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Opening extract from
Half a Creature from the Sea

Written by
David Almond

Illustrated by
Eleanor Taylor

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“Stories on the page are so beautifully neat. All that lovely black print; those lovely straight lines and paragraphs and pages. But stories are living things, creatures that move and grow in the imaginations of writer and reader. They must be solid and touchable just like the land, and must have fluid half-known depths just like the sea. These stories take place in a real world – the streets in which I grew, the fields and beaches over which I walked. People I know appear in them. But in fiction, real worlds merge with dreamed worlds. Real people walk with ghosts and figments. Earthly truth goes hand-in-hand with watery lies.”

David Luord

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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Dedication tk

“I’ll

start
with

things I can hardly

remember,

things I’ve

been told about,

things that are like
fragments of a dream.

I grew up in a town called Felling-on-Tyne. My first home was an upstairs flat in White's Buildings, a cluster of houses at the edge of the town's main square. It had high white walls and wide dark doors, and a tiny kitchen where the sink perched on a timber frame. The tin bath hung on the kitchen wall. Steep, crumbling steps led to a small back yard and the outside toilet. My mother used to say that before she opened the door to any room, she'd tap on it to make sure the mice scattered to their holes in the skirting boards and floors. There were hundreds of them, she told me. Thousands! I remember the smell of damp, of the outside loo. Dust cascaded through the shafts of light that poured through the narrow kitchen windows. Dead flies clustered on dangling fly papers. Sirens blared from the factories by the river, foghorns hooted from the distant sea. There were four of us then: Mam, Dad, my brother Colin, and me.

Mam said that I was just a few months old when she first took me to visit my Uncle Amos. She'd wheel me in my pushchair through the square, past the Jubilee pub, Dragone's coffee house, Myers' pork

shop. Down onto the steep, curving High Street, lined with a butcher's, grocer's, tailor's, pubs. A pink pig's head would be grinning out from Myers' window. There'd be boxes of bright fruit stacked outside Bamling's. A great cod fish, bigger than a boy, would lie on the marble slab outside the fishmonger's. You could smell the fish and chips from Fosters', the beer from the open windows of the Half Way House, oil and rust from Howie's cluttered junkyard behind its swinging stable door. We'd pass by the cracked pale faces and legs of the mannequins of Shepherd's department store. All the way, Mam'd be calling out greetings to family and neighbours. They'd be leaning down to grin and coo at me, maybe to slip a coin into my little hand. Always, above the rooftops, the thin steeple of our church, St Patrick's, pointed to the blue.

Halfway down the street, my mother would turn into a narrow alleyway and carry me into Amos's printing shop. There'd been a few generations of printers in our family, and Amos was the latest. He printed the local newspaper in that dark small place, on a pair of ancient printing machines. Do

I remember it? I like to think I do, but I guess I only really remember my mother's words. She told a tale that one day when she was in there, with me lying in her arms, Amos pulled a lever, and the printing machines began to clatter and turn, and the pages of the newspaper began to stream out from them, and I started to wriggle and jump in her arms, and to point and giggle at the pages. Just as a baby's eyes are caught by flashing lights or flying birds, my eyes were caught by print – and I'd be in love with it for evermore. Maybe I began to be a writer that day in that little printing shop, a time I can't remember, when I was a few months old.

Amos was a writer as well as a printer. He wrote poems, stories, novels, plays. At family parties, after a couple of drinks, he'd take a piece of paper from his pocket and read a poem to us. Some would roll their eyes and giggle, but I loved him for it. I had an uncle who was a writer; I could be the same. None of his work was ever published or performed, but it didn't matter to him. He kept on writing for the love of it, and for his family and friends. I was just a boy when I told him shyly of my own

ambitions. "Yes," he said, "do that!" He also told me, "Don't let your writing separate you from the people and places that you love."

White's Buildings was eventually classified as a slum and was demolished. We moved to a brand-new council estate, The Grange, beside the brand-new bypass on the eastern edge of town. I went to St John's Catholic primary school, a sombre stone-built establishment beside the river. Amos closed the printing shop and moved away, but the sign above the alleyway remained for years:

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I passed beneath it a thousand times as I continued to grow.

I played with my friends on the fields above the town. I roamed further, to the hills beyond the fields, where there were abandoned coal mines and spoil heaps, tussocky paddocks with ponies in them, newt ponds, ruined stables. From up there, you could see the whole town sloping away: the streets leading to the square, the factories below that, the river lined with shipyards, the city of

Newcastle with its bridges and towers and steeples. To the north, the distant bulges of the Cheviots in a haze. To the west, the hills of County Durham, the pitheads and winding gear of the coal mines. To the south, more fields, lanes, hawthorn hedges, then Sunderland, then the towns of Teeside on the far horizon. To the east, the dark North Sea. It seemed that much of the world, in all its variety, was visible from this little place.

I started to scribble stories of my own. I read books from the local library. I dreamed of coming back to this library one day in the future, to find books with my own name on them standing on the shelves. Once or twice I dared to admit to others that I wanted to be a writer. I remember one day getting the response,

“But you’re just an ordinary kid. And you come from ordinary little Felling. What on earth will you write about?”

As time has gone on, I’ve found myself writing more and more about that little place. Many of my stories spring from it. They use its landscape, its language, its people, and turn it into fiction –

half imaginary, half real. The stories in this book are all in some way connected to that ‘ordinary’ place. I try to do what many writers have done before me: show that ordinary places can be extraordinary. ””





J F Barber

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OPEN



“The story of ‘Slog’s Dad’ takes place right in the heart of the town, in Felling Square. This was a small, low-walled area with an ancient fountain and water trough at the centre. There were benches where folk sat to while away the day, to take a rest after walking up the steep High Street, or to sit and wait for the Black Bull or the Jubilee to open. On one side of the square was Ray Lough’s barber’s, with its plate-glass window, its short line of chairs. Ray would have no truck with modern styles. Boys might go in asking for a James Dean or a Beatles cut but they’d all get the same: short back and sides finished with lotion slapped on; the kind that set hard as soon as it hit the open air. Just next door was my grandfather’s betting shop. The name in the window – John Foster Barber – caused some men to walk in for a haircut, but instead they’d find my grandfather puffing on

his pipe behind the counter, men standing around earnestly reading *Sporting Life*, and crackly radio reports of horse race results coming from speakers on the walls. The square, and the High Street, and many of the shops and pubs, still exist. Not Lough's, and not the betting shop. My Uncle Maurice took it over when my grandfather retired, but then Ladbrokes opened in the square and Maurice moved the shop to Hebburn, a few miles away, to catch the custom of shipyard workers. But shipbuilding declined then quickly crashed, and the betting shop was one of the many businesses that went down with it.

Myers' pork shop sold the best pork pies, the best pork sandwiches, and the best saveloy dips in the area. Saveloys are a kind of sausage. They seemed to my friends and me to be the height of deliciousness, especially inside a soft bread roll with stuffing, onions and mustard and dipped into a shallow tray of Myers' special gravy. A saveloy dip with everything: a taste of Heaven!

I was a Catholic, like many of my friends. We were taught to believe that when good people died, they went to be with God. (The bad, of course, went to

Hell to burn for all eternity.) Sometimes, when the sun shone down and the sky was blue and the river glittered far below, the larks singing over the high fields, Heaven didn't seem too far away. We were constantly reminded of its inhabitants, too. There were statues of Jesus and his mother, and of saints and angels in St Patrick's. We all had prayer books and rosary beads and little statues and pictures in our homes.

Cheery priests were familiar figures in the streets – off to visit the sick, to comfort the bereaved or to have a glass of whisky with a parishioner. Tramps were often seen too. There was one in particular who lived, it was said, somewhere in the hills above town. No one knew his name, or where he'd come from. He was a silent, swiftly walking man with flaxen hair. He seemed at ease, untroubled by the world, and he was a romantic figure to boys like me. To live a life of freedom in the open air! Who wouldn't desire such a life? Sometimes I'd see him sitting alone on a bench in the square, just as Slog's dad does in the story. I longed to try to talk to him, but I never did.

This story came from a fragment from the

notebook of the great short-story writer Raymond Carver, which I used as an inspiration for a tale of my own. One line jumped out at me: 'I've got how much longer?' As soon as I wrote it down in my own notebook, 'Slog's Dad' sprang to life. I switched on the computer, began to write. There was a boy called Davie, walking across the square with his friend Slog. There was a bloke on the bench. There was Myers' pork shop with its delicious saveloys... ”



Slog's Dad

Spring had come. I'd been running around all day with Slog and we were starving. We were crossing the square to Myers' pork shop. Slog stopped dead in his tracks.

"What's up?" I said.

He nodded across the square.

"Look," he said.

"Look at what?"

"It's me dad," he whispered.

"Your dad?"

"Aye."

I just looked at him.

“That bloke there,” he said.

“What bloke where?”

“Him on the bench. Him with the cap on. Him with the stick.”

I shielded my eyes from the sun with my hand and tried to see. The bloke had his hands resting on the top of the stick. He had his chin resting on his hands. His hair was long and tangled and his clothes were tattered and worn, like he was poor or like he'd been on a long journey. His face was in the shadow of the brim of his cap, but you could see that he was smiling.

“Slogger, man,” I said. “Your dad's dead.”

“I know that, Davie. But it's him. He's come back again, like he said he would. In the spring.”

He raised his arm and waved.

“Dad!” he shouted. “Dad!”

The bloke waved back.

“See?” said Slog. “Howay.”

He tugged my arm.

“No,” I whispered. “No!”

And I yanked myself free and I went into Myers', and Slog ran across the square to his dad.

★ ★ ★

Slog's dad had been a binman, a skinny bloke with a creased face and a greasy flat cap. He was always puffing on a Woodbine. He hung on to the back of the bin wagon as it lurched through the estate, jumped off and on, slung the bins over his shoulder, tipped the muck into the back. He was forever singing hymns – “Faith of Our Fathers”, “Hail Glorious Saint Patrick”, stuff like that.

“Here he comes again,” my mam would say as he bashed the bins and belted out “Oh, Sacred Heart” at eight o'clock on a Thursday morning.

But she'd be smiling, because everybody liked Slog's dad, Joe Mickley, a daft and canny soul.

First sign of his illness was just a bit of a limp: then Slog came to school one day and said, “Me dad's got a black spot on his big toenail.”

“Just like Treasure Island, eh?” I said.

“What's it mean?” he said.

I was going to say death and doom, but I said, “He could try asking the doctor.”

“He has asked the doctor.”

Slog looked down. I could smell his dad on him, the scent of rotten rubbish that was always on him. They lived just down the street from us, and the whole house

had that smell in it, no matter how much Mrs Mickley washed and scrubbed. Slog's dad knew it. He said it was the smell of the earth. He said there'd be nowt like it in Heaven.

"The doctor said it's nowt," Slog said. "But he's staying in bed today, and he's going to hospital tomorrow. What's it mean, Davie?"

"How should I know?" I said.

I shrugged.

"It's just a spot, man, Slog!" I said.

Everything happened fast after that. They took the big toe off, then the foot, then the leg to halfway up the thigh. Slog said his mother reckoned his dad had caught some germs from the bins. My mother said it was all the Woodbines he puffed. Whatever it was, it seemed they stopped it. They fitted a tin leg on him and sent him home. It was the end of the bins, of course.

He took to sitting on the little garden wall outside the house. Mrs Mickley often sat with him and they'd be smelling their roses and nattering and smiling and swigging tea and puffing Woodbines. He used to show off his new leg to passers-by.

"I'll get the old one back when I'm in Heaven," he said.

If anybody asked was he looking for work, he'd laugh.

"Work? I can hardly bliddy walk."

And he'd start in on "Faith of Our Fathers" and everybody'd smile.

Then he got a black spot on his other big toenail, and they took him away again, and they started chopping at his other leg, and Slog said it was like living in a horror picture.

When Slog's dad came home next, he spent his days parked in a wheelchair in his garden. He didn't bother with tin legs: just pyjama bottoms folded over his stumps. He was quieter. He sat day after day in the summer sun among his roses, staring out at the pebble-dashed walls and the red roofs and the empty sky. The Woodbines dangled in his fingers, "Oh, Sacred Heart" drifted gently from his lips. Mrs Mickley brought him cups of tea, glasses of beer, Woodbines. Once I stood with Mam at the window and watched Mrs Mickley stroke her husband's head and gently kiss his cheek.

"She's telling him he's going to get better," said Mam.

We saw the smile growing on Joe Mickley's face.