Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Little Hands Clapping

Written by Ran Rhodes

Published by Canongate

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

LITTLE HANDS CLAPPING

Dan Rhodes



CANONGATE

Edinburgh · London · New York · Melbourne

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by
Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street,
Edinburgh EH1 1TE

1

Copyright © Dan Rhodes, 2010

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on
request from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84767 529 3

Typeset in Plantin by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
[PLEASE SUPPLY PRINTER DETAILS]

www.meetatthegate.com

The title is taken from Robert Browning's poem 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin', and from the song 'Little Hands' by Alexander 'Skip' Spence.

PART ONE

I

At night, indeed at any time, but most of all at night, when the narrow street is lit only by the occasional lamp, there is little to distinguish the museum from the other buildings in the old part of the city. It is painted white, and rises three stories before tapering into a roof, where small windows jut from the immaculate tiles. It is set apart from its neighbours by the brass plate beside the door, which gives, in four languages, its name and the hours when its contents can be viewed. Only by standing close and squinting into the darkness is it possible to read the lettering, and as the first warm day of the year nears its end, nobody is taking the time to squint into the darkness. A small party of tourists passes by without paying the place any attention. They turn a corner, their voices fade, and the street is quiet until the next group comes

along, young locals this time, their after-work drink having turned into a meal and several more drinks, their conversation reverberating from the high buildings as they head to somebody's apartment for a final glass.

The museum's lights are off, but that is not to say that the place is unoccupied. Behind one of the small windows sleeps an old man in a nightshirt and nightcap, their whiteness incandescent as it cuts through the dark. Partly covered by a single white sheet, and oblivious to the bursts of activity from the street below, he lies on a narrow bed. The skin of his face, a faint grey against the cotton that encases him, is a mosaic of oblongs, triangles and shapes without names. His mouth is open, his eyes are closed and the rattle of his breath fills the room. The old man is the museum's only resident, but this night he is not alone. The visitors are supposed to leave by five o'clock, but one had stayed on, huddling behind a large wooden display board as the door was bolted shut, and building up the courage to do what they had been meaning to do for so long. There are no sobs to be heard, and no wails. The visitor feels calm, and ready at last.

When this business is over and the story is out, or as much of the story as will ever be out, such interlopers will be described as having been drawn to the place *like moths to a flame*. While they are being counted and identified as accurately as possible, articles will be

written; some sober and balanced, others gleefully bug-eyed. None will capture the essence of the old man or even get a real grip on the events that had taken place under this roof. Nor will they convey any more than the haziest sense of the lives of these supposed moths, at least not what will often be referred to as their *inner lives* – the details beyond their education, employment history and haphazard lists of their likes and dislikes. With so little known about the thoughts and feelings from which they were built, these people will be presented to the world as having amounted to little more than a curriculum vitae, or a lonely hearts advertisement.

The more ambitious reporters will attempt to write something reflective, but frustrated by the incalculable blank spaces they will find their prose leaning towards the overwrought as they try, without much success, to make their way beneath the surface of the story. Their interviews with acknowledged experts will add nothing of interest to their copy, and their references to Othello and Ophelia, Heamon and Antigone and the works of Émile Durkheim and David Hume will make them appear not so much learned as desperate. It is the tabloid writers who will be happiest, seasoning the facts with amateur psychological profiling, coarse conjecture and simple, alliterative blasts of moral condemnation as they pull together lurid account after lurid account.

Not wanting to know much beyond the basics,

most people will only read around the edges of these articles. Looking at the photographs they will begin, but no more, to imagine what must have been happening behind the eyes that sometimes stare back at them, and sometimes scowl, but more often than not smile.

At no stage will an editor allow an article to reach the press unless somewhere the people such as the one huddling behind the large display board are described as having been *like moths to a flame*. But if this place is a flame, it is a cold one. Even on a night like this the warmth has not penetrated the thick walls, and a wintry chill still pervades the building.

The last drunk of the night passes in the street, singing a song from generations ago, learned in childhood and never forgotten:

> *Frieda, oh Frieda, will you still be mine when I am back from the war with a patch on my eye?*

It is supposed to be sung as a duet, but the drunk takes the woman's part too, a squawking, quavering parody of the female voice as she tells him that yes, of course she will still love him even though he has lost an eye.

> *Frieda, oh Frieda, will you still be mine when I am back from the war with my left arm torn off to the shoulder?*

The shrieking Frieda tells him again that she will still love him, at which point he reveals yet another body part lost on the battlefield. Just as Frieda is telling him she will still love him in spite of his right foot having been amputated after becoming gangrenous in a mantrap, the drunk takes a turning and the words become indistinct. Everybody who has heard him knows the song, and how it finishes: the soldier continues to break news to Frieda about further losses of body parts until there is almost nothing left of him for her to love, and she tells him that she will still be his, no matter what. It is a simple song of true love – perhaps that is why it has remained so popular and why, even when sung by a drunk late at night, no reports are made of his antisocial behaviour. The moth, though, huddling in the darkness, knows it to be a lie. But it is too late for anger. *Let them believe that if they want to. After all, they are only taking comfort, and who can blame them? For me, though, it is too late for comfort*. The voice fades, and fades, and soon it is gone altogether.

At ten past three the old man jolts awake at the sharp smack of wood on wood from one of the rooms below. He sits up and listens for any further disturbance, but none occurs. He sets his alarm for five, then lies back and closes his eyes. He knows the sound, and that it can be dealt with later on. His mouth falls open, and once again his breathing fills the room, beginning as

a light wheeze then escalating into a rattle, the inhalations and exhalations at a pitch so indistinguishable that it seems like a single undulating drone.

A fat house spider crawls across the sheet, clear against the bright white. It steps onto the sleeve of his nightshirt, where it lingers for a while before scuttling up to his neck. The moment the first of the eight dark brown legs touches the old man's cold skin he wakes once again. He does not move, but the rattle stops dead and his breathing becomes soft and shallow. The spider sprints to his cheek, where it remains still for a moment before moving towards his mouth, which has remained open. It stops again, as if considering its next move, and then, with an agility bordering on grace, it darts into the chasm.

The old man's mouth shuts and the spider races around, trying to make its way out, but there is no escape from the thin, grey tongue that pushes it first into his cheek and then between his back teeth. After some final desperate flailing, the spider is crunched into a gritty paste and the tongue moves around the man's teeth, collecting stray pieces.

His breathing slows, and he swallows the final traces. Soon the rattle returns. In and out, in and out. It all sounds the same.

II

At five o'clock the room filled with a furious beep. The old man extended a thin, grey arm and slid the alarm clock's switch to *off*. He rose to his feet, picked up a plastic torch and walked downstairs to find the source of the noise that had woken him in the night. It had come from one of the usual places, Room Eight, a small exhibition space at the back of the building. A flash of light showed him all he needed to see, and he went down to the desk by the main entrance. He picked up the telephone, and dialled.

'Yes?' came a man's voice after two rings, sprightly for so early in the morning.

'This is the museum.'

'Oh dear,' said the voice. 'Not bad news, I hope?'

'Yes. Bad news.'

'How awful.' There was a sigh. 'Could you tell me,

purely for medical reasons, if the prospective patient is male or female?'

'Female.'

'The poor lady.' He sighed again. 'I shall arrive at your back door in thirteen minutes.'

The old man used these thirteen minutes to return to his rooms and change from his nightshirt and nightcap into pressed black trousers, a black jacket, a brilliant white shirt and a black tie. His shoes shone a perfect black. He wore the same outfit every day, and he would often be mistaken for an undertaker. He almost never left the building, but when he did he found he was treated with misdirected deference, which suited him because nobody ever knew quite what to say, and he was able to avoid the vapid conversation that he found such a distasteful part of everyday life.

He stood by the fire exit door to the rear of the building. There had never been a fire, and apart from the occasional delivery of a bulky exhibit it was used only for these visits from the doctor. The old man followed the seconds on his watch, and the knock came precisely on time. He opened the door and the doctor entered, his profession signalled by the black portmanteau in his hand and the stethoscope around his neck. He looked healthy, and his hair was thick for a man in middle age, though the dark brown was flecked with strands of white. He gave his usual sympathetic smile.

'I fear, Herr Schmidt,' he said, 'that once again we are too late.'

They walked upstairs to the scene of the incident. At the doorway the old man switched on the light and stood aside for the doctor to pass before following him in. A chair, the source of the noise that had woken him, had been kicked aside and lay upended on the floor. The woman's body hung absolutely still, her feet several inches above the floorboards. The pipe to which she had attached the rope remained in place.

'Oh dear,' sighed the doctor, his voice low as he assessed the familiar sight. 'Still,' he said, a trace of lightness returning to his tone, 'what's done is done. Let us begin.'

The old man left the room, and returned with a step ladder. Quite used to the procedure, neither of them felt the need to speak. The doctor reached into his portmanteau for a folding serrated knife, which he handed to the old man, the taller of the two, who stepped up and started sawing through the rope at the point where the knot met the pipe. As fibres snowed down, the doctor delivered his post mortem.

'Interesting,' he said. 'Slow strangulation. Evidently she did not allow herself an adequate drop.' He picked up the chair she had kicked away, and nodded as his hypothesis was confirmed: her heels were not much lower than the seat. 'Just as I thought,' he said. 'She should have jumped from that table.' He pointed. 'It's higher.'

The woman's head was level with his. He took it in his hands and moved it from side to side. 'The neck doesn't appear to be broken,' he said, 'and judging by these fingernail marks on the throat it would seem that the unfortunate lady remained conscious for some time, trying quite desperately to save herself.' The old man stopped sawing for a moment to look at the scratches. He looked at her hands too. Her fingers were streaked with dry blood, and marked with burns from the rope. The doctor carried on. 'She would have fought for some time, maybe for as long as half an hour, realising all the time the terrible mistake she had made.' He sighed. 'What a shame that nobody heard a thing, that this poor creature could not have been rescued from her wrong turning.'

Neither of them had known this to happen before: whenever a visitor had chosen this manner of exit the doctor had found no evidence of a struggle. The well-executed incidents had resulted in a broken neck and instant death, and the less well-planned ones, with their insufficient drops or incorrectly positioned nooses, had apparently caused the person to black out as they fell, and they would hang, insensible, until the end.

His post mortem complete, the doctor stood aside as the final strands gave way and the body thumped to the floor. He removed the noose from the woman's neck, and pushed her tongue back into her mouth. 'Let's be absolutely sure,' he said, and listened for a while with his stethoscope before shaking his head.

They stood together, looking down at her. She had been around thirty, and was dressed in jeans and a thin green jacket. The old man had seen her arrive, but he had not seen her leave. He paid as little attention as possible to the museum's visitors, but he had noticed a hunted look about her eyes, and had not been surprised to see her again. He said nothing.

'We must do this quickly,' said the doctor. 'After all, I am a busy general practitioner and I have not yet eaten my breakfast and, as any doctor will tell you, breakfast is the most important meal of the day.'

The old man felt no need to say anything, and assumed his established role in the removal of the body, leaning over to grab it by the wrists. The doctor lifted the ankles, and they made their way down to the back door. When they got there the doctor dropped his end, pushed the bar and peered into the alley. There was nobody around, so he darted out and opened the rear door of his large saloon car, which he had backed up close to the building. He raced back inside. 'Now,' he whispered. Together they hauled the body into the back. The doctor slammed it shut, and hurried round to the driver's seat. Without a word he got in and drove away.

The old man pulled the door closed and made his way up to Room Eight. He put the steps back in their cupboard, and the chair in its place in the corner, checking it for damage as he did. None was noticeable. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and

wiped the seat. Very occasionally he would sit there, and he didn't want any muck from the woman's shoes ending up on his trousers.

Crouching, his knees stiff, he used his hands to wipe the sawn fibres into a pile, and wrapped them in the handkerchief. He picked up both lengths of rope, and had a final look around. He noticed her handbag was on the floor behind the display board. He picked it up, then went upstairs and dropped the pieces of rope into the kitchen bin. It had all been quite straightforward; he and the doctor had known these incidents to be a lot messier than this one. The cuffs of his brilliant white shirt remained spotless as he measured a fresh length from the coil of rope he kept under the sink, cut it, and tied an immaculate noose to replace the one the woman had taken from the display in the *Popular Methods* room. He wondered for a moment how long it would be before he was to find himself cutting yet another length of rope, but then he stopped wondering. It all meant very little to him. It would happen when it happened.

III

It took little time for the doctor to drive from the city centre to the suburbs. As the old man was putting the newly tied noose in its place, he arrived back at his home, a detached house in a quiet, green neighbourhood. His gates and the door to his double garage opened automatically, and when they had clicked shut behind him he walked to the back of the car, opened it, looked down and sighed.

'You poor girl,' he whispered, as if she was sleeping and he must take care not to wake her. 'You poor girl.' He shook his head. 'Coffee first.' He opened the door to the kitchen, and went through.

Doctor Ernst Fröhlicher had moved to the city ten years earlier, bringing with him a black Labrador called Hans and a heart-stopping tale of tragedy. While

looking for a house to settle in he had rented a room, and a short conversation with his landlady ensured that before his trunks were unpacked his story had spread through the streets around his practice. This was the extent of what was known: *Doctor Fröhlicher had married at the age of twenty-five, and been widowed at the age of twenty-eight.*

Noticing his wedding ring, his landlady had asked whether he would be joined at any point by Mrs Fröhlicher, and on hearing his reply she had not found it possible to ask him to go on. The story remained unembellished as it passed from house to house, and everyone who heard it felt their heart turn to lead with pity. Barring only the smallest details they saw the same image in their minds, of a wife so beautiful and so gentle that to behold her would make the heart overflow with joy, and of a man quite superhuman in his courage as he faced the world alone, smiling as he devoted himself to healing others even though he was unable to mend his own broken heart. When, a few years into his time in the town, the doctor let slip to a talkative patient that his wife had died as a result of complications from a pregnancy, his heroic status soared to even further heights, and thus he was able to live alone as he entered middle age without a single eyebrow being raised, or so much as a whisper of innuendo passing from house to house.

His wife, Ute, had indeed been extraordinarily

beautiful, but his new neighbours were not to know that she had also been wayward, devious, scheming and, when it suited her, shrill. Nor were they to know that there had been a coldness to her beauty, her lips always on the verge of turning thin and her blue eyes quick to narrow into slits. Her mother had not been blind to her daughter's ways, and had often found herself suggesting that she stop all her nonsense, find a promising young professional and settle down. One day the girl surprised her by seeming to do just that.

The conventionally good-looking son of a nearby family was in the final stages of studying medicine, and hearing he was back for a few days, Ute had feigned a dizzy spell and requested a visit from him. The consultation took place in her bedroom, and the moment he walked in she let her white silk robe fall to the floor.

'I'm ready for my examination,' she said.

As his eyes took in the most wonderful sight he had ever beheld, he had no idea what to do.

She helped him. 'Why not start here?' she said, taking one of his hands, guiding it downwards and gently pressing his middle finger to her, applying just the right amount of pressure as she guided it in a circular motion. He closed his eyes, and could feel the brush of the coarse, dark hairs, and the warmth, and the moisture. 'I'm feeling dizzy again,' she whispered, 'but in a different way from before.' She let out a series of small, breathy yelps, and touched his cheek with a single finger. 'A very different way.'

She moved his hand to one of her breasts, making sure the soft golden hair she had shaken loose brushed against his fingers. 'Have you found the root of the problem yet?' she asked, her mouth open just a little as she moved closer to him. She took his spare hand, and guided it to her other breast. 'Do you think it could be glandular?' As she pushed her body into his she could feel that she had conquered him.

'Oh, doctor,' she said.

'Well, I am not yet qualified, and I suggest that you . . .' Her lips brushed against his, and at last the world made sense. Everything he had strived for and everything he had lived through had been a stepping-stone leading him to this: the moment he found out what it meant to love somebody with every cell in his body. He had always had a sense that he had been looking for something, and he had found it right there in the soft lips that no longer brushed against his but devoured them, and in the smooth back that undulated beneath the touch of his fingers, and when they finally disengaged from their kiss it was there in the face that looked up at him, a face so immaculate that for a moment he thought nature unkind for not having made all women as perfect as the one in his arms.

Her fingers moved down to his belt buckle, and three months later her mother stood in church and looked on as her nineteen-year-old daughter exchanged vows with this handsome and promising young professional.

She wanted to be happy for them, but no matter how hard she tried, it wasn't possible. She had only ever seen her child look so demure when she had been up to something, and the joy and relief she should have felt was eclipsed by worry for her new son-in-law, and a creeping sense of guilt for having wished this terrible fate upon him.

Ute's mother's fears had not been misplaced. As the honeymooners paddled at sunset in the Mediterranean Sea, the bride told her husband that she had only married him to get back at her much older lover for refusing to leave his wife. She called a passing stranger, handed over their camera and asked for a photograph. 'Look happy,' she whispered. 'I'll make sure he gets a copy. It'll drive him insane.'

The young man felt as if he had been punched in the belly as he placed his arm around his bride's shoulders, and smiled.

'Don't worry though,' she said, when the stranger had handed back the camera, 'I'll still let you fuck me.'

To his horror, he found his heart gladdened by these words.

As they set up home together, Ute complained about the modest size of their apartment, railed at the time he devoted to his junior position at the hospital when he could have been dancing attendance on her, and did little to hide her readiness to yield to temptation

in his absence. The onslaught never abated. Even on her death bed, when she had known there was no chance of recovery, she had refused to say she was sorry for the way she had treated him, and she used the last of her energy to imply that the baby, by this time lost, had almost certainly been her lover's, the one she had gone so far out of her way to spite. 'Now he'll be sorry,' she said, her beauty more powerful than ever as it shone from her ashen face. The doctor still loved her completely, and even though he felt a sense of release when this awful child's heart stopped beating, it was a release he would never have wished for.

The people who heard his story were right when they shook their heads and supposed that nobody would ever be able to take her place.

The doctor tickled Hans behind his ears, and while the coffee was percolating he found his camera, returned to the garage and opened the back of the car. He took some photographs then braced himself, picked up the body and carried it to one of his four large chest freezers. Smiling, he heaved it in, closed the lid and went back inside. There was still time for breakfast before Hans' walk.

He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a thick slice of meat, which he fried in dripping and seasoned with a sprinkling of salt and pepper. When it was ready he put it on a plate and ate it, throwing the occasional piece to the grateful dog. 'This will set me up amply

for the morning ahead,' he said, 'and for the sake of balance I shall eat an apple as we walk in the park. After all, Hans, it is important to receive a range of nutrients, particularly at breakfast time, and folk wisdom and modern science are united in telling us that there are few foods more nutritious than the apple.'

Hans had heard these sounds many times before.

The doctor scraped the bone into the bin and put the plate in the dishwasher. 'Come, Hans,' he said. The dog bounded for the front door and waited to be put on his lead.