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opening extract from

# Barkbelly

written by

## Cat Weatherill

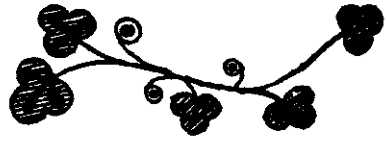
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## Puffin

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# *The Beginning*



The flying machine bumbled on through the night, humming like a fat bee. Above, the sky was freckled with stars. Below, the blue hills slipped by unseen. On board, the star sailor swayed in his hammock, dreaming of gold. Nothing disturbed his sleep. Nothing told him that some of his precious cargo was about to be stolen.

The thief clung to the rigging, eyeing the bag of wooden eggs. She tilted her head. She peered. She pondered. She judged the distance between her perch and the string bag and calculated the degree of sway. Then she flew down between the spinning feather blades, caught hold of the bag with beak and claws, and dangled acrobatically beneath. She breathed in. *Silver stars! What a tantalizing scent!* She opened her mouth and wrapped her beak round one of the eggs. Her black tongue wriggled over its surface. She tasted salt and sand, forest and fern.

The parrot wondered what kind of nuts they were. She had never seen anything like them before.

The shells were unbelievably hard. Could she crack one open? No, not in the bag. She would have to get one on to the deck and then hold it between her feet. If she chewed through the string, one would slip out easily enough . . .

'Bella! Leave the cargo alone!'

The star sailor, Moontar, was wandering across the deck to the navigation crystals. Bella knew he would soon return to his hammock. If she didn't move, perhaps he would forget she was there.

'Bella! Come down!' Moontar yawned and rubbed his gummy eyes. 'I can *see* you, you know! Come down! Those eggs are worth money. If you chew through the bag, they'll go everywhere. Come on now. Leave them!'

But Bella didn't leave them. She dangled like a bat and glared at Moontar. How dare he intrude like this? She was a Purple-Plumed Night Parrot. The night belonged to her. *To her.* Moontar was trespassing. How dare he? This was her time to fly, to explore, to eat. She would do what she liked. Let him wait till morning.

Bella returned to her chewing. The thin string was wet and weak. Her tongue wormed the fibres looser.

'Bella . . .'

Moontar was walking towards her. She chewed on.

'I'm warning you.'

He was pointing a finger at her. *Oh, the cheek of the man!* She watched him with one cold eye. She could feel an egg starting to push through the hole she was making.

'BELLA!'

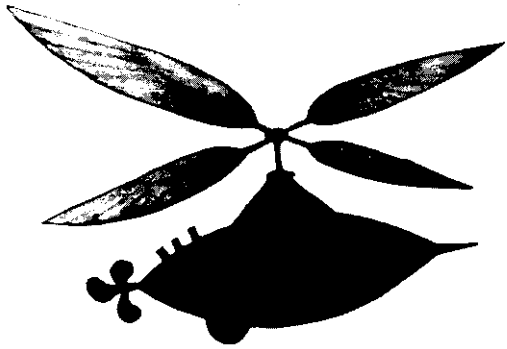
The star sailor lunged towards her but she was gone, flying off into the darkness she loved. His fingers closed round nothing but the bag.

'Seven seas!' he muttered. 'She's more trouble than a monkey. And that's saying something.'

Moontar realized he would have to unhook the bag from the rigging. Bella couldn't be trusted. She would return as soon as he was below deck, and the eggs were valuable cargo. With a grunt, he pulled over a crate, clambered up and unhooked the bag. But as he did, one shiny egg slipped out through the hole Bella had made and fell down, down, down through the midnight sky. Down to the shadowland below, where it thudded into a farmer's field. And there it lay, hidden from human eyes, while the wheat grew up around it. Mice built their nests in the stalks above it. Slugs gathered in the damp soil beneath it. Rain soaked it. Mud spattered it. Summer sun dried it. Weeks went by and still it lay there unnoticed.

But then the harvesters came.

# PART ONE






Fish Patterson pulled out a grubby handkerchief and mopped his brow. It was still early, but already he could feel the heat rising. Sunbeams were dancing on the roofs in Pumbleditch.

*I should be down at the river on a day like this*, he thought, *not stuck in a field with the oldies*. But everyone had to help with the harvest. That was the rule. For two exhausting weeks, every Pumbleditcher had to sweat and heave and tie and truss until the fields were stubbly as chins.

His mates were already at work – if shoving wheat stalks down someone's shirt could be called work. Moth, Dipper, Log: they were all there, over on the far side of the field. Even at this distance Fish could hear Moth's protests. He was writhing around on the ground, shouting and laughing in turn. Poor Moth. Always the victim.

Fish felt someone tugging at his jumper, as if it wasn't baggy enough already. He knew it was Little Pan Evans before he heard his voice.

'Fish! Fish!'

'What?' He looked down on to a face as eager as a puppy's.

'One of the harness rats is being real nasty,' said Pan, hopping from foot to foot. 'In the next field. I'm going to tell the lads.' He sprinted away.

Fish thought for a moment. Did he really want to watch someone fighting a rat as big as a lion, with teeth like penknives and claws like daggers? Yes. Oh, yes!

Fish sped into the next field.

The harness rats powered the tractors. They were devils to handle if they were angry and, this morning, one was. The handlers had it trapped in a corner of the field. They had ropes, but Fish could see that the rat wasn't going to be harnessed without a fight. It bared its teeth and gripped the earth with polished claws.

'He's wicked,' said a familiar voice at his side. Moth Williams. 'Look at those eyes. They'll never get him in the wheelcage.'

'Course they will,' said Dipper Dean, coming up behind. 'They just need to get those ropes round his neck, then they can haul him in. They'll have to mind his tail, though.'

The gang watched as the men positioned themselves. Boot Marlow, the head rat handler, was a brawny man with watery eyes and a beard like a hawthorn hedge. Next to him was Sock Samuels,

a thin man with patched trousers and foul feet. And lastly, Rag Weaver, the youngest of the three – little more than a lad, with a thatch of yellow hair and a gap-toothed grin. He wasn't smiling now, though. He was terrified. The rope dangled in his hands like a dead adder.

'I think they should forget about the ropes,' said Log Worthing, last to arrive as usual. 'If Sock Samuels took off his shoes, they could hold him like a battering ram and the stink from his feet would stun that rat.'

Fish grinned. 'That's too cruel! I like this rat. Look at it his way. Once he's in that wheelcage, he'll have to run round and round all day. I'd put up a fight too.'

But the rat didn't have time to fight. Suddenly three ropes dropped over his head and the nooses tightened as the men pulled. The rat reared up on his back legs, but the men held him fast and others ran to join them. The rat was dragged along the ground. His claws furrowed the earth. He thrashed his tail, but the men were expecting that and kept well clear. He hissed uselessly. Big as he was, there were just too many of them.

The lads watched as he was bullied into an empty wheelcage. The men closed the door and slipped the ropes off his head. The rat sniffed the air. There was a rat in the other wheelcage – he could smell its misery. Then the men pushed the tractor from

behind and the wheelcages began to turn. The rat started to run; he had no choice. The wheelcages turned faster and faster as the tractor gathered momentum and then they settled into a steady rhythmic roll. Another day's work had begun.

'Poor thing didn't stand a chance,' said Moth.

'Never do,' said Dipper.

'I like rats,' said Little Pan Evans, though he knew no one would be listening to him.

'We should be getting back now,' said Log. 'We'll be missed.'

They started to walk off. In the other field, they saw Gable Gantry, the village carpenter, mending a broken wheelcage. He nodded to them as they passed.

'I like him,' said Moth while they walked on.

'Yes, he's all right,' said Fish.

'Stand back!' said Log.

A tractor was rumbling towards them, driven by Farmer Gubbin. There was a shushing of blades as it scythed past, then – *THUUD!* – the blades struck something hard. Whatever it was went hurtling through the air towards Gable Gantry and – *UURGH!* – smacked him hard on the head. He went down like a skittle.

'Whoa!' said Fish. 'Old man down!'

The gang whooped and whistled and ran over for a closer look. But when they reached him, Gable Gantry was scary. He wasn't moving. Thick, dark

blood dripped from the wound in his forehead.

'He's dead!' cried Little Pan Evans.

'He can't be,' said Fish. He knelt down and put his ear close to the old man's face. He listened. He frowned.

'Is he dead?' whispered Moth. There was no reply. 'Fish! Is he dead?'

Fish looked up. His face was pale as paper. 'I can hear him breathing,' he said gravely. Then he grinned and Little Pan Evans punched him.

People started running over from all parts of the field. They made a ring round the old man, still holding the tools they had been working with. They nudged each other, whispered, shuffled closer like cows. Suddenly Gable shuddered and screwed up his face. Then he opened his eyes and found himself surrounded by villagers. Some of them were trying to help him up. Some of them were telling him to lie down. His head ached and his sight was fuzzy.

'What happened?' he croaked.

'You were hit by this,' said Fish, and he gave him a lump of mud.

Gable rubbed the object between his fingers. The mud started to flake off. It looked like an egg. A wooden egg, no larger than a goose egg, but much heavier. 'What on earth is it?' he said.

'Goodness knows!' said Farmer Gubbin, climbing down from his tractor. 'It was just lying there on the

ground. I've never seen anything like it before. I doubt if anyone here has!'

He was right. No one had.

'Well,' said Gable, offering the egg to the farmer, 'if it were on your land, happen it's yours by right.'

'Eh, no!' cried Farmer Gubbin. 'I don't want it! You keep it, Gable! To remind you of your adventure!'

So Gable wrapped the egg in his handkerchief and took it home to show his wife.




Home for Gable Gantry was a small stone cottage with mullioned windows and a moss-green door. It was hidden among the trees of Ferny Wood, but the path to it was well trodden. In the Gantry house, any visitor was welcome: young or old, feathered or furred. Many a stray cat had found a warm hearth beyond the green door. The stove, like the kettle, was never allowed to go cold. All day long, smoke curled out of the cottage chimney like apple peel.

Pumpkin Gantry was at home, making lunch for the harvesters. *Green pea soup!* Gable could smell it from the garden gate. He smiled and let himself in.

'Oh, my!' said Pumpkin when she saw him. 'Whatever has happened?'

'I've had a bit of a morning,' said Gable, sinking into his favourite chair.

'I can see that! Look at your head! Oh! Let me wipe away that blood.' She wet a cloth at the sink and started dabbing at the wound.

'Something hit me,' said Gable. 'It was thrown up by a tractor.'

'It must have been pretty hard, whatever it was,' said Pumpkin. 'This is a nasty cut.'

Gable fished in his pocket and brought out the egg. 'It was this.'

Pumpkin took it to the sink. She washed it clean and dried it on her apron. 'Look at this pattern,' she said. She traced the grain with a fleshy finger. 'It's ever so lovely. Is it sycamore wood?'

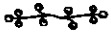
Gable took it back. 'No, it's not sycamore. I reckon it's ash.'

'I wonder where it came from,' said Pumpkin. 'Do you think something laid it? Some kind of bird?'

'No,' said Gable. 'I know it looks like an egg, but it's solid. There's nothing inside it. See?' He knocked it hard on the table.

'Don't do that!' cried Pumpkin. 'You'll dent it!' But when she took it from him, she found the egg was as smooth as it had ever been. 'I want to keep it,' she said. 'It's so pretty. I'm going to put it on the window ledge.'

And she did. She put it between the potted plant and the porcelain cat. And there it lay, gathering dust, until one winter's night, when a troublesome fire changed everything.



It was bitterly cold. The wind was prowling round the cottage, rattling the doors and window frames. Gable had been struggling for hours, trying to coax life into the fire. It just wouldn't burn properly. The wood smoked miserably and no amount of kindling made any difference.

'It's got no heart,' he grumbled as he tempted the flames with dried potato peelings. 'A fire must have a heart! This is nothing but a bundle of bones.'

Pumpkin smiled and put down her sewing. Gable was so patient! She would have lost her temper long ago. She pulled herself out of her chair and went to the window ledge. There was the wooden egg: dull, dusty, long forgotten.

'Here,' she said, handing it to her husband. 'Try this.'

'No! Not that! You like it.'

'I do,' said Pumpkin. 'It's such a pretty thing. But it's just lying there. There's not much you can do with a wooden egg, is there? Look – it's covered in dust. No, put it on the fire, and if it gets a blaze going, we can sit together and watch the flames.'

Gable wiped the egg and gazed for one last time at the wonderful patterns in the wood. Then he sighed and threw it into the fire. The flames started to lick at it, but they didn't burn brighter. If anything, they seemed to dwindle even more.

'Perhaps it won't burn,' said Pumpkin, disappointed. 'It's very hard wood.'

She made a fresh pot of tea and buttered some scones. Then the old couple settled themselves to watch. At first it seemed that Pumpkin was right. The egg simply wouldn't burn. But then it started to smoulder and a thick, bark-brown smoke spiralled lazily up the chimney.

'There it goes,' said Pumpkin happily. 'It'll burn now!'

But the egg didn't burn. Instead, it started to move.

It began slowly at first, with a gentle rhythmic rocking. Then it started to twist, as if something were stirring inside it. Then it shuddered and, with a great *BANG*, cannonballed out of the fire, smashed the teapot on the table, ricocheted across the room, hit the milk pail, shot back towards the fire and landed on the cat.

The cat ran up the curtains. Pumpkin tried to calm the cat. Gable tried to catch the egg. The egg bounced on to the best rug.

And there it lay, quite still.

The old couple watched, owl-eyed. They hardly dared to breathe. The egg was starting to grow. It grew bigger and bigger, till it was the size of an old leather football. Then it started to stretch. *There was something inside it.* And whatever it was, it was trying to get out. The leathery egg strained and bulged – and out came a leg. A fat little wooden leg, with wriggling toes. Then out came a second leg.

And a fat arm. And another fat arm. The egg wasn't an egg now. It was a body, with a round belly and arms and legs – but no head. It rolled helplessly on its back, like a beetle. Its wooden fingers curled into two angry little fists that beat at the air. Then it managed to flop over on to its belly. The arms pushed down on the ground, the toes dug into the rug and the creature rose unsteadily to its feet. Then the hands took hold of the empty place where the head should have been and they tugged and tugged – and out popped a head. And there stood a perfect wooden baby, with an angry, crumpled face.

He peered at the old couple. He screwed up his wooden eyes and opened his wooden mouth. They saw a wooden tongue and two rows of sharp wooden teeth.

'WAAAAAA!' he bawled, and the whole house rattled.

Gable and Pumpkin stared at the new arrival. Then they stared at each other and back at the baby.

The wooden baby looked from one moon face to the other. He frowned. *Who were these people? Didn't they understand?*

'MAMAAA!' he wailed. 'PAPAAA! FEEEED MEEEE!'

'Ah!' cried Gable in horror. 'It can talk!'

'He called me Mama,' said Pumpkin in a small voice. 'He called me Mama.'

Gable looked at his wife. Her eyes were bright with tears.

'We have a son,' said Pumpkin. 'After years of waiting – years of disappointment – we have a son, Gable. *We have a son.*'

She reached out to the wooden baby and gathered him into her arms. Instantly he was calm. He gazed at her with warm wooden eyes. Pumpkin thought they looked just like hazelnuts. She smiled and started rocking her new son.

'Mama,' he said again, quietly now. 'Mama.'

Gable watched his wife with the child. So much tenderness. So much joy. Gable felt love purring in his heart like a warm cat.

'Happen the little chap will need a name,' he said gently. 'What would you like to call him, my sweet?'

Pumpkin looked at the baby carefully. He was pale, with a fine wood-grain pattern on his limbs. He had strong little arms and legs. And such a potbelly! It was hard and round like a piglet's, with wood grain swirling all over it. Pumpkin stroked it and the wooden baby gurgled with pleasure.

'My love?' said Gable again. 'Do you have a name for him?'

Pumpkin smiled. 'I do,' she said. 'I think we should call him Barkbelly.'