Opening extract from

Watership Down

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Published by

Penguin Books Ltd

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PART I THE JOURNEY

1. The Notice Board

CHORUS: Why do you cry out thus, unless at some vision of horror?
CASSANDRA: The house reeks of death and dripping blood.
CHORUS: How so? 'Tis but the odour of the altar sacrifice.
CASSANDRA: The stench is like a breath from the tomb.

Aeschylus *Agamemnon*

The primroses were over. Towards the edge of the wood, where the ground became open and sloped down to an old fence and a brambly ditch beyond, only a few fading patches of pale yellow still showed among the dog's mercury and oak-tree roots. On the other side of the fence, the upper part of the field was full of rabbit-holes. In places the grass was gone altogether and everywhere there were clusters of dry droppings, through which nothing but the ragwort would grow. A hundred yards away, at the bottom of the slope, ran the brook, no more than three feet wide, half-choked with king-cups, water-cress and blue brook-lime. The cart-track crossed by a brick culvert and climbed the opposite slope to a five-barred gate in the thorn hedge. The gate led into the lane.

The May sunset was red in clouds, and there was still half an hour to twilight. The dry slope was dotted with rabbits – some nibbling at the thin grass near their holes, others pushing farther down to look for dandelions or perhaps a cowslip that the rest had missed. Here and there one sat upright on an ant-heap and looked about, with ears erect and nose in the wind. But a blackbird, singing undisturbed on the outskirts of the wood, showed that there was nothing alarming there and in the other direction, along the brook, all was plain to be seen, empty and quiet. The warren was at peace.

At the top of the bank, close to the wild cherry where the blackbird sang, was a little group of holes almost hidden by

brambles. In the green half-light, at the mouth of one of these holes, two rabbits were sitting together side by side. At length, the larger of the two came out, slipped along the bank under cover of the brambles and so down into the ditch and up into the field. A few moments later the other followed.

The first rabbit stopped in a sunny patch and scratched his ear with rapid movements of his hind-leg. Although he was a yearling and still below full weight, he had not the harassed look of most 'outskirters' – that is, the rank-and-file of ordinary rabbits in their first year who, lacking either aristocratic parentage or unusual size and strength, get sat on by their elders and live as best they can – often in the open – on the edge of their warren. He looked as though he knew how to take care of himself. There was a shrewd, buoyant air about him as he sat up, looked round and rubbed both front paws over his nose. As soon as he was satisfied that all was well, he laid back his ears and set to work on the grass.

His companion seemed less at ease. He was small, with wide, staring eyes and a way of raising and turning his head which suggested not so much caution as a kind of ceaseless, nervous tension. His nose moved continually and when a bumble-bee flew humming to a thistle bloom behind him, he jumped and spun round with a start that sent two near-by rabbits scurrying for holes before the nearest, a buck with black-tipped ears, recognized him and returned to feeding.

'Oh, it's only Fiver,' said the black-tipped rabbit, 'jumping at blue-bottles again. Come on, Buckthorn, what were you telling me?'

'Fiver?' said the other rabbit. 'Why's he called that?'

'Five in the litter, you know: he was the last – and the smallest. You'd wonder nothing had got him by now. I always say a man couldn't see him and a fox wouldn't want him. Still, I admit he seems to be able to keep out of harm's way.'*

* Rabbits can count up to four. Any number above four is *Hrair* – 'a lot', or 'a thousand'. Thus they say *U Hrair* – 'The Thousand' – to mean, collectively, all the enemies (or *elil*, as they call them) of rabbits –

The small rabbit came closer to his companion, lolloping on long hind legs.

'Let's go a bit further, Hazel,' he said. 'You know, there's something queer about the warren this evening, although I can't tell exactly what it is. Shall we go down to the brook?'

'All right,' answered Hazel, 'and you can find me a cowslip. If you can't find one, no one can.'

He led the way down the slope, his shadow stretching behind him on the grass. They reached the brook and began nibbling and searching close beside the wheel-ruts of the track.

It was not long before Fiver found what they were looking for. Cowslips are a delicacy among rabbits, and as a rule there are very few left by late May in the neighbourhood of even a small warren. This one had not bloomed and its flat spread of leaves was almost hidden under the long grass. They were just starting on it when two larger rabbits came running across from the other side of the near-by cattle-wade.

'Cowslip?' said one. 'All right – just leave it to us. Come on, hurry up,' he added, as Fiver hesitated. 'You heard me, didn't you?'

'Fiver found it, Toadflax,' said Hazel.

'And we'll eat it,' replied Toadflax. 'Cowslips are for *Owsla** – don't you know that? If you don't, we can easily teach you.'

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fox, stoat, weasel, cat, owl, man, etc. There were probably more than five rabbits in the litter when Fiver was born, but his name, *Hrairoo*, means 'Little thousand', i.e. the little one of a lot or, as they say of pigs, 'the runt'.

*Nearly all warrens have an *Owsla*, or group of strong or clever rabbits – second-year or older – surrounding the Chief Rabbit and his doe and exercising authority. Owslas vary. In one warren, the Owsla may be the band of a war-lord: in another, it may consist largely of clever patrollers or garden-raiders. Sometimes a good story-teller may find a place; or a seer, or intuitive rabbit. In the Sandleford warren at this time, the Owsla was rather military in character (though, as will be seen later, not so military as some).

Fiver had already turned away. Hazel caught him up by the culvert.

'I'm sick and tired of it,' he said. 'It's the same all the time. "These are my claws, so this is my cowslip." "These are my teeth, so this is my burrow." I'll tell you, if ever I get into the Owsla, I'll treat outskirters with a bit of decency.'

'Well, you can at least expect to be in the Owsla one day,' answered Fiver. 'You've got some weight coming and that's more than I shall ever have.'

'You don't suppose I'll leave you to look after yourself, do you?' said Hazel. 'But to tell you the truth, I sometimes feel like clearing out of this warren altogether. Still, let's forget it now and try to enjoy the evening. I tell you what – shall we go across the brook? There'll be fewer rabbits and we can have a bit of peace. Unless you feel it isn't safe?' he added.

The way in which he asked suggested that he did in fact think that Fiver was likely to know better than himself, and it was clear from Fiver's reply that this was accepted between them.

'No, it's safe enough,' he answered. 'If I start feeling there's anything dangerous I'll tell you. But it's not exactly danger that I seem to feel about the place. It's – oh, I don't know – something oppressive, like thunder: I can't tell what; but it worries me. All the same, I'll come across with you.'

They ran over the culvert. The grass was wet and thick near the stream and they made their way up the opposite slope, looking for drier ground. Part of the slope was in shadow, for the sun was sinking ahead of them, and Hazel, who wanted a warm, sunny spot, went on until they were quite near the lane. As they approached the gate he stopped, staring.

'Fiver, what's that? Look!'

A little way in front of them, the ground had been freshly disturbed. Two piles of earth lay on the grass. Heavy posts, reeking of creosote and paint, towered up as high as the holly trees in the hedge, and the board they carried threw a long shadow across the top of the field. Near one of the posts, a hammer and a few nails had been left behind.

The two rabbits went up to the board at a hopping run and crouched in a patch of nettles on the far side, wrinkling their noses at the smell of a dead cigarette-end somewhere in the grass. Suddenly Fiver shivered and cowered down.

'Oh, Hazel! This is where it comes from! I know now – something very bad! Some terrible thing – coming closer and closer.'

He began to whimper with fear.

'What sort of thing – what do you mean? I thought you said there was no danger?'

'I don't know what it is,' answered Fiver wretchedly. 'There isn't any danger here, at this moment. But it's coming – it's coming. Oh, Hazel, look! The field! It's covered with blood!'

'Don't be silly, it's only the light of the sunset. Fiver, come on, don't talk like this, you're frightening me!'

Fiver sat trembling and crying among the nettles as Hazel tried to reassure him and to find out what it could be that had suddenly driven him beside himself. If he was terrified, why did he not run for safety, as any sensible rabbit would? But Fiver could not explain and only grew more and more distressed. At last Hazel said,

'Fiver, you can't sit crying here. Anyway, it's getting dark. We'd better go back to the burrow.'

'Back to the burrow?' whimpered Fiver. 'It'll come there – don't think it won't! I tell you, the field's full of blood –'

'Now stop it,' said Hazel firmly. 'Just let me look after you for a bit. Whatever the trouble is, it's time we got back.'

He ran down the field and over the brook to the cattle-wade. Here there was a delay, for Fiver – surrounded on all sides by the quiet summer evening – became helpless and almost paralysed with fear. When at last Hazel had got him back to the ditch, he refused at first to go underground and Hazel had almost to push him down the hole.

The sun set behind the opposite slope. The wind turned colder, with a scatter of rain, and in less than an hour it was

dark. All colour had faded from the sky: and although the big board by the gate creaked slightly in the night wind (as though to insist that it had not disappeared in the darkness, but was still firmly where it had been put), there was no passer-by to read the sharp, hard letters that cut straight as black knives across its white surface. They said:

> THIS IDEALLY SITUATED ESTATE, COMPRISING SIX ACRES OF EXCELLENT BUILDING LAND, IS TO BE DEVELOPED WITH HIGH CLASS MODERN RESIDENCES BY SUTCH AND MARTIN, LIMITED, OF NEWBURY, BERKS.

2. The Chief Rabbit

> The darksome statesman, hung with weights and woe,
> Like a thick midnight-fog, moved there so slow,
> He did not stay, nor go.
>
> Henry Vaughan *The World*

In the darkness and warmth of the burrow Hazel suddenly woke, struggling and kicking with his back legs. Something was attacking him. There was no smell of ferret or weasel. No instinct told him to run. His head cleared and he realized that he was alone except for Fiver. It was Fiver who was clambering over him, clawing and grabbing like a rabbit trying to climb a wire fence in a panic.

'Fiver! Fiver, wake up, you silly fellow! It's Hazel. You'll hurt me in a moment. Wake up!'

He held him down. Fiver struggled and woke.

'Oh, Hazel! I was dreaming. It was dreadful. You were there. We were sitting on water, going down a great, deep

stream, and then I realized we were on a board – like that board in the field – all white and covered with black lines. There were other rabbits there – bucks and does. But when I looked down, I saw the board was all made of bones and wire; and I screamed and you said, "Swim – everybody swim"; and then I was looking for you everywhere and trying to drag you out of a hole in the bank. I found you, but you said, "The Chief Rabbit must go alone," and you floated away down a dark tunnel of water.'

'Well, you've hurt my ribs, anyway. Tunnel of water, indeed! What rubbish! Can we go back to sleep now?'

'Hazel – the danger, the bad thing. It hasn't gone away. It's here – all round us. Don't tell me to forget about it and go to sleep. We've got to go away before it's too late.'

'Go away? From here, you mean? From the warren?'

'Yes. Very soon. It doesn't matter where.'

'Just you and I?'

'No, everyone.'

'The whole warren? Don't be silly. They won't come. They'll say you're out of your wits.'

'Then they'll be here when the bad thing comes. You must listen to me, Hazel. Believe me, something very bad is close upon us and we ought to go away.'

'Well, I suppose we'd better go and see the Chief Rabbit and you can tell *him* about it. Or I'll try to. But I don't expect he'll like the idea at all.'

Hazel led the way down the slope of the run and up towards the bramble curtain. He did not want to believe Fiver, and he was afraid not to.

It was a little after *ni-Frith*, or noon. The whole warren were underground, mostly asleep. Hazel and Fiver went a short way above ground and then into a wide, open hole in a sand patch and so down, by various runs, until they were thirty feet into the wood, among the roots of an oak. Here they were stopped by a large, heavily-built rabbit – one of the Owsla. He had a curious, heavy growth of fur on the crown of his head, which gave him an odd appearance, as

though he were wearing a kind of cap. This had given him his name, *Thlayli*, which means, literally, 'Furhead', or as we might say, 'Bigwig'.

'Hazel?' said Bigwig, sniffing at him in the deep twilight among the tree-roots. 'It is Hazel, isn't it? What are you doing here? And at this time of day?' He ignored Fiver, who was waiting farther down the run.

'We want to see the Chief Rabbit,' said Hazel. 'It's important, Bigwig. Can you help us?'

'We?' said Bigwig. 'Is *he* going to see him too?'

'Yes, he must. Do trust me, Bigwig. I don't usually come and talk like this, do I? When did I ever ask to see the Chief Rabbit before?'

'Well, I'll do it for you, Hazel, although I'll probably get my head bitten off. I'll tell him I know you're a sensible fellow. He ought to know you himself, of course, but he's getting old. Wait here, will you?'

Bigwig went a little way down the run and stopped at the entrance to a large burrow. After speaking a few words that Hazel could not catch, he was evidently called inside. The two rabbits waited in silence, broken only by the continual nervous fidgeting of Fiver.

The Chief Rabbit's name and style was *Threarah*, meaning 'Lord Rowan Tree'. For some reason he was always referred to as '*The* Threarah' – perhaps because there happened to be only one threar, or rowan, near the warren, from which he took his name. He had won his position not only by strength in his prime, but also by level-headedness and a certain self-contained detachment, quite unlike the impulsive behaviour of most rabbits. It was well-known that he never let himself become excited by rumour or danger. He had coolly – some even said coldly – stood firm during the terrible onslaught of the myxomatosis, ruthlessly driving out every rabbit who seemed to be sickening. He had resisted all ideas of mass emigration and enforced complete isolation on the warren, thereby almost certainly saving it from extinction. It was he, too, who had once dealt with a particularly troublesome stoat by leading it down among the pheasant

coops and so (at the risk of his own life) on to a keeper's gun. He was now, as Bigwig said, getting old, but his wits were still clear enough. When Hazel and Fiver were brought in, he greeted them politely. Owsla like Toadflax might threaten and bully. The Threarah had no need.

'Ah, Walnut. It is Walnut, isn't it?'

'Hazel,' said Hazel.

'Hazel, of course. How very nice of you to come and see me. I knew your mother well. And your friend –'

'My brother.'

'Your brother,' said the Threarah, with the faintest suggestion of 'Don't correct me any more, will you?' in his voice. 'Do make yourselves comfortable. Have some lettuce?'

The Chief Rabbit's lettuce was stolen by the Owsla from a garden half a mile away across the fields. Outskirters seldom or never saw lettuce. Hazel took a small leaf and nibbled politely. Fiver refused, and sat blinking and twitching miserably.

'Now, how are things with you?' said the Chief Rabbit. 'Do tell me how I can help you.'

'Well, sir,' said Hazel rather hesitantly, 'it's because of my brother – Fiver here. He can often tell when there's anything bad about, and I've found him right again and again. He knew the flood was coming last autumn and sometimes he can tell where a wire's been set. And now he says he can sense a bad danger coming upon the warren.'

'A bad danger. Yes, I see. How very upsetting,' said the Chief Rabbit, looking anything but upset. 'Now what sort of danger, I wonder?' He looked at Fiver.

'I don't know,' said Fiver. 'B-but it's bad. It's so b-bad that – it's very bad,' he concluded miserably.

The Threarah waited politely for a few moments and then he said, 'Well, now, and what ought we to do about it, I wonder?'

'Go away,' said Fiver instantly. 'Go away. All of us. Now. Threarah, sir, we must all go away.'

The Threarah waited again. Then, in an extremely

understanding voice, he said, 'Well, I never did! That's rather a tall order, isn't it? What do you think yourself?'

'Well, sir,' said Hazel, 'my brother doesn't really think about these feelings he gets. He just has the feelings, if you see what I mean. I'm sure you're the right person to decide what we ought to do.'

'Well, that's very nice of you, to say that. I hope I am. But now, my dear fellows, let's just think about this a moment, shall we? It's May, isn't it? Everyone's busy and most of the rabbits are enjoying themselves. No elil for miles, or so they tell me. No illness, good weather. And you want me to tell the warren that young – er – young – er – your brother here has got a hunch and we must all go trapesing across country to goodness knows where and risk the consequences, eh? What do you think they'll say? All delighted, eh?'

'They'd take it from you,' said Fiver suddenly.

'That's very nice of you,' said the Threarah again. 'Well, perhaps they would, perhaps they would. But I should have to consider it very carefully indeed. A most serious step, of course. And then –'

'But there's no time, Threarah, sir,' blurted out Fiver. 'I can feel the danger like a wire round my neck – like a wire – Hazel, help!' He squealed and rolled over in the sand, kicking frantically, as a rabbit does in a snare. Hazel held him down with both forepaws and he grew quieter.

'I'm awfully sorry, Chief Rabbit,' said Hazel. 'He gets like this sometimes. He'll be all right in a minute.'

'What a shame! What a shame! Poor fellow, perhaps he ought to go home and rest. Yes, you'd better take him along now. Well, it's really been extremely good of you to come and see me, Walnut. I appreciate it very much indeed. And I shall think over all you've said most carefully, you can be quite sure of that. Bigwig, just wait a moment, will you?'

As Hazel and Fiver made their way dejectedly down the run outside the Threarah's burrow, they could just hear, from inside, the Chief Rabbit's voice assuming a rather

sharper note, interspersed with an occasional 'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir.'

Bigwig, as he had predicted, was getting his head bitten off.

3. Hazel's Decision

> What am I lying here for? . . . We are lying here as though we had a chance of enjoying a quiet time . . . Am I waiting until I become a little older?
>
> Xenophon *The Anabasis*

'But, Hazel, you didn't really think the Chief Rabbit would act on your advice, did you? What were you expecting?'

It was evening once more and Hazel and Fiver were feeding outside the wood with two friends. Blackberry, the rabbit with tipped ears who had been startled by Fiver the night before, had listened carefully to Hazel's description of the notice board, remarking that he had always felt sure that men left these things about to act as signs or messages of some kind, in the same way that rabbits left marks on runs and gaps. It was another neighbour, Dandelion, who had now brought the talk back to the Threarah and his indifference to Fiver's fear.

'I don't know what I expected,' said Hazel. 'I'd never been near the Chief Rabbit before. But I thought, "Well, even if he won't listen, at least no one can say afterwards that we didn't do our best to warn him".'

'You're sure, then, that there's really something to be afraid of?'

'I'm quite certain. I've always known Fiver, you see.'

Blackberry was about to reply when another rabbit came noisily through the thick dog's mercury in the wood, blundered down into the brambles and pushed his way up from the ditch. It was Bigwig.

'Hullo, Bigwig,' said Hazel. 'You're off duty?'

'Off duty,' said Bigwig, 'and likely to remain off duty.'

'How do you mean?'

'I've left the Owsla, that's what I mean.'

'Not on our account?'

'You could say that. The Threarah's rather good at making himself unpleasant when he's been woken up at ni-Frith for what he considers a piece of trivial nonsense. He certainly knows how to get under your skin. I dare say a good many rabbits would have kept quiet and thought about keeping on the right side of the Chief, but I'm afraid I'm not much good at that. I told him that the Owsla's privileges didn't mean all that much to me in any case and that a strong rabbit could always do just as well by leaving the warren. He told me not to be impulsive and think it over, but I shan't stay. Lettuce-stealing isn't my idea of a jolly life, nor sentry-duty in the burrow. I'm in a fine temper, I can tell you.'

'No one will steal lettuces soon,' said Fiver quietly.

'Oh, that's you, Fiver, is it?' said Bigwig, noticing him for the first time. 'Good, I was coming to look for you. I've been thinking about what you said to the Chief Rabbit. Tell me; is it a sort of tremendous hoax to make yourself important, or is it true?'

'It *is* true,' said Fiver. 'I wish it weren't.'

'Then you'll be leaving the warren?'

They were all startled by the bluntness with which Bigwig went to the point. Dandelion muttered, 'Leave the warren, *Frithrah*!' while Blackberry twitched his ears and looked very intently, first at Bigwig and then at Hazel.

It was Hazel who replied. 'Fiver and I will be leaving the warren tonight,' he said deliberately. 'I don't know exactly where we shall go, but we'll take anyone who's ready to come with us.'

'Right,' said Bigwig, 'then you can take me.'

The last thing Hazel had expected was the immediate support of a member of the Owsla. It crossed his mind that although Bigwig would certainly be a useful rabbit in a tight corner, he would also be a difficult one to get on with.

He certainly would not want to do what he was told – or even asked – by an outskirter. 'I don't care if he is in the Owsla,' thought Hazel. 'If we get away from the warren, I'm not going to let Bigwig run everything, or why bother to go?' But he answered only, 'Good. We shall be glad to have you.'

He looked round at the other rabbits, who were all staring either at Bigwig or at himself. It was Blackberry who spoke next.

'I think I'll come,' he said. 'I don't quite know whether it's you who've persuaded me, Fiver. But anyway, there are too many bucks in this warren, and it's pretty poor fun for any rabbit that's not in the Owsla. The funny thing is that you feel terrified to stay and I feel terrified to go. Foxes here, weasels there, Fiver in the middle, begone dull care!'

He pulled out a burnet leaf and ate it slowly, concealing his fear as best he could; for all his instincts were warning him of the dangers in the unknown country beyond the warren.

'If we believe Fiver,' said Hazel, 'it means that we think no rabbits at all ought to stay here. So between now and the time when we go, we ought to persuade as many as we can to join us.'

'I think there are one or two in the Owsla who might be worth sounding,' said Bigwig. 'If I can talk them over, they'll be with me when I join you tonight. But they won't come because of Fiver. They'll be juniors, discontented fellows like me. You need to have heard Fiver yourself to be convinced by him. He's convinced me. It's obvious that he's been sent some kind of message, and I believe in these things. I can't think why he didn't convince the Threarah.'

'Because the Threarah doesn't like anything he hasn't thought of for himself,' answered Hazel. 'But we can't bother with him any more now. We've got to try to collect some more rabbits and meet again here, *fu Inlé*. And we'll start fu Inlé, too: we can't wait longer. The danger's coming closer all the time – whatever it is – and besides, the Threarah isn't going to like it if he finds out that you've been

trying to get at rabbits in the Owsla, Bigwig. Neither is Captain Holly, I dare say. They won't mind odds-and-ends like us clearing off, but they won't want to lose you. If I were in your place, I'd be careful whom I picked to talk to.'

4. The Departure

Now sir, young Fortinbras,
Of unimproved mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Sharked up a list of lawless resolutes
For food and diet to some enterprise
That hath a stomach in't.

Shakespeare *Hamlet*

Fu Inlé means 'After moonrise'. Rabbits, of course, have no idea of precise time or of punctuality. In this respect they are much the same as primitive people, who often take several days over assembling for some purpose and then several more to get started. Before such people can act together, a kind of telepathic feeling has to flow through them and ripen to the point when they all know that they are ready to begin. Anyone who has seen the martins and swallows in September, assembling on the telephone wires, twittering, making short flights singly and in groups over the open, stubbly fields, returning to form longer and even longer lines above the yellowing verges of the lanes – the hundreds of individual birds merging and blending, in a mounting excitement, into swarms, and these swarms coming loosely and untidily together to create a great, unorganized flock, thick at the centre and ragged at the edges, which breaks and re-forms continually like clouds or waves – until that moment when the greater part (but not all) of them know that the time has come: they are off, and have begun once more that great southward flight which many will not survive; anyone seeing this has seen at work the