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Opening extract from

The Forever Whale

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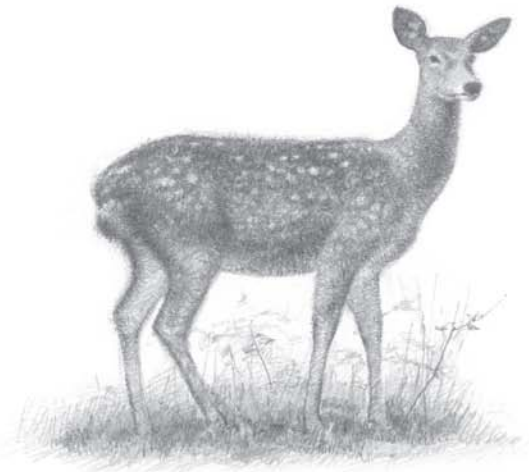
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1.

GRANDAD DRAWS THE OARS INTO THE BOAT as we coast on the glassy water until we nudge into the bank. We both have our fingers over our lips, not to tell each other to be quiet, because we are, but because we think alike. I don't know what Grandad has seen, I only know to trust him.

"Can you see it, Hannah?" Grandad whispers.

The dappled and striped shadows are barely moving in the golden September evening and I can't see anything in the jumble of grasses and reeds. I shake my head.

"Keep looking," Grandad whispers.

I follow his eyes, but it takes me a long while to spot the fawn, curled up and waiting. Its skin is hardly any different from the landscape around it. I can see the glisten of its black nose, but it knows to stay still, to be safe. Once I see it, it stands out a mile.

I whisper, "Is the fawn all right on its own, Grandad?"

He nods his head towards another curve of the bank. A deer is looking at us, anxious because she doesn't want to draw attention to her fawn, who is separated from her by a channel of water.

Grandad smiles to himself. "Will you stay or

will you swim across?" He says it as if he and the deer have a history together. We've seen deer here many times, but he's never said that before.

"I didn't know deer could swim," I say, keeping my voice low and soft like his.

"That's how they came to live on…" Grandad hesitates and looks over his shoulder. His eyebrows are crushed into a frown. He's looking towards the island in the middle of the huge harbour, even though we can barely see it from here. But I'm not sure why.

"Furze Island?" I ask.

"Furze Island," he repeats. "A long time ago a herd of deer swam over from the mainland and settled on the island."

Grandad is still looking far away towards the harbour entrance, maybe for the billow of

sails, to see if any broad and magnificent ships have blown in today.

We are quiet for a few minutes until Grandad speaks again. "It's your turn to row now," he says.

We change places in the boat. I see him stumble. He must be tired today. Grandad and I have taken a thousand journeys like this out in the quiet inlets of the harbour. Here we are just specks, tiny people marvelling at the changing sea and all the ordinary everyday things. These are my favourite days. I feel the familiar tug in my middle as the oars knock in their sockets and I row, pulling, rolling and lifting like Grandad taught me. The paddles splash like a slow-ticking clock.

"Hannah, I want you to remember something for me," Grandad says. "Something important, in case I forget."

I wonder why he would ever forget something

important, but I want him to tell me.

"Anything for you," I say.

"August the eighteenth," he says. "You'll remind me, won't you?"

"That's a long time away, nearly a year. Are you going somewhere?"

I only ask because I know that Grandad has spent all his life here in Hambourne, working with wood, rowing the inlets with me, and watching from his bedroom window for schooners and square-riggers in the harbour.

Grandad leans against the side of the boat and scratches his white beard and the bristles crackle under his fingernails. His eyes are warm and brown like oiled wood.

"Some journeys need us to travel great distances. But others are closer to home, like today when our eyes see more than what's in front of us."

"You mean like finding the fawn in the grass?" I see his face folding like worn origami paper into the peaceful shape I've always known.

Grandad slowly puts his gnarly old hand on the bench between us. My hand is still smooth like a map without journeys and I put it on top of his. We pile our hands over each other, his then mine,



his then mine, like we always have. He pulls his huge hands out and gathers mine like an apple in his. And, just like always, that feeling is too big to keep inside me and bursts out and makes me laugh.

"Yes, great journeys like this," he says. "Those great days that live in our memories and make us who we are."

