

O N E

They have found a sea-monster. A Japanese fishing boat, trawling for mackerel in the deep black seas off New Zealand, has caught in its nets the shabby stinking remains of a colossal beast. The crew had hoisted the rotting thing over the boat to get a better view. At first they'd thought it was a whale – then they wondered if it wasn't something more. As if obliging the curious men, the dead thing had slithered through the ropes and slumped heavily onto the deck. Pinching their noses, gagging, the fishermen reeled away. One held his breath to creep gamely forward, camera in hand to record the astonishing wreckage they saw.

Adrian stares at the photographs, reproduced imperfectly in the morning's newspaper. In the background of each picture are the beams and steel cables of a working trawler; in one there is a chequered buoyancy-ring. Massed in the foreground of the photos sprawls the monster. Its blockish head weighs down a long and narrow neck. Winglike flippers fold back from its

cresting, cavernous body. It seems to possess a tattered rope of tail. The bones show through – sometimes break through – the white and waxy skin. The flesh looks melted, it is a thing in ruins. Seaweed hangs from it in hanks. Knuckles on its backbone are as straight as a set of stairs.

There's speculation that this creature could be a giant turtle, slipped loose from a massive shell. There is even talk that it might be a plesiosaur, which is a seafaring dinosaur believed extinct for millions of years. A spokesman calls it a precious and important discovery; a toy company announces it will sell wind-up models of the thing.

They hadn't kept it on the boat for long. It had stunk unbearably. After the photos were taken they'd jimmied it off the deck, once more into the sea.

A monster. Adrian scoops his spoon through the limp flakes and warm milk of his breakfast, studying the photographs. There's something sad in the way the animal hangs its head, its attitude of defeat and shame. It is sad that it's been dredged from its cold water grave and hung up for everyone to see.

Still, a *sea-monster*. In the pictures, the men who stand beside the beast look like children, even smaller. Though this one is dead, there might be others alive, winging the scaly waves into shore. It is not going to be the same now, swimming in the sea.

Adrian adds sea-monster to the list of things he finds disquieting.

Grandmother (Grandmonster?) is another. After breakfast she makes him stand in front of her dressing-table mirror while she combs his hair. She makes no attempt to be gentle. Adrian, looking in the mirror, winces occasionally. His hands hover just above the surface of the dressing table.

“Don’t fidget, Adrian.”

“I’m not.”

But his fingers are drawn like thieves to the glittering dresser set which holds pride of place on the tabletop, a hand mirror and hairbrush rested on a matching, sparkling tray. Apart from the squat mirror face and the prickly bristles of the brush, the entire set is made of crystal. The crystal is carved into a pattern of neat rowed pyramids. Running a finger over the pyramids feels like petting a crocodile. Adrian lifts the hairbrush by the handle and the weight of it makes the points of the pyramids bite into his palm.

“Put it back now.”

He returns the brush carefully to the tray, bristles down, beside the mirror, but his fingers linger, balancing on the pyramid tips. “You never use this brush and mirror, do you, Gran?”

She doesn’t look up from the knot she’s discovered. “It’s too good to use.”

“Then why do you have it? Why do you keep it on the table?”

His chin is jerked up as she wrenches the knot, and he hears his hair tearing. “If we only kept what had a use,” she says, “there’d be a lot less junk lying round.”

He contemplates her image in the dresser mirror, wondering what she means. He’s never seen much junk lying anywhere around the stolid urban neighbourhood, but he imagines tottering tangles of doll heads, bike tyres and foil milkbottle caps rising as creaky mountains from the middle of footpaths. He scrambles like a mouse to the peak of a rubbish hill and as far as he can see is inviting flotsam and curious dregs, a child’s utopia. He returns his gaze to the silvery mirror: his gran is wearing a cream dress splashed with flowers so red they might be bleeding. “Crystal looks the same as glass,” he muses. “What’s the difference?”

His grandmother doesn’t answer. He shifts his balance to the other foot. “I don’t know why there’s two things that look the same but get called different names.”

“Adrian, stand still!” She cuffs the side of his head and he straightens obediently, dropping his hands to his sides. In the mirror she’s frowning furiously at his hair. His hair is dense and yellow and strangely, stiffly wild, an armload of hay dumped helter-skelter on his head. It tangles like it has a lunatic mind of its own. “Where on Earth did he get this hair?” his gran asks no one, and strand after strand of it breaks beneath her ploughing

comb. “It didn’t come from our side of the family. The McPhees haven’t got this impossible straw. It’s come from the father’s side.”

Adrian steals a cowed glance to the mirror. His grandma’s hair sits in downy cylinders – if he opens the top drawer of the dresser he’ll find the pink and blue plastic rollers responsible for curving it that way. Her hair looks white as chalk today; it is thin, and getting thinner. He seems to remember it once being mauve. He dreads the thought of sprouting purple hair himself, but he worries that he’ll never be a normal person, that his impossible hair is a symptom of some inescapable failing. Even when his grandmother has finished with it, the hanks still seem defiantly snarled. “There,” she says. “You’re ready.”

Adrian’s gaze flits to his reflection, his clean face, his trim school uniform, the sky-blue skivvy at his throat. The v-neck jumper sports cuffs of navy blue, the grey corduroy trousers are ironed. This is *ready*. Though it is the brink of winter the past few days have been warm, and the corduroy will be heavy to wear. In summer the boys wear shorts and long socks and their kneecaps look bruised, knobbled, too big for their legs. His gran says, “Get your things and I’ll meet you in the car.”

He hurries down the hall to retrieve his satchel from his room, a hand on his forehead to soothe the smarting of his scalp. He double-checks the bag’s depths for his homework and lunchbox. As he trots back through the hall, the strap of the

satchel like a swinging snake on his arm, he hears his uncle calling him and slides to a halt on the parquetry, teeth sinking into his lip.

The door is slightly ajar. Adrian runs a hand down it lightly, so it glides away on its hinges. He slips partway through the gap, an arm and foot and the schoolbag staying in the hall. The room is dark, the curtains closely drawn. On the cold air is the ruddy mean scent of oil paint and, beyond it, another, insistent and grimly stale: this is only the smell of young man, but Adrian sniffs in it the odour of the bad things that can befall anyone. “Yes, Uncle?”

The dark and silence has made him whisper. A scrap of brightness noses in from the hall but is parched before it reaches the end of the bed. Adrian knows his uncle is lying there, curled like a mole under his earthy heap of blankets. His pillow, Adrian knows, is limp and dented as a fallen leaf. Again he breathes, “Yes, Uncle?”

Uncle Rory speaks into the black; his voice is like the snow. He says, “You tell me something and I’ll tell you something.”

A fish-hook of dread grabs at Adrian’s maw. He hears, outside, the engine of the car. His grandmother is reversing the vehicle out of the garage. The car is as big as a tank, as an ocean liner, and it takes all his grandma’s patience to get it safely down the drive. If he is not there to meet it when the wheels heave onto the footpath, then – strife, grandmonster.

The inspiration comes with giddy relief. “They’ve found a monster in the sea.”

“Have they?”

“Yes – in the newspaper. It might be a dinosaur.”

“Really.” He hears the air jet from Uncle’s nose. “We’ll see.”

Adrian can’t think what to answer; his ears are pinned back with the sound of the car. The bag dances on the end of its strap. “I’ve got to go.”

“Don’t you want to hear what I’ll tell you?”

He nods quickly, and swallows. His uncle shifts, the blankets distend, and the bed creaks tiredly. “I’ll tell you the difference between glass and crystal, Adrian. The difference is that crystal sings.”

Adrian blinks. Uncle Rory hears everything – Adrian often forgets. Uncle is a man who hears and sees all: Gran says it’s because he won’t stir himself to do anything a bit more useful. Rory would have heard Gran disown Adrian’s unwieldy hair; Uncle himself has the McPhees’ puckish but biddable curls. “Oh,” says the boy.

“Do you know what I’m talking about? How crystal sings?”

“...No. I’ve got to go.”

“Trust me,” says Rory. “It sings. One day I’ll show you.”

Adrian looks blindly into the room, the air chill on his lips. The smell is almost solid; the scrap of light from the hallway lies in a faint across his shoes. “I’ve got to go,” he repeats.

“Go on, then,” sighs his uncle. “Pay attention to your teacher.”

“I will,” says Adrian; he ducks away and runs down the hall, flying like a bird, through the kitchen, out the door and into the morning air.

He doesn't like or hate school: his nine years have been lived doing what older people have told him to do, and going to school is one of those things, unavoidable, not worth resenting. This isn't his first school – he's been coming here only as long as he's been living with his grandma and uncle, which is almost a year. Before then, while he'd lived with his mother, he had gone to a school so close to home that he'd walked there and back alone every day; living with his father, he'd caught the school's trundly bus. Now, at this different school, his gran drives him to the gate each morning and meets him in the same spot every afternoon. She often tells him he's a tie-down, and Adrian has no clear idea what she means. He doesn't have anything to do with ties.

He isn't particularly gifted at anything except art: the other kids gather admiringly round his desk during the once-weekly afternoon sessions when they're allowed to paint and draw. Aside from this, he goes more or less ignored. He doesn't mind that – he prefers to be overlooked. He is bashful, and rarely puts up his hand: if he knows an answer, he generally keeps it

to himself. He isn't boisterous, he can't run fast, he is hopelessly uncoordinated. He sometimes joins the boys playing football at lunchtime on the broken asphalt, but he isn't a skilful player. When the captains pick their teams from the mob, first one boy choosing and then the other, Adrian is unfailingly one of the last to be selected, left waiting with the fat boy and the immigrant. Adrian is the runt. But he takes the humiliation in good stead, and always feels a squeeze of pleasure when his name is finally called.

He has a best friend, another unathletic specimen: Clinton Tull, whose glasses are thick enough to hold back the tide, never sees a football coming before it booms off his brow. Clinton is known to be scrupulous, and his glasses naturally make him wise. He is regularly called upon to settle disputes which fisticuffs have failed to solve. He isn't spoilt, but his mother delights in buying him things. The two boys had become friends over a top-of-the-range tin of Derwent pencils: Clinton owned them, but Adrian could harness their brilliance.

Most lunchtimes Adrian doesn't play football; instead, he and Clinton sit in their favourite place on the sidelines, watching and conferring quietly, sombre as a pair of old gents. They sit side by side with their spines against the red bricks of the disused toilet block, their wrists propped on their knees. The bricks are warm in winter and the eaves shade off the summer sun. Attached to the wall, at ear-height to the sitting

boys, is a steel trough with six drinking taps, and occasionally they exchange a few words with a bloodied or thirsty football player. From their territory against the toilet block, the boys overlook most of the schoolyard – the basketball court where the bigger girls play rounders, the undercroft where the smaller girls skip, the asphalt yard that's a black, gnarled and grassless playground, the jungle-gym and monkey bars over which the little kids swarm. They see the studious girls ranged in twos and threes along a distant fence, driving unsentimental bargains over swapcards. They see the excluded boys and girls, most of them sitting in shadows by themselves. Adrian feels sorry for these misfits, but not so sorry that he will risk his meagre reputation by befriending any of them. He knows how close he himself teeters to the abyss of exclusion. Only Clinton stands between him and the searing loneliness Adrian recognizes in the outcasts. He has felt, before, their aching forlornness for himself.

It is a small suburban school, and the pupils know each other's faces and names. There are entire families on the rollcall, siblings spread throughout the grades – even Clinton has a sister in Prep. Everyone knows who is rich, who is poor, whose mother is expecting another baby, who was sprung on the weekend pitching waterbombs at the presbytery door. Between classes the yard swells with normal school sounds, laughter and shrieking, whistles and tears, the warm bubbling

welter of childhood's noise. But through this school runs a streak of strangeness, and ever since the day Clinton explained it to him, Adrian has never felt very safe here.

Along the road from the school, enclosed by a towering fence, stand the long russet buildings of St Jonah's Orphanage. A few of its charges attend the school. The stigma of the institution hangs from them like a fusty, wet-wool smell. Many of the most isolated children, the ones sunk most deeply into the lunchtime shadows, are children from St Jonah's; other children shy from them. "Because it's not really an orphanage," Clinton had informed him, early on. "It's a Home."

Adrian, confused, said, "I thought they didn't have homes?"

Clinton's face had creased, his glasses dropping to the end of his pebble-round nose. He is a font of innuendo and gossip – his parents approach life as a soap opera and make dramas out of the most mundane, worrying details to death over the dinner table, the steaming peas. "Not a home, a Home. Like an orphanage for kids whose mum and dad are still alive."

"How come they're at the Home, then?"

"Their parents are no good, that's why. Can't look after their children. Don't treat them very well. Maybe don't even want them. So the kids get taken away and put in the Home. But it's too late, usually. Some of them have already gone nuts. Nuts from not being looked after properly. Crazy like their mum and dad are."

Adrian had felt the warmth drain from his skin. His own parents were alive, but he didn't live with them. He had prayed that Clinton would not make a contorted connection between himself, his absent parents, the craziness of the Home children, and the possibility that Adrian might likewise be crazed. Clinton had said nothing, either his imagination or his malice failing to stretch so far. But Adrian had thought of it, the similarities seemed glaring to him, and he still thinks of it every day. He is haunted by the prospect of becoming a pariah here, distrusted and pitied and sometimes openly despised, ground down beneath the mercilessness of the fresh-faced young.

The pair of them sit against the toilet block this lunch-time, sunning in the last warmth of autumn. They have already discussed the sea-monster; Clinton is laying private plans to catch a living one. He is a boy with ambitions, his mother always telling him that he's destined for glory: he sees himself as a seafarer, the creature bound in iron and chain. Now there's nothing left to talk about and their gazes drift across the yard, where a desultory but painful game of Brandy is being played, to the log-lined perimeter of the adventure playground. Prancing there, on her toes, is the girl the children call Horsegirl.

She is the most unlovely and unloved of the Home children, and the most defiantly crazed. Her real name is Sandra, but it is rarely heard: inside the classroom, the teacher directs few

questions to her. She is sometimes unruly in class, slamming her fists on the desk, mumbling hotly to herself. She is tall and strong and exudes danger – everyone is frightened of her. When enraged she is near-impossible to control, and the male third-grade teacher has often had to be called. She becomes enraged if the authorities don't let her do as she pleases, so she is mostly left to do what she likes. And what pleases Sandra is to be a horse.

She trots, prances, gambols like a horse. She tosses her long mane of hair. She paws the asphalt and shakes away flies. She often won't talk, for horses never do, but she snorts and nickers and neighs, smacking flaky raw lips. Sometimes she confines herself to the make-believe stable that she's outlined with pine needles and cones. If she is in a nice mood, she'll hoist a prep child on her shoulders and race around the yard. Her mood might blacken doing so, and the child becomes her terrified prisoner. Then there's screaming, shouting, teachers white with stress. The result of Horsegirl's volatility is that when the children see her coming, they tend to back away. Nobody wants to be accused of laughing at her, so their faces go carefully blank. No one talks to her or meets her eye, not even the big boys from the higher grades. In the classroom, no pupil will share a desk with her. She is relegated to a lonely corner, where she is happiest.

Today something unusual has happened, and no one can

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remember seeing Horsegirl so cheery. She has brought to school a leather bridle and reins. Nobody knows where she got these from, and none dare to ask. A nun at St Jonah's has doubtlessly indulged her, realizing the girl's mind has galloped beyond repair. If she must be a horse, let her be a joyous and fulfilled horse.

Horsegirl is running round the yard, pausing occasionally to buck. She has the bit in her mouth, the reins slapping at her legs. Above the noise in the yard Adrian can hear the clink of the bridle's buckles. The air is cut through with sharp, surprising whinnies. She makes a sound when she canters, a fair rendition of hooves striking dirt. Children fall away to give her space to run. Her thin grey face is pink with exertion, her expression bliss: in her mind she is thundering somewhere far from here. Somewhere green and hilly, Adrian thinks, where nothing catches her. Clinton's eyes, behind masses of glass, follow her back and forth.

"Look at that," he says. "That's what happens."