

# 1

IT WAS BELIEVED a whale had gone mad at the mouth of the river. Several fishing boats had been destroyed in acts of violence so extraordinary they were deemed inhuman. Each attack had come at dusk, while the boats were passing the heads on their way back to port—the same area where plumes of spray were supposedly erupting from the water. Transport ships reported powerful, mournful vibrations ringing through their hulls. Gulls flew strangely; cormorants seemed skittish. Ocean swimmers' strokes were thrown out of rhythm by a high, ancient melody that rose through the brine. A fluked tail had been seen troubling the waves.

Ned was five when all this happened. In later years he struggled to remember the incidents clearly, but at the time it was all anyone was talking about. The animal had been harpooned far down south, someone's uncle said, and after fleeing north was now visiting vengeance on any ship it encountered. Another version of that story claimed the harpoon had lodged in the

whale's brain, turning it feral and vicious. Another was that the whalers had missed the beast but not its pod, and the creature had been driven insane after witnessing the slaughter of its family.

There were other theories too, ones that didn't include whaling, ideas of lunar imbalances and divine judgement, although they weren't paid much attention. Most held the southern whalers responsible for fouling the animal's mind. There was talk of writing letters, demanding reparations, getting the council involved.

'It's nonsense,' Ned's father told his children. He'd caught them whispering about the wrecks at the dinner table, unaware he'd returned from the orchard.

'There is no whale,' he said. 'No monster. Fishermen do three things: they drink too much, and they make things up.'

He took off his coat and hung it on a hook by the door.

'What's the third thing,' asked Ned's eldest brother, Bill.

Their father levered himself into his chair. 'Occasionally they catch fish.'

But their father's words did not convince them; the story of the mad whale had sunk too deep into their minds. Ned's sister, Maggie, was old enough to restrain herself from contributing to the gossip, but Bill and Toby, their middle brother, talked about it constantly.

Ned heard everything, and their conversations filled him with obsessive dread. All day he thought of the smashed ketches and skiffs, of an unseen giant with a blade snagged in its brain. At night his dreams were flooded with blood-foamed water. For a week he woke sweating and screaming until, when his

exhausted father demanded to know the cause of his turmoil, he revealed that his nightmares were of the murderous, hell-sent whale.

‘Right,’ his father said the next morning, toast cooling on his plate. ‘We’re going to the river mouth tonight. I’ll show you the truth of this so-called man killer.’

Late that afternoon he took his sons to a nearby jetty, where they piled into a small boat their father had borrowed from a neighbour, one of the only boats in the area with a motor. Their father fiddled with the greasy machine, and his solemn care gave Ned and his brothers the sense that a large favour had been called in. But none of them said anything. They were all thinking of the whale.

Soon their father got the engine working, got it growling, and for the next hour they motored along the river until the course of the water straightened and the sea beyond it widened to fill the dusk. When they reached the mouth, all that remained of the sun was a half-disc of orange light over the western hills. Their father killed the motor.

They stayed there, bobbing on the light swell. The last sliver of sun vanished and the sky darkened into a clear night. Their father leaned back in the boat, appearing to contemplate the thick pattern of starlight above them. The wind was cold. Ned and his brothers shivered into their collars as they waited for the whale to explode out of the river and paste them into the waves.