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opening extract from

Saving Finnegan

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Chapter 1

Early one morning, before even the cock had crowed, Holly woke up and wondered why. She watched the curtains flapping at her open window. Daylight was just breaking through and chasing the shadows around the room. When a chill draft brushed her face, she pulled Nana Matty's handmade quilt snuggly round her ears. She closed her eyes and tried to drift back to sleep on the hush of distant waves, but she was too awake and already feeling fidgety.

To stay in bed, or not to stay in bed, that was the question. No one else was up and about, though in the room next door her father was mimicking Gerda the pig with his snorts and grunts and wheezes.

'Oink, oink, oink,' Holly giggled to herself.

What would she do if she got up, she wondered?

She could let the chickens out, but the poxy fox might be lurking in the leftover night, ready to pounce. Poor Miss Marigold, their neighbour, had lost all four of her chickens two weeks before, and she was still in mourning for her poached egg breakfast.

She could make herself a mug of hot chocolate and toast her toes by the kichen range. Tibbles the cat would be on the comfy chair and would protest pitiably at being dislodged, but she had had it to herself all night, and a cat's place was outdoors catching mice if Holly's father had his way. Which he hadn't, so Tibbles was lucky. Trog the sheepdog wasn't so lucky. A dog's place at night was in his kennel under the stars, and her father did get his way on that, though Trog was quick to flop into his basket in front of the range as soon as the morning door opened and he'd wolfed his biscuits.

Perhaps, Holly thought, I could go down to the beach and skim stones across the silvery sea and watch the sun creeping up on the moon. Or I could run along the sand and frighten the crabs back into their holes. Trog could come with me. He likes chasing crabs

because he thinks he can catch them, but he never has and he never will now because his joints are much too rickety.

Not to stay in bed, that was the answer. Holly leapt to her feet, thrusting her quilt on to the creaky old floor, and scuttled to the window to see how far the day had dawned.

The sky was still heavily smeared with inky blue and grey, but patches of golden white and palest blue were stretching out and sweeping them away. From the rooftop, those pesky gulls shrieked their wake-up calls and squabbled over breakfast.

'Yeeek, yeeeek, you're ugly,' Holly yelled up at them. 'Go and find someone else to pester.'

Below, the winding path wove its way from the wobbly back gate of Lobster Pot Cottage, stepped down through the steep grassy slope, shrank past Old Ma Meldrew's (the children called her Mildew) and staggered onwards to the gigantic coal-black rocks that framed the beach.

Holly's eyes stopped on the beach and popped out on stalks.

One of the rocks had been moved!

Instead of forming part of the frame round the beach, this rock was lying as bold as brass right in the middle of the beach.

'Not possible,' Holly muttered to herself. She concentrated her gaze on the displaced rock and tried to conjure up an explanation for its displacement. 'Not possible,' she muttered again.

In the spreading light, Holly began to see that the rock wasn't quite rock-shaped and that it wasn't quite rock-coloured. It was too long and too low and too smooth, and it was browny-grey rather than black. If it's not a rock, then what on earth is it? Holly wondered.

She decided that wondering was all very well, but she wanted to know. She scrambled out of her pyjama bottoms and into her jeans, then pulled Nana Matty's hand-knitted jumper over her pyjama top. She tiptoed across the bedroom, opened the door and listened. Her father's snorts and grunts and wheezes were accompanied now by a gentle whistle. Holly smiled at this alternative dawn chorus as she slipped past her parents' bedroom, on past grotty little George's room, and down the stairs to the front door. She carefully lifted the latch,

peered along the road to see if anyone was coming and crept outside.

The sun was rising as she went round the side of Miss Marigold's cottage and ran to join the winding path. She looked back to see Trog, still head down in his kennel in the back garden, dreaming of crabs.

'Ha, ha,' she chuckled. 'You have failed in your duty to stop an urchin from escaping, Oh Defender of the Lobster Pot. And I can't take you with me because you'll wake up the whole house, so there.'

She skipped down the steps and slowed by Old Ma Meldrew's.

'I hope the midges are biting,' she mouthed at the blacked-out windows, then stuck her tongue out and scurried on by.

When she reached the rocks, Holly kicked off her trainers and began to climb. At the highest point, she stood up and gazed down across the sand to the alien object.

'What IS it?' she gasped. 'It's HUGE!'

She looked all around her to see if anyone else was about, but though there were lights blinking through

the curtains at Curly Lockett's and Jim Robottom's, Holly had the daybreak to herself. She stared again at the brownish-grey, long, smooth object, and an idea began to form in her mind.

'It can't be,' she exclaimed.

She scrambled and slid over the rocks in front of her and began to run across the sand.

'It is!' she cried, clapping her hands. 'It is, it is!'

She stopped, mouth gaping in disbelief. 'Holy mackerel, I've found a whale!' she breathed.

For a moment, Holly didn't know what to do. She thought about racing home and fetching her father and mother, but if she went away someone else might find her whale and steal it from her.

Then she thought she heard the whale sigh.

She ran a few steps towards it, but stopped in her tracks when it groaned loudly, shuddered and thrashed its huge tail.

'Eek!' she cried. It dawned on her that this was no puppy she was about to go and comfort. This was the biggest beast she had ever seen in her life, a hundred times as big as an elephant even. It might be dangerous. It might eat her! One slip into its enormous

mouth (if it opened it) and she would be like Jonah. She might never see her father and mother and Nana Matty and Tibbles and Trog again. (She didn't mind so much about George.) And then she thought, it hasn't got legs so it can't run after me. The best it can do is flump, and I'm sure I can run a lot faster than it can flump.

She crept towards it, worried that it might be frightened. She could see its great chest heaving and its tiny half-closed eyes. She was worried then that it might be ill.

'Don't die, Mr Whale,' she whispered. 'Please don't die.'

The whale shuddered again and swept its tail slowly, sadly Holly thought, backwards and forwards across the wet sand. Holly looked towards the sea, which was rolling further and further away into the horizon.

'It'll come back to fetch you later on,' she said, 'if you can just be patient.'

The whale seemed to sigh again, a tremble of air escaping from its blowhole. Holly wished she could go closer and put her arm round its neck, but she didn't

dare. She wanted someone to come now, someone who would know what to do. She gazed back at the village, ready to pounce upon anything that moved (as long as it wasn't Old Ma Meldrew). There were lights on in more of the cottages. There was a light on downstairs in Lobster Pot Cottage, but the curtains were still closed. Dad, Holly thought, making Mum her cup of tea to prise her out of bed. Dad, yawning under his sticky-up hair, mooching around in his slippers. Dad, having a bit of quiet time before opening the door to Trog with his wagging tail and jabbering jaws.

'Open the door now,' Holly willed him. 'I need you Dad.'

A movement on the road up to the right of the cottages caught her eye. The postman's van. It came down towards their cottage then disappeared behind it. It seemed to stay there for ever.

'Stop gossiping,' Holly muttered. 'I bet they're going on about fish, fish, fish.'

At last the van reappeared round the other side of the cottage, heading towards the back of the beach. Holly jumped up and down and waved her arms wildly above

her head. She giggled when the whale thrashed its tail as well.

'Postie,' she yelled. 'Come here, quickly. It's a whale, Postman Cyril. I've found a whale!'