

Also by Pony Louder

# The Memory of Blood

'Unforgettable'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

'So good I want to scream'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

'Luminous'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

'My book of the year'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

# OCTOPUS

Pony Louder

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This book is based on the experiences and recollections of the author. Names and some locations and dates have been changed to protect the privacy of others.

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**For Doy**

Who taught me to read and gave me the world

**And for Margot and Michael**

Who showed me the world, and gave me a few other things besides

With a host of furious fancies  
Whereof I am commander,  
With a burning spear and a horse of air,  
To the wilderness I wander.  
By a knight of ghosts and shadows  
I summoned am to tourney  
Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end:  
Methinks it is no journey.

– *Anonymous*

'We were all going to hold hands, take LSD, find God – and what happened? We ended up at the drug dealer's door, carrying guns and in total madness.

– *Dennis Hopper, the Guardian*

## Prologue

A note about the weather

Go deep. Be real, they say. Write the truth.

Good grief.

I've tried to. As far as I can tell, the real story's the most interesting one.

Problem is, truth is slippery as water. It's not easy to cup in your hands. Sometimes there are scars: anchors on your skin you can follow. Pulling yourself, hand-over-hand, back down through murky depths to the events. Mostly though, truth relies on the wet work of memory. And memory is weird. Things aren't always in the places we left them. Sometimes memory and imagination feel like the same thing.

When we were kids, the truth was simple. It was what we couldn't talk about. And maybe this isn't my story to tell.

I was there.

This is what I saw.

That doesn't mean a dozen other people might have seen something else. Or that any of them would be wrong.

Memory tells lies. None of us remember easy. But I've done my best. I've gone deep.

Oh, and I know about the weather. I know you're not supposed to open with swirling snow and black canals frozen solid. Fuck that. I say the weather is truth too.

Also, I changed the names. Trust me, you would have too.

**Amsterdam, 1983**

A little after 1am

It's snowing outside.

Beautiful twirling flakes, fat and fluttery as ripped paper. They're piling up on the balcony and collecting in heaps along the edges of the canal below.

This is the first city we've lived in where it's snowed while we've been in it. Not just a shake of grey in the air and wet spots on the footpath. This is proper white. We're living in a fairy tale. It's like walking around inside a giant snow globe that's being ever-so-gently shaken.

The apartment we're staying in is on the Prinsengracht, close to the Westerkerk church, right in the centre of Amsterdam. Across the canal is the Anne Frank house, where Anne's family sheltered from the concentration camps. Most afternoons there's a line of people over there, slow-shuffling up the street, waiting to go inside and take a stickybeak around the annex.

I've not been over myself, but I can picture the tight coil of stairs, the wooden rail worn shiny from too many hands. It's not hard to imagine the claustrophobia of being sealed shut behind a wall for two years.

Maybe it's respectful. Something about the long queue feels ghoulish. Like gawping at a car crash. It reminds me of how people slow down on the motorway to look at tyre burns and windscreen fragments. People want to see blood. Whoever owns the house now must be raking it in.

So it's beautiful, but also sad. When there's no queue, the Anne Frank house looks like a normal home. From the outside at least. Same as ours. I try to pretend no one was ever dragged down those stairs to their deaths, and just soak in how lovely the tall Dutch houses look across the frozen canal.

I can't get enough of the view. The crazy-thin, six-storied buildings, the looping black bridges, the twirling snowflakes. I could stare at it for hours, but we have to keep the curtains drawn. Even in Amsterdam, where everyone seems so easy-going and nice, it would be pretty bad if anyone saw what we're doing.

What we're doing is tablespooning extremely high-grade cocaine into the hollow legs of camera tripods.

It's kind of snowing inside too.

It's a little after 1am and the air is cloudy with powder. It's all hands on deck. Besides Mum and Dad, there's Nils and Baz and myself.

In their day jobs, Nils and Baz are freelance graphic designers. They specialise in album covers that look like photographs but are really airbrushed paintings. Photoshop doesn't exist yet, so Nils and Baz are in big demand. Skinny and generously haired, they look more like rockstars than some of the rockstars they work for. You could picture them strutting around an arena somewhere. Hogging up front of stage, doing

all those extended guitar solos. Baz with one boot on the footlights, Nils sliding to his knees. Both of them with their heads thrown back, eyes closed, lost in their own strumming and the crowd's rapturous applause. They are best friends, but you know they'd fight over who played lead.

Right now, they're dusted in cocaine. I look down and see it's all over me too. It's settled on my arms and t-shirt and around the hip pockets of my jeans. It's the colour of slightly off-white icing sugar.

There's a small window of time in which this needs to be done. The mood in the room is bright and industrious. Think Snow White's seven dwarves marching home. Which is kind of appropriate, if you know your eighties drug slang.

It's fairly dull, repetitive work that anyone could do. But, as usual, I'm keen to show how helpful I can be and stuffing it down extra hard into my tripod. *Heigh-ho. Heigh-ho. Scoop, scoop, down the metal leg we go.*

Rather than whistling, everyone is humming along with Fleetwood Mac. Via the stereo near the bookshelf, Stevie Nicks is singing about going your own way. Which is maybe also appropriate, if you believe all the rumours about how much blow Stevie got through making this record.

This is the purest cocaine anyone in the room has ever seen or snorted.

People tend to lie about drugs. It's one of the associated problems, certainly in the procurement stages. When it comes to drugs there's a lot of exaggeration over quality. Everyone swears theirs will be the best gear ever. Then they go and deliver something that's been stepped on more times than Tiananmen Square. The chances of getting the purity you've ordered is so desperately optimistic that no one really expects to.

Except tonight, when the consignment arrived and the tests were done, it turned out to actually be 99.2 percent pure, uncut cocaine. Turns out, it pays to buy in bulk.

Bulk. No one in the room is actually saying this out loud, but I get the feeling that ordering up a bunch of 1kg bricks of Bolivian cocaine is not the same as seeing them stacked neatly in front of you on the dining table.

Luckily the dining table is a big one. It and everything else in this apartment belongs to Nico, a friend of Nils' who is living elsewhere at the moment. From the outside, her flat looks like a traditional Dutch house. Inside it's all chrome, butter-soft black leather and two large banana trees. It's weird to see tropical plants growing somewhere so cold, but I guess if the bananas stay indoors, bunched up near the radiators, they'll be OK.

Nico is great. Most people don't like it if you tell them you don't know how long you'll be living somewhere. It's a lot to expect someone with a regular life to understand, but Nico didn't blink twice. Maybe because her boyfriend is in a band and always travelling too. Nico has a decent bookshelf and she was really nice about that as well. 'Eh? You like *my* books? Of course! Read, read!'



Probably she was surprised because she knows I can't speak Dutch or French, but there are a few English paperbacks, and half her shelves are art books, so you can still look at the pictures. There's a whole shelf taken up by those extra-glossy sexy-type books, but you can't have everything.

From this point onwards, the cocaine will be divided up. Some of it will be travelling in wine bottles, so the first job was to weigh out the portion that needed to be converted to liquid. Nico's glass-topped dining table was given a quick polish and the bundles of coke were razored open.

Once it was freed from its tight bundles, the amount of cocaine *was* impressive. Even to me. It's a table that comfortably sits eight chairs, and it's now heaped with powder. Like someone went outside, raked up a couple of wheelbarrows of snow and dumped it here, all over the glass. Hence the chipper mood around the table.

I imagined it was a pile of Ferrero Rocher chocolate balls to get the vibe.

The wine bottles were specially blown. Just like Nico and Anne Frank's houses, they look normal from the outside, but like Anne's, each bottle has a secret compartment. Below the cork there's a small section that will be filled with wine, leaving three-quarters of the bottle hollow. Baz and Nils designed a wine label to hide the seam that separates the coke from the wine. With its embossed gold printing, their label looks super-authentic. You don't even notice that it goes right around each bottle.

Behind the green glass, the two liquids look the same. Even if you pick up a bottle and shake it. Anyone curious enough to actually uncork it will find shiraz. Everyone's pretty pleased with this bit of sneakiness. Hopefully that curious person won't want more than a few sips.

Along with the tripods, we'll take half the wine bottles. Travelling separately, Nils and Baz will take the other half. If anyone asks, this is my grandparents' favourite wine. Our story is that Nanny and Poppa have a big anniversary dinner party coming up. We're helping them celebrate their years of wedded bliss by bringing the red to be served with mains.

That's the story, but all goes well, no grandparents anywhere will ever know anything about this wine.

The bottles have been boxed in special carry cases, then wrapped in Happy Anniversary gift paper. Now we need to concentrate on getting the rest of this cocaine into the tripod legs.

It's hot in the apartment, the central heating's on and we obviously can't open the windows. Nils has stripped to a vest. Baz has rolled the sleeves of his fully unbuttoned denim shirt about as high up his arms as they'll go. I'm in my baggy *Hungry Like The Wolf* t-shirt. Mum and Dad are both still in warm long sleeves, but they don't own any short-sleeved clothes anymore. Anything that didn't hide the inside of their arms had to go a while back. Even the pretty dresses Mum had made for her.

Mum has tied back her long red hair. Her beautiful face is glowing. She's happily moving in time to the music. I imagine she's wishing I wasn't so uptight. I keep spooning, packing it down as hard as I can.

In addition to the spooning, there's a lot of furious sniffing going on around the table. Also running fingers over the front of teeth, licking the insides of the bundle wrappings and laughing about just how superb the sight of a massive pile of almost entirely pure Bolivian cocaine really is. There's jokes and general hilarity about how much a sneeze could cost us right now: 'Anyone feel one coming on, Chrissakes step away from the table! Mwahaha,' etc etc.

Earlier, getting the cocaine into the perfect wine-like consistency was precision work that involved extensive product sampling, so everyone's pretty happy right now.

Everyone but me.

Instead of 'living in the moment', I'm thinking about what would happen, exactly, if the police barged in now. Even in Amsterdam where everyone seems so nice, there are laws about this amount of class A drug. I can't see how the adults wouldn't go to jail for a long time. None of them are Dutch, so most likely they'd be extradited, which could mean life sentences.

That's nothing new. Mum and Dad being carted off to spend the rest of their lives in gruesomely unhygienic jail cells has been a nagging strain for a while. Right now, there's also the worry of how we're going to get all this cocaine into the tripods: I don't see how it can possibly fit. I'm spooning like mad, stuffing the metal tube solid, really cramming it in, and the mountain in front of me doesn't seem to be getting any smaller. There is just so much stupid cocaine.

I keep looking up at the clock on the kitchen wall. We have a deadline and it's coming up very soon. If we miss this deadline, the supply chain tumbles like a domino chain all the way down to Sydney, Australia. My understanding is that this would be *very* bad.

As usual, I'm the only one who seems the least bit concerned. 'Dad, we're not going to make it.'

'Course we will,' says my father, a light dusting of white over his goateed chin. 'Just pack it properly.'

'We ordered too much,' I say, mostly under my breath.

'What on *earth* will we do with a spare pile of pure cocaine?' says Nils in mock horror. Everyone chortles.

Switching to my third tripod leg, I start going faster. Jamming the coke down with the back of my spoon. Standing on tiptoes to put my weight into it.

I'm not a fan of drugs. They make things very stressful.

There's a building rush in my head, a roar in my ears.

I look down at my feet. They look small and far away. Down there, under the snowy glass tabletop, they seem entirely disconnected from the rest of me.

I'm pretty sure I'm standing still. My feet aren't moving, but my chest is tight and loud, like I've been running up stairs. My eyes feel extra wide-open and fluttery. Faster and faster I pack. My hand's moving so fast now, it looks fuzzy around the edges.

What I don't realise is that I'm coked off my head. High as a kite, just like the adults. You could peel me off the ceiling.

I'm so anti-drugtaking that it never occurs to me, or anyone else in the room, that some of the stuff clouding up the air and coating my clothes could have floated up my nose or into my mouth. No one's thinking about face masks or gloves. The air is so thick with cocaine, we could probably be getting high just from the particles hitting the membrane on our eyeballs.

I look up at the clock again. The more freaked I feel, the more relaxed everyone else seems. No one looks the least bit worried, about anything. Dad's not even trying, he's loosened up his silk cravat and is leaning down to leisurely snort up another bump from the edge of the pile, one arm behind his back like a posh waiter about to pour from a bottle of Chateau Margaux. Baz is fiddling with the stereo.

My heart's now pounding so fast, I think I might go blind.

Then, suddenly, the tightness in my chest surges up and pops like a bubble.

In its place deep blue sadness. Fizzing with sharp feelings. All the feelings, about all the things: that life is swerving precariously, evermore out of control. That I haven't been to school for years. That my father just spent the night in jail. No one can understand how he could possibly have been released with the drugs and passports that he had on him. It's great, obviously, that he got out, but *how*? Is my Dad an escaped convict now? On top of everything else?

None of this can be a healthy home environment for my little brother and sisters.

Fantastically emotional now – oblivious to the fact I'm enjoying a quality of high that most users can only dream of – I get to the worse bit. I'm twelve. In just four months I'll be thirteen: three whole years into my second decade and I've done *nothing* with my life. When she was my age, poor doomed Anne Frank was writing a book that's been read by half the planet. I can barely make myself commit to writing a shopping list.

I'm so old. I've achieved zilch. And I don't fit in. Not with normal people. Not with the people in this room. We've been to a lot of countries: I'm on my third passport and most of its pages are stamped. It feels safe to assume that if I haven't fitted in anywhere yet, that place probably doesn't exist. I'm obviously weird as hell.

The whole thing is unbearable. Excruciating. All I want is a normal life with normal parents and normal friends, and there's nowhere in the world I'll ever belong.

I feel so old and tired I could collapse on the carpet right here.

Finally, the tripods are packed solid.

As the adults are scraping up the glass table, I slump over to the balcony. Drowning in self-wallow, but still very careful not to ruffle the curtains as I open the door, I step out into the night.

Outside everything feels muted and still.

It's late on a Tuesday night in January and there's no one out. Snowflakes are all that's moving. They're falling soft, but thoroughly. It's very cold. There's a blue wash to the light and everything is ridiculously pretty. I know I should be thankful to be here, alive. Especially with poor dead Anne Frank just across the canal. My life's a sunshine picnic compared to hers. Hundred percent I should be grateful. Can't be arsed. How much I don't want to be me right now is too consuming.

To add to the misery, I've just realised my face is crying. There's a salt-sticky trail that's freezing down each cheek. It is *very* cold out here in my t-shirt. Instead of going back into the warmth, I stay put, melodramatically freezing. Maybe catching pneumonia, I think.

Raucous peals of laughter come from inside. Grace Jones's *Pull Up To The Bumper* is now thumping out of the stereo. It sounds like everyone's singing along. Possibly dancing. There's a chorus of woohoos. Tucked snug in their beds upstairs, my siblings are used to noise. Hopefully Nico's neighbours are also good sleepers.

I'm so tired. I brush some of the snow off the ledge so I can sit with my back against the balcony door. Really, when you give it proper consideration, our whole situation is hopeless. My presence is definitely not improving it.

As I sit down, the single-edged razorblade I've got in my jeans jabs my leg. This happens a lot. I'm always forgetting to take them out of my pockets. I don't even need to carry one around, there's plenty of them scattered throughout the apartment. The blades are designed for old-school shaving razors, the ones you pop and screw in, but the sharpness of the blade, coupled with the blunt finger guard down the other side make them super-handy to do lots of other things. Whisk the brown bits off apples, snip threads of cotton. I use them all the time. They cut so neat, you feel really powerful and precise.

Mum and Dad use them for chopping up lines. More fun than using a credit card. Tougher on mirrors though. Most places we stay, any mirror that can be pulled down from a wall and laid flat gets scratched to hell. After a week or two, you have to squint to see your face past the webs of lines cut into the glass.

The razor in my pocket I'd last used when I was helping slice open the bricks of coke. I'm fiddling with it now, feeling the fine edge of the blade with my fingertips.

In the dim light, I can just make out the thin line of blue under my skin, the vein running vertically up my arm from my upturned wrist. Everyone knows horizontal cuts are for losers and show ponies. Anyone who means it, would cut vertically. Even I know that.

## Octopus

The blade slices softly through my skin. It's so sharp, it glides almost tenderly along the vein. There's almost no resistance. Like cutting jelly. It doesn't even hurt much.

There's a moment of nothing. Like everything is frozen blue. Me and the canal and the beautiful Dutch houses all holding our breath, waiting for what I've done to actually happen.

Then it does.

A line of dark red appears and bubbles up. It drips off my arm, down to the snowy ledge beside me. Warm enough that it melts deep into the snow. I peer down at it, thinking of Snow White again and her mother's ruby red blood in the beginning of the fairy tale. My blood looks quite atmospheric.

Then the cut starts to sting. It stings like a bugger. Suddenly there's a lot of blood. It's pouring through the fingers of my other hand, which is now gripped in horror over where I've sliced myself.

The blood's coming out like a tap. Soaking the snow.

Panicked, I start kicking all the red snow off the balcony onto the street below.

One hand clamped to the other wrist, I'm now doing this weird little kicking dance, like some demented Riverdancer, trying to get rid of all the red snow. But the more red snow I kick away, the more red snow there is.

My blood's gushing out like it's super-excited to be leaving me behind.

I'm also *really* cold now. I'm shivering so hard, I'm kind of juddering.

This is not going well.

Whatever this is, it's not going well.

I've made a right cock of things.

Typical.

## **PART 1: THE SEVENTIES**

In the beginning.

## Auckland, New Zealand

Ten years earlier

‘Absolutely not. It’s dangerous. We are not having that shit in the house.’

It’s 1973 and Martin T. Starling, my dad, was glaring at the box I’d just carried in like it might end us all.

‘Maybe if we let her keep this one... We’ll tell your parents not to buy any more,’ offered my mother, Vivienne Starling, not really wanting to get involved.

I rested the box gently on the rug and took a small, hopeful step backwards. Imagining it might seem less treacherous out of my hands.

The three of us looked down at the set of Lego I’d just been given. My birthday present from my grandparents for turning three.

Dad was a bit ahead of the curve on this one. In 1973 everyone loved plastic. As far as I knew, everyone thought it was superb. Or at least when they looked at children’s toys, no one was thinking of whales washing up dead on beaches with 100kg plastic balls lodged in their stomachs.

I certainly wasn’t. I’d never wanted anything more.

My chubby little paws were shaking to hold the box again. Just carrying it around from Nanny and Poppa’s had been intoxicating. So bright. So shiny! The rattle and shuffle of the pieces inside pure joy.

Even the sticky cellophane smell of it called to me. It was the smell of what normal kids had. I already had an inkling we weren’t quite like everyone else, but I was young enough to think this could be fixed with a 350-piece set of building blocks.

‘You can’t destroy it. Lasts forever. *Forever!* Something man-made lasting forever, can you even *imagine* how seriously ridiculous that is?! And they’re churning out *more* of it,’ yelled Dad. ‘We are *not* having that petroleum, man-made bullshit in our house.’

Our house wasn’t really ours. Strictly speaking, it wasn’t even a house. We were living in a small cottage behind Dad’s parents’ home. Their place wasn’t really a house either, it was a three-levelled mansion on the side of a 470ft volcanic mountain.

The address was number 231 Remuera Road, and everyone called it Two-three-one.

My whole family lived at 231. A colony of Starlings (and for a glorious but brief time, one Conway-Smith, my other grandmother). Like Miss Havisham’s place in *Great Expectations*, there was a general feel of

expired glamour at 231. Built at the top of a private driveway, the house had been fitted in the very finest style. But that had been some time previous and no one had done much since.

Rooms were still lit with crystal chandeliers. The carpet still richly patterned, but puddles of threadbare beige had started to creep around doorways and down the middle of some of the hallways. If you pressed the wallpaper with your fingers, sometimes you could feel air bubbling behind the gold filigree swirls.

The laundry dated back to another time altogether. It was called the washhouse and consisted of an open tub that hissed and gurgled grey water like a witch's cauldron. It had a mangle to wring out wet clothes and a wooden board for particularly stubborn stains. This being the seventies rather than the 1870s, it was a fairly antique operation, but it was used daily without discussion or complaint. By the women at least. I never saw a man venture into the washhouse, I don't know what they did with their dirty clothes.

The nearest neighbour down the mountain was a nose and ear specialist who lived behind a dense trellis of kiwifruit vines. Five more minutes down the driveway was inner-city Auckland, New Zealand's biggest city, but living on Mount Hobson felt rural. Cows stomped freely over the parklands next door. If our side gate was left open, the herd would come barrelling into the front garden. They were not friendly and left behind hauntingly large pats. Anyone of my size unfortunate enough to fall over near one could find themselves coated head-to-toe in slimy horror.

The house rambled, an unidentified shape. No one could say for sure how many rooms there were. I'd tried to count them, but there was never a time I could access every room. At some point in its history, the mansion had been divided up into self-contained flats. The flats had different combinations of bedrooms, lounge, kitchen and bathroom. Two of them were just large rooms with locks on their doors and a shared bathroom down one of the long dark corridors.

My grandparents had six children, but there was always space for everyone. At one point, when there wasn't, and Uncle Lance had to move back home with his pregnant girlfriend, he and Dad got the hammers out. Everyone helped bring down the walls in the front basement. Narrowly escaping total structural collapse and turning it into a hilariously oversized open-plan living space. Once the beanbags were in and some macraméd pot plants were hanging from the ceiling, it looked pretty cool.

Always, throughout 231, the key aroma was toast. You could smell it as soon as you walked into the hallway. Toast was the breakfast, snack or light meal of preference. Specifically well-buttered wholegrain; usually topped with thin-sliced tomato and a shake of salt. In this, unlike many things, the Starlings were united. Whatever time of day, it was pretty reliable that someone, somewhere in the house, would be toasting bread or slicing up a tomato.

As well as Starlings, there were four tenants at 231. Whether by design or chance, all of them unmarried men. The bachelor tenants came and went, mysterious and largely unseen by me. I'd occasionally glimpse



one of them hurrying across the grand hall or lightly jogging from their mailbox. Reversing at speed out of the carpark.

They paid for their flats in brown envelopes that would be slipped under the glass doors of Nanny and Poppa's flat. Sometimes, if you were lucky, you'd see a dark shadow approaching the frosted glass, then one of Nanny's pre-labelled little envelopes would slide under the door. Always, my dream was to fling open the doors and make friends, but I had strict instructions not to disturb the tenants. No running or singing past their doorways. Definitely no talking to them.

One tenant drove a pale green Citron DS. A highly exotic car for New Zealand in 1973, when everyone else was tootling about in brown and white Fords. It looked like its bum was hanging down in the road, but this was the design. The Citron-driving tenant worked for an unnamed government organisation and was mostly away overseas. It was generally understood that he was a spy.

Another tenant wore Old Spice aftershave. You could smell it wafting down the corridors long after he'd scurried past. When he moved out, years later, to live with his boyfriend, I got to see his flat (five rooms if you counted a walk-in closet). Weeks after his departure, the flat still smelt of Old Spice and Benson & Hedges; a faint undertone of grilled bacon.

I worried for them. The idea of living alone in family-less, bacon-y bachelorhood seemed lonely to me. Nanny said the tenants preferred it that way, 'If they didn't, they'd just pop up and go, wouldn't they?' It was true the tenants stayed for years, two of them had been in their flats long before I was even born.

The Starlings themselves were less settled. Within the family, tensions felt tight and watery, always ready to crack open like a watermelon. Mostly they sloshed over my head. I didn't understand why Mum and Dad so disliked living in such a great home.

Every so often there'd be a sharp moment for me to puzzle over. Once Mum and I accidentally brought death flowers for Nanny. We'd picked the creamy white calla lilies before we knew that they were cursed harbingers of doom. They just looked like flowers. But when Nanny saw us standing in her kitchen with them in our hands, she let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Even as we backed away out the kitchen door, Mum hiding the lilies behind her, Nanny was still screaming. 'Get out! Get *out!* over and over again, in the worst voice.

On the steps outside Mum and I looked at each other. We'd done something really bad. Hurrying back to the car, our hands sticky from the lilies, Mum promised me we hadn't brought death into the house. It was just that 'no one would ever be good enough for that woman's precious son'.

Mum was right. No one ever died at 231.

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