opened with a scraping sound, and the car lurched again as everyone piled out.

“Should I get the wine out of the trunk, boss?” the bald man asked.

The Baudelaires froze.

“No,” Count Olaf replied. “Madame Lulu will have plenty of refreshments for us.”

The three children lay very still and listened as Olaf and his troupe trudged away from the car. Their footsteps grew fainter and fainter until the siblings could hear nothing but the evening breeze as it whistled through the bullet holes, and at last it seemed safe for the Baudelaire orphans to speak to one another.