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Opening extract from

Into That Forest

Written by

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EGMONT
Give Strong Stories As Gifts

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

To Vincent Ward

Me name be Hannah O'Brien and I be seventy-six years old. Me first thing is an apology – me language is bad cos I lost it and had to learn it again. But here's me story and I be glad to tell it before I hop the twig.

I were born in Tasmania, born not in a hospital but here in the backblocks. In this actual house. It is crumbling round me ears now, but the roof hardly leaks and if I chop enough wood I can heat the place when it snows. Though I live here by meself I am not lonely. I got a wedding photograph of me mother and me father when men wore beards and sat down for the picture while me mother wears a wedding dress and stands beside him. And there's

me father's harpoon hanging from the living room wall with its cracked wooden handle and rusted blade. Me only new thing is the cabinet with a radio in it which Mr Dixon down at the general store gave me. I can't hack it. There always be mongrel music in it, like it's shouting all the time. Anyway, I'd sooner yabber to me-self than listen to those voices inside that box. I reckon I need new curtains, these are a bit dusty and fraying, but they keep out the summer light when it's so strong it hurts me eyes.

I think me uncle built this house. He gave it to me father. It were a present. At that time we were the only house for miles and miles. Me father wanted to live in a place near water – if not the sea, then a river. Me mother liked rivers and so the house were a give-and-take for the both of them. From the verandah we could almost touch the Munro River as it flowed down to the sea. I had no brothers or sisters. I don't know why. There were a problem, I think. I'd hear me mother crying buckets in me

father's arms and hear him say, like to a child, *There, there, we got Hannah.*

Me first memories, well, the thing is, and this be strange when I think about it, but me first memories, they are really me father's. Maybe not even his memories, maybe his stories. I'd drop into a swoon of gladness when he come to me bedroom to put me to sleep and he'd tell me 'bout his adventures. He were a whaler and when he came back after travelling the seas, he'd tell me these stories, stories about places and things he'd set eyes on. I s'pose me mind made them me own so I thought it was me, Hannah, in the Philippines and I could see two black men in a boat, the sort hacked out of a log, and they were waiting for a whale shark. When it came, one fisherman jumped out of the boat onto the back of the whale shark and rode it like it were a brumby and at the same time he stabbed it in the back til it croaked. In the South Seas, in water so clear you could see right down to the bottom where queer fish swim, a fisherman jumped into the sea

with a banana in his mouth. He spitted bits of the banana at a huge groper which gobbled them up, all the time coming closer and closer til the fisherman caught that big fish in his bare hands. There were another time when me father were at the bow and a sperm whale, big as a house, were harpooned and the whale boat, stuck fast to the wounded whale, were dragged along at a wild speed towards the sun on the horizon til the monster carked it of exhaustion. One time me father were at anchor in Western Australia when he seen a gin on a beach and she were singing a song, an uncanny song like you sing to ghosts, but it called to the whales. One whale, a minke, came to shore sucked in by her song and beached itself like a sacrifice for her. On the Tasmanian coast, near South Bruny, a whale were winched into the flensing yard where a big puncture were cut into the back of the creature and an old man, he crippled with tuberculosis so bad that he walked on all fours, were put into it, like a plug down a hole. He was pulled out half a day later and all the workers were

thunderstruck cos this fellow could walk and he was straight-backed. He had been cured.

When me father came home from his voyages, you knew. When me mother and I lived by ourselves every-thing were quiet, but when me father were in the house there were sing-ing and me mother kept bursting into giggles and me father's footsteps were loud and happy. One time when I were 'bout five he brought back some stuff from inside a whale. He had carved it out from deep inside its spout. It were like a small, grey, ugly sponge. He put it in a jar and sometimes I opened the lid and sniffed it. It half stank of dead, putrid things from the sea but when I got past that stink I smelt perfume, ever so sweet: a rosy, sugary mist. Me father said it were worth more than gold but he never tried to sell it – it were to be me dowry. He had lots of memories of his whaling – there were a harpoon on the wall, baleen always drying on the back verandah, rigging ropes and cutting blades so sharp that when the sun shone on the blades it cut the shine up into thin

pieces. People smile when I say that, but I seen it with me own eyes.

His times away growed longer cos whales were harder to find. Once Derwent River were so choked with whales that it were just a matter of going out in a boat and harpooning – you could do it wearing a blindfold, there were so many right whales using the river as a nursery. The people of Hobart used to complain that they couldn't sleep cos of all the whales blowing all the time. That's how many there were, me father said. Now he had to go to all parts of the globe. Me mother and me were close, like sisters, when me father were away. She taught me to read and write. I were very keen on animals, especially Sam the pig. He were as big as a beer barrel and he allowed me to ride him. I spent a lot of time with him, talking to him in grunts and snuffles. I never made fun of him by going *Oink, oink*. Me mother used to get worried. *Why you talking to Sam like he were a person?* But I were lonely being a child in the bush by meself, and, you know, I were just a little

girl, but I'd look at Sam as I were talking to him and he'd seem to understand, like he were listening really hard to me.

Cos I liked being outside and playing, I were always dirty and me mother would shake her head and say, *You're grubby or filthy, but never clean, Hannah.* I couldn't help it. If I ate food at the table, some of it would always slide out of the side of me mouth and plop onto me clothes. There's a cobweb across two trees in the back yard, well, I don't know how I do it, but pretty soon I'm wearing it like a hair net. Me hair were always such a mess that me mother shoved a bowl on me head and cut me hair – it were a real basin cut. It didn't bother me. But I must oppose meself here. Sometimes I did feel green with envy when me mum would take the pins out of her hair and let it fall down her back. It made her look like one of those mermaids in me picture books. I still remember her cry of *Oh no, Hannah* when I brung home wounded birds or wallaby joeys or blue-tongues. I were always sad to see animals hurt.