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Opening extract from

How the Whale Became and other stories

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Published by
Faber & Faber

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Long ago when the world was brand new, before animals or birds, the sun rose into the sky and brought the first day.

The flowers jumped up and stared round astonished. Then from every side, from under leaves and from behind rocks, creatures began to appear.

In those days the colours were much better than they are now, much brighter. And the air sparkled because it had never been used.

But don't think everything was so easy.

To begin with, all the creatures were pretty much alike – very different from what they are now. They had no idea what they were going to become. Some wanted to become linnets, some wanted to become lions, some wanted to become other things. The ones that wanted to become lions practised at being lions – and by and by, sure enough, they began to turn into lions. So, the ones that wanted to become linnets practised at being linnets, and slowly they turned into linnets. And so on.

But there were other creatures that came about in other ways . . .

Why the Owl Behaves as it does

When Owl became an Owl, the first thing he discovered was that he could see by night. The next thing he discovered was that none of the other birds could.

They could see only by day. They knew it was no use trying to see by dark night, so at every grey dusk they closed their eyes and slept until the grey dawn. They had been doing this for so long, they had forgotten what the dark was.

Owl thought about this. Then he went to the other birds and said: 'I know a country where there are farms, but no farmers. You may eat when and where you please. There are no guns, no bird-scarers, no men. I will take you there if you like.'

Every day, Man killed large numbers of the birds as they were feeding in the fields. They said:

'This sounds like a safe, peaceful country, made for birds. Let us go with Owl.'

Owl smiled to himself.

'Good,' he said. 'Now, as we have no passports, we shall have to cross the frontier by night, when no one can see us. We shall leave at dusk and should be there by dawn.'

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When dusk came, Owl led all the birds to a rabbit hole on the hill.

'Hold each other's hands,' he cried. 'I will lead you.'

All the rabbits that lived on the hill ran up to see what new game the birds were playing. Owl led the way down into the dark hole.

'Is this night, then?' whispered the linnets in the pitchy darkness of the hole.

'Hmm,' said the crows. 'So this is night.'

It was so dark down the hole that the birds couldn't even see their own beaks. Each one clung to the wing of the bird in front and followed blindly. Owl led them to and fro in the loops and twists of the hole for about five minutes. By that time, the birds, who were not at all used to walking, felt as if they had been travelling for hours.

'Is it much further?' cried the swallows. 'Oh, our poor little feet!'

At last Owl shouted:

'Halt, while I see if it's all clear up ahead.'

He popped his head out of the rabbit hole and looked around. It was darker than when they had entered the hole a few minutes before, but it was not yet quite night. There was still a pale light in the west.

'Here we are!' he cried then. 'Over the border, just as dawn is breaking.'

And he led the birds out into the open. All the rabbits ran up again and sat, one ear up and one ear down, watching the birds with very puzzled expressions.

'Is this the new country?' asked the birds, and they crept close together, looking round at the almost dark landscape.

'This is it,' said Owl. 'And that is dawn you can see breaking in the east.'

The birds had quite lost their bearings in the dark underground, and the landscape was now too dark to recognize as the one they knew so well by day. They believed everything that Owl said.

Owl led them off the hill and down towards a farm.

'But it seems to be getting darker,' said the doves suddenly.

'Ah, I am glad you noticed that,' said Owl. 'That is something I forgot to tell you. In this country, day is darker than dawn.'

He smiled to himself, but the birds looked at each other in dismay.

'But what about the nights?' they cried. 'If day is darker than dawn, how dark are the nights?'

Owl stopped and looked at them. They couldn't see his face, but they could tell that he was very serious.

'Night here,' he said, 'is so dark, so terribly dark, that it is impossible for a mere bird to survive one glimpse of it. There is only one thing to do if you want to keep alive. You must close your eyes as tight as you can as soon as the dark of the day begins to turn grey. You must keep them closed until I awake you at grey dawn. One peep at the dark, and you are dead birds.'

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Then, without another word, he led them into the stackyard of the farm.

The farm lights were out. The farmer was sleeping. The farm was silent.

'Here you are,' said Owl. 'Just as I promised. Now feed.'

The birds scratched and pecked, but by now it was too dark to see a thing. At last they learned to find the grains by feeling with their feet. But it was slow work.

Meanwhile Owl sat on the corner of the barn, overlooking the stackyard. Whenever he felt like it, he dropped down and snatched up a nightingale or a willow-warbler. In the pitch dark, the rest of the birds were no wiser. 'This is better than rats and mice and beetles,' said Owl, as he cleaned the blood from his beak. By the time the first grey light showed in the sky, Owl was fuller than he had ever been in his life.

He gave a shout:

'Here comes the grey of dusk. Hurry, hurry! We must get to our beds and close our eyes before the terrible dark comes.'

Tumbling over each other and bumping into things, the birds ran towards his voice. When they were all gathered, he led them to a nearby copse which was full of brambles.

'Here is good roosting,' said Owl. 'I will awaken you at dawn.'

And so, in the grey of dawn, which Owl had told them was the grey of dusk, the birds closed their

eyes. All that bright day they stood in groups under the brambles, their eyes tightly closed. Some of them were too frightened to fall asleep. Not one of them dared to open an eye. One look at that darkness, Owl had said, and you are dead birds.

Owl dozed happily in the dark hollow of a tree. His trick was working perfectly. He was very pleased with himself. No more mice and rats and beetles for him.

At dusk he gave a shout.

'Here is dawn,' he told the birds. 'Back to our feeding.'

And he led them back to the farm where everything happened as the night before.

In this way, Owl grew fat and contented, while the other birds grew wretched.

They grew tired of scraping in the dark stackyard. Sometimes they swallowed a grain, but as often it was a cinder. The farm cocks and hens that picked the stackyard over from end to end all day long had not left much for the birds.

And when they fell asleep, they were terrified lest they have a dream, open their eyes without thinking, and catch a glimpse of the deadly darkness. It was a great strain. Owl was continually warning them of the danger.

'One peep at that darkness,' he kept saying, 'and you are dead birds.'

If only one little bird had peeped, for only one second, with only one eye, he would have seen that there was no such thing as deadly darkness. He would have seen the sun, and the countryside he

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knew so well. But Owl made sure that none ever did.

The birds grew thin. Their feathers began to fall out. Their feet ached with stumbling about in the darkness, and their wings ached with never being used. They did not like the new country.

They complained among themselves.

At last one dusk, when Owl awoke them with his usual cry: 'Dawn!' they all went up to him and told him they could stand it no longer.

'Please lead us back to our own country,' said the birds.

Owl was worried. He wanted to keep the birds in his power. He didn't want to go back to eating rats, mice and beetles.

Then he had an idea.

'Yes,' he said. 'You are right. This is a fine country, and not dangerous. But, as you say, it is hard to make a living here. Let us find the hole by which we came and return to our own country.'

He led them up to the rabbit warren on the hill. It was almost dark.

'Here are the birds playing that game again,' said the rabbits, and they all ran up to stare.

'Now,' said Owl to the birds. 'It was one of these holes, but just which one I cannot remember. Can any of you remember?'

'I think it might have been this one,' said Cuckoo.

'Or perhaps this one,' said Jenny Wren.

'Let us try them all,' said Owl.

Most of the birds didn't dare to enter the holes lest

they get lost. The ones that did were soon up again saying:

'This one comes out here.'

And:

'This one comes out here.'

Owl pretended to be distressed.

'We have lost our way back, and it is all my fault. Oh dear!' he cried. Then he made his voice sound very brave, as he said:

'As we are here for good, let us make the best of it.'

And he led them down to the stackyard for the night's feeding.

So it went on, for almost a year.

At last the birds decided they had had enough. They were too unhappy to go on living.

'This is no life whatsoever,' they said to each other.

'Let us all die bravely, and at once,' said Robin, 'rather than go on dying slowly in this miserable way.'

'We will do that!' cried the storm-cocks. 'Let us all die bravely together, rather than live like this.'

'But how?' said Little Gold-Crested Wren. 'How can we die?'

'Let us open our eyes,' said Robin, 'to the deadly darkness. Owl said that will kill us all.'

The unhappy birds went out with Owl that night for the last time. He led them to the stackyard as usual, and took up his post. But instead of trying to find food, the birds all sat down together in a big close group in the middle of the yard. They had decided what to do. But Owl knew nothing of it. He

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stared down. Softly, the birds began to sing their old songs.

'What's the matter with you?' cried Owl. 'You'll starve if you don't eat!'

But the birds took no notice of him. They went on singing, in their thin, hungry voices. It was a long time since they had sung. Now they sang very low, and very sadly.

It was a bright night, with a full moon, but Owl couldn't catch a single one of those birds. They were pressed far too closely one against another. He couldn't even pick one from the edge of the group. And they sang all night long.

By dawn Owl was furious.

'Dusk!' he cried. 'Back to the copse! Here comes the deadly dark.'

He was very hungry. But he knew what he would do. He would sneak down on them by broad day, when they were standing under the brambles with their eyes tight shut. Then he would eat his fill. He would have a song-thrush, a yellow-hammer, a greenfinch, and five bluetits –

'Where are you going?' he cried.

Instead of following him back to the copse, the birds had turned up the hill. Following the rising ground, they came at last to the very top. All around them lay the dark landscape. They gathered under the three elm trees there and faced the first grey line that was showing in the East. Then, once more, they began to sing their old songs.

Soon the deadly darkness would begin to spread through the sky. Or so they thought. They stared

into the brightening dawn and sang, holding their eyes as wide as they could to catch the first rays of deadly darkness.

Oh, they were so tired of their lives.

To die like this was better than to live as they had been doing, going nowhere but where Owl led them, always in darkness, scraping their feet raw for a few grains.

They sang, and stared into the dawn. Every moment they expected the first killing ray of black to shoot out of the bright east.

At the edge of the field Owl was beating his head with his wings. He knew what the result would be. In a few minutes the sun would rise, and the birds would recognize the landscape round them.

'Come home!' he cried. 'You sillies! You'll all be killed dead as stones. Come home and close your eyes!'

But the birds had no more interest in anything that Owl said. They only wanted to die.

Slowly the sun put its burning red edge into the sky.

Lark gave a shriek. He sprang up into the air.

'It's the sun!' he cried. 'It's real day!'

Slowly the sun rose.

As it rose, the birds flew up into the branches of the elms, dancing on the twigs, and singing till their heads rang.

'It's the sun!' they sang. 'It's real day!'

From under a blackthorn bush at the field's edge, Owl stared in rage. Then he ducked his head, and

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flew away down the hedge, low over the ground. Even so, the birds saw him.

'He tricked us!' they cried. 'And there he goes! There goes the trickster!'

In a shouting mob, all the birds flocked after Owl. All the way back to his tree they beat him with their wings, and pulled out his feathers. He buried himself deep in his hollow tree.

The birds flew up into the tree top and sang on.

And so it is still.

Every morning the birds sing, and the Owl flies back to his dark hole. When the birds see him, they mob him, remembering his trick. He dare come out only at night, to scrape a bare living on rats, mice and beetles.

How the Whale Became

Now God had a little back-garden. In this garden he grew carrots, onions, beans and whatever else he needed for his dinner. It was a fine little garden. The plants were in neat rows, and a tidy fence kept out the animals. God was pleased with it.

One day as he was weeding the carrots he saw a strange thing between the rows. It was no more than an inch long, and it was black. It was like a black shiny bean. At one end it had a little root going into the ground.

'That's very odd,' said God. 'I've never seen one of these before. I wonder what it will grow into.'

So he left it growing.

Next day, as he was gardening, he remembered the little shiny black thing. He went to see how it was getting on. He was surprised. During the night it had doubled its length. It was now two inches long, like a shiny black egg.

Every day God went to look at it, and every day it was bigger. Every morning, in fact, it was just twice as long as it had been the morning before.

When it was six feet long, God said:

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'It's getting too big. I must pull it up and cook it.'
But he left it a day.

Next day it was twelve feet long and far too big to go into any of God's pans.

God stood scratching his head and looking at it. Already it had crushed most of his carrots out of sight. If it went on growing at this rate it would soon be pushing his house over.

Suddenly, as he looked at it, it opened an eye and looked at him.

God was amazed.

The eye was quite small and round. It was near the thickest end, and farthest from the root. He walked round to the other side, and there was another eye, also looking at him.

'Well!' said God. 'And how do you do?'

The round eye blinked, and the smooth glossy skin under it wrinkled slightly, as if the thing were smiling. But there was no mouth, so God wasn't sure.

Next morning God rose early and went out into his garden.

Sure enough, during the night his new black plant with eyes had doubled its length again. It had pushed down part of his fence, so that its head was sticking out into the road, one eye looking up it, and one down. Its side was pressed against the kitchen wall.

God walked round to its front and looked it in the eye.

'You are too big,' he said sternly. 'Please stop growing before you push my house down.'



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To his surprise, the plant opened a mouth. A long slit of a mouth, which ran back on either side under the eyes.

'I can't,' said the mouth.

God didn't know what to say. At last he said:

'Well then, can you tell me what sort of a thing you are? Do you know?'

'I,' said the thing, 'am Whale-Wort. You have heard of Egg-Plant, and Buck-Wheat, and Dog-Daisy. Well, I am Whale-Wort.'

There was nothing God could do about that.

By next morning, Whale-Wort stretched right across the road, and his side had pushed the kitchen wall into the kitchen. He was now longer and fatter than a bus.

When God saw this, he called the creatures together.

'Here's a strange thing,' he said. 'Look at it. What are we going to do with it?'

The creatures walked round Whale-Wort, looking at him. His skin was so shiny they could see their faces in it.

'Leave it,' suggested Ostrich. 'And wait till it dies down.'

'But it might go on growing,' said God. 'Until it covers the whole earth. We shall have to live on its back. Think of that.'

'I suggest,' said Mouse, 'that we throw it into the sea.'

God thought.

'No,' he said at last. 'That's too severe. Let's just leave it for a few days.'