

Whalesong

by Kit Brookman

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NOTES

‘/’ symbol refers to a beat, a breath, a pause, or similar.

Stage directions are in ***BOLD ITALICS***.

In the case of ***WHALE SCREAM***, which recurs, this is a sound and lighting effect. Whatever this is, it should not be the same every time. Sometimes it might be sudden, sometimes slow. It should always be terrifying.

CAST AND DOUBLING

The play is performed by a company of 6. At times they speak as chorus, and at times as character.

Unassigned lines in the text (‘-’) are shared between the company.

NAMES in bold italics refer to characters.

Essentially, each member of the cast plays one of the children, and also one of the adults in the story.

DOUBLING

Mary,	also Vicar & Principal
Angela,	also Martin
Pip,	also Expert
Uguolo,	also Mrs Parsons
Joe,	also Peter & Cowboy
Farhad,	also Binks

Angela’s Mother is alternated by members of the ensemble (sometimes played by more than one actor at a time).

SONGS

‘Step song’ is sung by all the cast except Angela.

‘Nightmare song’ is sung by the whole company.

‘Martin’s song’ is sung by Martin.

‘In the cold deep’ is sung by the actors playing Mary, Pip, Uguolo, and Farhad.

PROLOGUE. BEGINNING.

Darkness. Sound. Something is coming closer.

1. FIRST SIGHT.

The cast stand in a group at the back of the stage. Like a gang of kids. Or a school of fish.

- A shape.
- A lump.
- More shadow than shape.
- Indistinct.
- A dark gap in space.
- Defined only by the seawater that slips around it, sheer and silver, rushing back from the tide-line.
- A body.
- At first he struggles to tell it apart from the rubble.
- Landslips are frequent,
- The most recent one sent sheets of rock spilling into the sea.
- So when he first sees the body,
- That some especially large chunk of rock has been torn from the cliff in the night.
- He had left his cottage early to walk with his dog along the cliff tops.
- He does it every morning.
- Him and his dog.
- The dog's name is Albert.
- He's a stray, a mongrel.
- Just showed up one morning and stayed.
- Mr. Hallicks speaks more to Albert than he does to other people.
- The worst kind of people are other people.
- This is Mr. Hallicks' favourite saying.
- He says it frequently.
- But only ever to Albert.
- This morning hadn't shown any signs of being different to usual. He woke up,
- same room, same curtains hanging from the same plastic rail, same grey sky out the window.
- Same dog.
- The same mug of tea within a reasonable range of possibilities.
- Mr. Hallicks owns only three mugs.
- He took the same path across the fields towards the sea.
- He heard the waves crashing against the cliffs.
- Same sea, same waves, same cliffs.
- In the distance, he saw the lights of the oil rigs out at sea.
- Or, dimly, a gout of flame from the flare stacks, burning off the excess gas.

- All as it should be.
- But now this.
- A shape.
- A lump.
- A body.
- He edges his way down the path, his boots crunching over the samphire, the wildflowers.
- The cliffs, grey-white and chalky; towering, ancient slabs of limestone,
- they catch the rising sun so that the air around Mr. Hallicks as he descends seems to glow.
- He reaches the rain-slicked grey-sand beach, he looks up.
- It's unmistakable now.
- The carcass towers over him. It's on its back, the rumped black throat exposed to the air, flippers splayed out at horrid angles.
- A whale.
- MANY** *[Quietly, under the following] One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, eleven, thirteen, seventeen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-eight, thirty, thirty-three, thirty-nine, forty.*
- Mr. Hallicks walks the length of the body.
- He counts his steps.
- At the tip of the nose he turns, he walks the length again to be sure.
- Forty steps.
- No blood, no wound.
- The body is fresh. No rot.
- It smells of salt and sand and drying seaweed.
- And another smell. One he can't put his finger on.
- He doesn't think about going back to his cottage, about preparing his breakfast of hard boiled eggs and sugary tea.
- He doesn't think about how he has to go into the village later to collect his heart tablets.
- He doesn't move.
- He stays standing there, staring up at the body of the whale, as the sun rises, breaks across the water.
- As the dawn chorus of birds swells and fades.
- As the thin, cloud-strained light stabilises, flattens into day.
- He stands there for hours, unmoving,
- until
- ALL:** Yes
- Until he becomes aware.
- Mr. Hallicks becomes aware.
- He is being watched.
- MOTHER** *Angela don't be late home after school.*

- There are five of them watching from the cliff top.
- MOTHER** *Angela do you hear me?*
- ANGELA** *But Mum we were going to –*
- MOTHER** *I don't care.*
- There had been six, but Angela had run back up the road into town to fetch an adult.
- ANGELA** *Isn't anyone going to come with me?*
- OTHERS:** *'Bye Angela.*
- ANGELA** *Don't go down and look! Don't do anything until I'm back!*
- Angela races back up the slope. She drops her bag by the bus stop so that she can run faster. Once the others are out of sight, her ears turn pink with embarrassment. The others will think she's afraid.
- Angela opens the front door, but her mother's gone. She left ten minutes before, walking up the hill to the church, past the rows of black-shingled houses. Angela's mother listens to the cartilage in her knees crunching over itself.
- She hates this hill.
- She holds onto her hatred like a child holds onto a blanket. It's the only thing that gets her up the hill on mornings like this. Getting to the top and thinking with a little thrill that she's beaten something that she hates.
- She and the vicar set up the tables. From their position at the entrance to the church hall, the vicar and Angela's mother can see all the way to the sea.
- Angela's mother smothers a trestle with a vinyl-coated tablecloth, the one with the strawberry print, while the vicar puts up the food bank sign on the church gate.
- As they stack the tin cans she juts her chin towards the ocean and says,
- *Look at it.*
- And though the vicar doesn't quite reply, she goes on.
- *Look at it lying there. The ocean. It's strange, don't you think? How we know so little about it.*
- Angela's mother has never been swimming in her life.
- *The sea's for fishes, and I'm a person,*
- she likes to say.
- She keeps talking. The vicar tries to dismiss a vague feeling that he is being murdered by conversation.
- Angela's mother turns the tin cans so the labels all face outward.
- *They say we know less about the ocean than we do about space. The deepest parts. Down in the Mariana Trench or whatever. I heard that man on TV say it. You know, that idiot man with the voice.*

- She hands out charity while on the cliff top, the five children watch Mr. Hallicks on the beach below.

FARHAD Farhad,

MARY Mary,

PIP Pip,

UGUOLO Uguolo,

JOE and Joe.

- They're on their way to school.

- They walk to school together every morning.

- Mary Parsons leaves her house first and meets Uguolo at the end of the street.

- And together they go around the corner to meet Angela.

ANGELA *Angela has never liked the ocean. It makes her think of how uncomfortable it must be to be one of the droplets right at the bottom, with all that water pressing down on you. She dreams of never having to see it again, of striding the vast prairies of the American mid-west, with half a continent between her and the Atlantic.*

- Then the three of them walk down the coastal path, where they meet Pip and Farhad,

- and then they turn back towards town, where Joe will be waiting for them at the intersection.

All take a chocolate bar out of their pocket, take a bite, drop the wrapping on the ground.

- At the end of the day they stop off at the corner shop to buy a chocolate bar.

- And go back the way they came.

ANGELA *Don't do anything until I'm back!*

- They all know Mr. Hallicks.

- Mary sees him sometimes in her mother's pharmacy.

- He has a strange smell.

- Like damp cigarette-ends mixed with chlorine.

- If they're together when they see him they'll joke about him.

PIP *He has a face like a melted candle.*

FARHAD *Like an over-done scotch egg.*

MARY *Like a sad old man.*

UGUOLO *Like a potato!*

- But if they're alone they'll admit that there's something about this old man and his dog.

- Some unguarded grief, some deep old thing he can't keep inside of himself.

- He gives me the shivers,

- Farhad says.
- From the cliff top, they watch Mr. Hallicks and the whale. They watch the gulls circle above the whale's body.
- They are good at watching.
- At being watched.
- At school, at lunch time, they'll sit on the benches, very loud or very quiet.
- They will lean against walls in calculated ways.
- They will perform their boredom in Geography class.
- They will fix their hair.
- Acting so cool.
- Feeling so watched by each other.
- But they don't watch each other now.

MARY

- *Let's get a closer look.*
- They've come this way before.
- In summer to swim or lie on the beach.
- Or when it's cooler to explore the caves at the base of the cliffs.
- The caves are dangerous.
- If you stay too long you can be trapped by the tide.
- But all this is forgotten.
- The beach is not the same beach.
- It is another place, transformed by death.
- They're close now.
- The whale's shadow falls over them, the sun disappears behind its hulking black back.
- It's cold.
- Colder than any of them expect.
- They don't hesitate.
- But they feel it.
- And they can hear something.
- The wind
- or not the wind
- the water
- surge-sink
- a kind of whisper a kind of

STEP SONG

Step.
Another step.
The whale's eye
is as cold as death.

Step.

*Another step.
The grey sky
holding rain.*

*Step, step
Step, step (cont.)*

*Something moving,
something moving (cont.)*

*In the corner of, in the corner of
In the corner of, in the corner of...*

*The whale's eye.
Cold as death.
The grey sky.
Holding rain.*

- They press themselves against the whale's body, lay their warm cheeks on its cold flank.
- Their eyes are shut
- As if they were asleep,
- at home,
- in their beds.
- The waves run over their school shoes.
- They don't stir.

ANGELA *Mary?*

- Angela runs down the path.

ANGELA *I told you not to look! I told you not to do anything until I was back!*

- She falls, blood streaks down her forearm.
- She doesn't seem to notice.
- No one notices.

ALL *I told you not to look!*

- Other figures are appearing at the cliff top now.

ANGELA *Mary say something! Why did you come down here?*

ALL *Why didn't you stay up on the cliff like we said?*

- For the first time she sees it properly
- Jaw slung open, snapped out of its joints
- Rows of baleen exposed to the wind
- Wind tearing through the baleen hairs like steel on slate
- She stares up
- Up
- Into the whale's eye
- Split open
- Darker than midnight
- Staring out from death.

Angela screams.

2. THE CORDON.

Angela's house. ANGELA and her mother. A clock ticking.

MOTHER *I don't see why they cancelled school.
Over a dead animal.
It wasn't like that when I was growing up.*

You're all so sensitive.

Angela?

Well since you're home you can listen out for my delivery.

I might go out and... I could see about getting that lamp fixed.

I'm waiting for a stick mixer.

I looked at the tracking number online, I know that it's left the warehouse.

Don't you think they should be able to tell you when things are going to arrive?

And now we can't go down to the beach. Do they think it's contaminated somehow?

Angela?

Why do they do that? The whales. Why do they throw themselves up onto the beach like that? It seems like a very stupid thing for an animal to do.

Was that the bell?

Did you hear the bell, Angela?

Why don't people make things loud enough?

We certainly paid enough.

I don't know what this little game is but I don't like it. I spoke to Mary's mother on the phone, she says Mary isn't talking either. You're just going to have to pull yourselves together.

Angela, if I go out will you make sure to answer the door?

-

At the beach, the crowds have gone.

The police tape flaps in the wind.

The vicar sees off the last of his congregation. He read from Jonah that evening, and feels pleased that he thought to do so.

He thinks of the sailors in the grip of the deadly storm, casting lots to decide who was to blame, he thinks of their reluctance to offer up Jonah to the sea.

VICAR

From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

-

The police sergeant tilts his head back, pinches the bridge of his nose.

He fumbles in his pocket for a tissue.

Stepping in out of the cold night he felt the blood slide simultaneously out his left nostril and down the back of his throat.

It tastes like salt and tin and iron.

He remembers how his mother always told him he'd grow out of them.

- He never has.
He glances out his window, towards the cliffs.
The vicar looks up at the stained glass window.
Saint Thomas, uncertain, his fingers thrust delicately into Christ's wounds.
He switches out the light.
- The beach is dark.
Just the whale.
And birds, now, crows and gulls, beginning to peck at the exposed flesh.
Snow begins to fall.
The village is dark.
Except one house.
Far at the edge of town.
Blazing bright as a beacon.
It's Mr. Hallicks' house.
It's on fire.

3. THE DOG, ALBERT.

- Sergeant Binks!
- BINKS** *When did you find him?*
- Just before sunrise. Mrs. Parsons at the pharmacy, she was expecting him to come in yesterday and pick up his tablets but he never did.
- BINKS** *He might've done it on purpose. It's happened before.*

- What, Hallicks jumping off the cliff?
- BINKS** *No. Obviously. But other people have done it. Poor fella.*
- He worked with my dad on the oil rigs back in the day. Kept himself to himself even then, apparently.
- BINKS** *Any clue how the fire started?*
- Could have been bad wiring. Those old houses.
- /
- BINKS** *Anyone want to keep his dog?*

4. MIDNIGHT.

- Midnight.
- The village is dark. The snow is not yet thick upon the ground, and Mr. Hallicks' house is not yet burning.
That's still to come.
- Everyone is in their beds.
- Asleep.

- PARSONS** *Or awake.*
Mary's mother stares through a gap in the curtains at the orange street lamp.
Little flurries of snow are whirling past.
In the morning there'll be thin strips of it laying in pools of shadow.
It'll make for a mess at the pharmacy.
People dragging it in on their boots, spreading it around the shop.
She'll have to take the mat out from the back of the shop, make sure to lay it down first thing.
- Can't sleep.
- PARSONS** *Left the electric blanket on too long.*
- She's too hot.
- Air's too cold.
- Too
- PARSONS** *Something is moving.*
- Yes.
- Under sleep, deep
- deep under
- PARSONS** *something is moving*
- Something is moving through the sleep of the village.

NIGHTMARE SONG

COMPANY

ONE VOICE

MRS PARSONS

She watches the street lamp.
 She watches snow melt against the street lamp.
 She tries to sleep.
 But it's like holding on to water.

Something is moving.

The village sleeps. They turn. They sigh.
 Something is moving
 through the sleep of the village.

Something is moving

And on they sleep. They scratch. They dream.
 They dream of the tide,
 water rising and falling.

Something is moving.

Something...

Something...

And in the dream of the village,
 the tide snaps,

it keeps rising....

Water rising over everything.

Feet, ankles, calves, knees

And all the time

Something dark is coming nearer,
carried on the tide.

**Thighs, hips.
Navel, belly, ribs.**

*Something is moving,
moving closer.*

They strain to see it.
But they can't.

**Chest. Shoulders. Neck.
Chin, mouth, nose.**

5. AGAINST THE TIDE.

Night. ANGELA is standing by the bus stop. A COWBOY is there.

COWBOY *Hello there.*

ANGELA *Hello.*

COWBOY *Isn't it a bit late for you to be out?*

ANGELA *I'm running away from home.*

COWBOY *You don't seem to be running very fast.*

ANGELA *I'm waiting for the bus.*

COWBOY *That makes sense. What's your name?*

ANGELA *Angela.*

COWBOY *It's dark at this bus stop, ain't it?*

ANGELA *Kids throw rocks at the lights.*

COWBOY *Little hooligans.*

ANGELA *They're just immature.*

COWBOY *Not like you?*

ANGELA *No.*

COWBOY *You never smashed a light Angela?*

ANGELA *No.*

COWBOY *But you're a bit of a rebel, aren't you.*

ANGELA *I'm really not.*

COWBOY *But here you are running away from home. If that ain't rebellious...
We've got a soft spot for rebels where I'm from.*

ANGELA *What are you doing here?*

COWBOY *I guess I must stand out.*

ANGELA *A bit.*

COWBOY *I'm chasing my fortune, Angela. Riding the crest of the wave into the
great golden nowhere of prosperity.
I'm in the oil business. It was a romantic profession, once.*

ANGELA *Have you seen the whale?*

COWBOY *Well sure, I didn't want to miss it. Don't get many whales where I'm
from.
You're awful pretty to be running away on your own. Don't you have
a boyfriend?*

ANGELA *Yes.*

COWBOY *He's not running away with you?*

ANGELA *I didn't ask him.*

COWBOY *The bus seems to be late.*

ANGELA *I know.*

COWBOY *Do you find the timetable reliable?*

ANGELA *Not really.*

COWBOY *I was looking at it earlier and apparently there are only four buses per
day, that doesn't seem like a lot.*

ANGELA *I know.*

COWBOY *And none on Sundays.*

ANGELA *It's a small town.*

COWBOY *But it doesn't even seem like enough to be useful. They'd be better off scrapping the bus altogether if they can only run four services and none on Sundays.*

ANGELA *You're right.*

COWBOY *I have to ask you – something's puzzling me.*

ANGELA *Oh?*

COWBOY *Why exactly are you running away from home?*

ANGELA *I'm afraid something terrible is going to happen.*

COWBOY *Like what?*

ANGELA *The entire world is going to be swept away and there'll be nothing left but darkness.*

COWBOY *Well everyone's afraid, Angela. Everyone's afraid all the time, God help us.*

ANGELA *Are you afraid?*

COWBOY *Well sure.*

I have to tell you, I've been watching this bus stop a long time and I haven't seen any buses come by.

ANGELA *Watching from where?*

COWBOY *On a stool by the window down in that there saloon. They've got a warm fire and a whisky that sits just right with my traveler's disposition. What do you say we go warm our toes?*

Children wearing whale skull masks appear in the distance. They watch Angela.

ANGELA *I can't.*

COWBOY *You don't want to be waiting here for the bus. In the cold. Imagine waiting forever in the cold, Angela. In cold water. Your skin pickling over like a soaked raisin. Feeling your body vice up as the last air escapes it, watching those bubbles race away from you towards the surface and thinking: ah shoot, there goes my precious little life. It's a long way from sitting by a fire with a nice warm mug of cocoa. What do you say we give your mother a call, let her know you're safe.*

ANGELA *I should probably go.*

COWBOY *A word of advice: if you're going to go, then best not turn back. A buffalo can't look over its shoulder, Angela. It's anatomically impossible.*

The cowboy goes. Angela takes a step after the Cowboy. The whale skull children are watching her. Angela pauses. Angela looks over her shoulder. She sees the whale-skulled children.

ANGELA and MOTHER.

MOTHER *I'm waiting.*
I'm waiting for you to tell me where you've been, Angela.

/

ANGELA *I was –*

MOTHER *I don't want to hear it!*

I can guess.

You've been running around all over town, giving it away to anyone who wants it. Haven't you. Haven't you. Isn't that right, Angela?

What have you got to say for yourself?

/

Do you think that's the right spot for that lamp?

6. MORNING.

- Morning.
- Mrs. Parsons sits up in bed, reluctant to swing her feet onto the cold floorboards. Mr. Hallicks' body is found at the foot of the cliff.
- The dog, Albert, is re-homed with Sergeant Binks, who gets a phone call back at the police station.

- Someone's coming about the whale.
- An expert.
- BINKS** *What kind of expert?*
- An expert in this kind of situation.

- Mrs. Parsons watches the sunrise through her bedroom window.
- The sunrise
- PARSONS** *Like someone poured blood through an egg in the pan.*
- The day begins.
- A thousand little routines.
- A thousand little hands holding up their portion of sky.
- Angela waits at the gate.
- She hasn't slept.
- She waits for Mary and Uguolo to come around the corner.
- She waits ten minutes longer than she should.
- But they don't come.
- No one thought to tell her.
- No one's put it together yet.
- That the five children who leaned their faces against the whale,
none of them have woken up.

7. MRS PARSONS

- PARSONS** *There was a sound.
Like a long, low – like a whistle maybe?
Or a scream?
But buried, buried.*

*Like when you walk through a churchyard and you think you can hear
– do you ever have that? You think that you can hear someone
screaming to you from deep beneath the earth.
And then you think you're being ridiculous, stop it, put it out of your
mind.
But still, you hurry through just that little bit faster.
It was like that.
So faint you could pretend not to hear it.
Except I did hear it.*

8. THE APPLICATION OF EXPERTISE.

EXPERT *I'm glad you called me, Sergeant Binks.*

BINKS *I didn't call you.*

EXPERT *Someone called me.*

BINKS *I don't know.*

EXPERT *I wouldn't have come all this way if I hadn't been called.-*
BINKS *What exactly are you an expert in?*
EXPERT *Someone said that there are children that have fallen asleep and won't wake.*
BINKS *That's right.*
EXPERT *And these were the five that found the whale.*
BINKS *Yes. No.*
EXPERT *No?*
BINKS *No, Mr. Hallicks found it.*
EXPERT *Where's he?*
BINKS *He's dead. I've got his dog.*

MOTHER *You're going to have to start talking now, Angela. The expert's here now, you're going to have to talk to them and tell them what you know. You can't carry on like this.*
I went into the pharmacy. Mrs. Parsons is distraught. Distraught. Do you know what that means, Angela?
It means she's very upset. It's not just you.
I know it wasn't nice, what happened to Mr. Hallicks, but these things do happen and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it.
And I know you've been upset about Mr. Hallicks, but you should have answered the door. Would it have killed you? Would it have killed you, Angela, to answer the door? Now I've missed my delivery and I have to go to the post office.
I haven't heard you volunteering to go down yourself to pick it up.
There's one word for it, Angela, there's one word. Selfish.

- *Peter is a teacher.*
He's not from the village, he moved here a few years previously to start teaching at the school. He'll never be a local, he knows that, but still, he feels like he belongs.

PETER *The children were in my class. I feel a sense of responsibility.*

EXPERT *Yes, I see.*
MANY: *What?*
EXPERT *The whale.*
MANY: *Well it's hard to miss.*
EXPERT *Where was Mr. Hallicks' body found?*
BINKS *At the foot of the cliffs.*
EXPERT *And those lights out at sea...*
PETER *The platforms? Oil rigs.*
EXPERT *Visible at night?*

BINKS *Depends on the weather.*
PETER *There was snow. So last night maybe not.*
BINKS *What's Mr. Hallicks falling off the cliff got to do with the whale?*
EXPERT *Maybe nothing.*
Can you bring me to the children? The five that won't wake up. I'd like to speak to them if I can.

9. REACHING THROUGH THE VEIL.

- *But the five children sleep on.
They sleep all day in their beds.
They have been shaken gently by their shoulders.*

PARSONS *Mrs. Parsons covered Mary's mouth and pinched her nose to see if it would wake her. It didn't. She wants to confess her actions. She doesn't.*

- She wonders if she should close the shop.
When they come into the pharmacy to buy their toothpaste, customers don't know what to say.
- I'm sorry, I know it must be strange.
A time like this.
If there's anything you need.
- Her neighbour guiltily hands over a prescription for sleeping tablets.

PARSONS *Mrs. Parsons feels as though she's swallowed a lump of coral. But she goes into the back, takes the tablets down from the shelf. Somehow, the day passes.*

- *She turns around the little sign hanging on the door.
Across the road, she can see a man sitting in the gutter.*
- She knows Martin.

PARSONS *He kissed her on the cheek at the far end of the playground when they were both nine years old. Now she only ever speaks to him when he comes in with just enough change to buy aspirin.*

- She turns out the light.

MARTIN'S SONG

MARTIN

My name is Martin
I've drunk enough to sink a boat

but not enough to float my hopes

I've lost my shoes, I've lost my coat,
my name is Martin.

COMPANY

(na na na na, na, na na na)

(na na na na, na, na na na)

EXPERT: *The expert sits in the second-best room in the second-best hotel in town. They look out of the window towards the ocean, watch the distant lights of the oil rigs, and fall asleep early.*

The expert dreams of travelators, of the chrome and marble and the eerily convincing plastic gardens of international airports.

MARTIN'S SONG (continued)

MARTIN:

Life hasn't taught me very much,
but one thing that I've learned that's true:
the softest part of a broken heart
is near the veins where the blood runs blue.

- No one else falls asleep early.
- Because they're afraid.
- Even though no one says it.
- They're afraid that anyone who falls asleep might not wake up.
- But one by one, their eyelids droop.
- With one exception.

MARTIN *The fog's thick tonight.*

- The fog reminds Martin of sheep.

MARTIN *Yeah of burying his face in a sheep's woolly side.*

- Martin did that when he was young.

MARTIN *The sheep standing patiently with their weird hourglass eyes.*

- The fog seeps through the village streets
It rolls off the water and around the dead whale
And if anyone had been there to see it,
It would have looked like the fog was

MARTIN: *Rolling out?*

Yeah I think so.

Like it was rolling out of the whale's mouth.

Even though of course that's impossible and anyway no one was there to see it.

- But Martin did see something else.

MARTIN: *The children.*

Farhad, Mary, Joe, Uguolo, and Pip.

Their eyes are shut.

Bare feet.

No hats, no coats.

Mary holds a torch.

The children walk together down the quiet streets towards the coast road.

He sees them turn onto the path down the cliffs.

He gets to the cliff edge just in time to see them crossing the beach, towards the whale.

He reaches the beach in time to see the last of the children disappear on the other side of the whale's body.

And the whale's eye, it opens.

Light blinds the audience – the children vanish.

10. SWALLOWED BY THE AIR.

- And in the morning, no trace of them. Not even a footprint in the sand.

The police station. BINKS, MARTIN, and the EXPERT.

BINKS *They just vanished?*

MARTIN *I know how it sounds.*

EXPERT *Interesting.*

MARTIN *They must have walked into the sea.
I didn't do anything. When I was coming here, when I was brought in, people were looking at me in the street. They think I've got something to do with it!*

BINKS *If anyone gives you any trouble we'll sort them out.*

MARTIN goes.
*We'll have to put together a search party, they might have gone across the beach into the caves.
What's your opinion?*

EXPERT *I don't have one. It wouldn't be professional.*

BINKS *What's your best guess, then? Are we dealing with a person, or...*

EXPERT *Or what?*

BINKS *I don't know.*

EXPERT *It might be a person. I have seen hypnosis produce effects not unlike the things we have witnessed. Or drugs. Or it might be a germ, some unknown disease. I have also seen healthy individuals begin to manifest the symptoms they are convinced that they possess. Have you ever taken leave of your body, Sergeant Binks? I could sit in that chair and float quite easily out of my body and up into the corner of this room. Maybe the children disappeared last night, or maybe they disappeared the moment they came into contact with that thing on the beach.
You don't want to believe me. There are feats against which our language falls short, Sergeant Binks. Just as there are no truly satisfying explanations of why whales beach themselves. Many theories, many of them plausible, in some circumstances demonstrably correct, and yet on some rare occasions, it just doesn't make any sense.*

11. ROT SETS IN.

- Sergeant Binks puts together a search party. The teacher, Peter, is among them.

PETER *The whale's flesh is starting to give way.*

- Torn open in small stretches by scavengers, exposed to the sun, it's beginning to stink. The smell, sickly sweet, carries on the icy wind.

BINKS *Martin, do you see anything you recognise?*

MARTIN *I can't concentrate, everyone's looking at me. It all looks different in the daylight.*

- *The day wears on into evening. The search party begins to disband. But no one has seen the teacher.*

DARKNESS. *Peter is alone in the caves. The only light comes from a torch that he is holding. We see him in snapshots as he walks deeper into the cave.*

PETER: *Two steps into the cave, he has to switch on his torch.
Grey daylight hovers behind him, a jagged shape cut out of the darkness.
As if a child with scissors has been messing around with the sky.
The teacher's boots slip on the rocks.
The ocean's echo runs back up towards him from the depths of the cave's throat.*

- *(unseen) Peter?*

DARK.
LIGHT.

PETER: *The daylight behind him is gone.
The torch finds the black walls of the cave.
He calls out. His own voice answers.*

DARK.
LIGHT.

PETER: *Stalactites like wet teeth.
His breath thin in his lungs.
Is someone there?*

DARK.
LIGHT.

PETER: *The cave slopes downwards.
Water under his feet. Feet cramping with the cold.
There's a smell. A stench.
Rotten seaweed hanging like curtains from the rocks.*

- *His eyes bursting against the dark.
(unseen) Peter?*

PETER drops the torch.

PETER: Oh Christ.

He finds the torch. In the torchlight, MARY is running towards him, corpse-pale, near-naked, drenched. He drops the torch again, she disappears. Another torch, held by Sergeant BINKS.

BINKS: Peter? Peter it's Sergeant Binks.

PETER: Mary?!

BINKS: The tide's coming in, the cave's filling with water.

PETER: I saw something.

BINKS: You imagined it. We've got to go!

12. FEAR.

The church. The VICAR is speaking to an assembled crowd.

VICAR I know in times such as this it can feel as though God has turned his face away from us. That is not so. God has not forsaken us. We find it harder to listen to him. We find it harder to clear the space that allows us to bring the quality of attention to his word. Even if we want very much to hear him.

Many of you here tonight I don't see week to week. Which is not to lay guilt on you but simply to point out that in times like this we have a sharper need of God's love.

How, in times like these can we hear anything? Even God.

And yet we must hear him. We must hear one another. Or else we proceed in darkness, in ignorance, in fear.

The VICAR coughs.

Excuse me. But we can proceed in sureness of God's love. That he loves each of us with a –

The VICAR coughs.

With a love beyond our own comprehension. We must not fear those things that are beyond our comprehension, but rather –

Someone else coughs.

Clearly there's something going around.

Someone else coughs. The VICAR coughs.

I have to –

He is overtaken by coughing. He reaches up to his throat, his mouth, from his mouth he drags out a stream of tangled plastic.

13. A MEASURED RESPONSE.

MARTIN is walking in the street. A crowd gathers.

- Martin.
- What did you see?
- Where are they, Martin?
- Why didn't you stop them?

MARTIN *Leave me alone, I didn't have anything to do with it.*

The crowd attacks him. Before we see much of it, utter darkness.

14. WHERE THERE IS SMOKE THERE IS SMOKE.

Darkness. The unsteady little flame of a cigarette lighter. A cigarette is lit.

MOTHER switches on a lamp.

MOTHER is smoking.

MOTHER *Look at me, Angela. Look at what I'm doing. I'm smoking. Why do you think I'm smoking?*

I haven't smoked a cigarette since I was pregnant with you. Most mornings I would wake up happy to be pregnant, but once or twice I

woke up and I thought of you, this little floating alien, taking up my space, sucking nourishment... one or two mornings I really resented you. And on those mornings I'd break open a packet of cigarettes.- Why do you think I'm smoking again now, Angela? Why didn't you say anything? The expert spoke to you so nicely. Everyone noticed. Did you ever think of what that must be like for me? Just once did you ever think of anyone except yourself? Why did you sit there like a pile of wet straw, I can't bear it! Speak! Speak! Say something!

15. THERE ARE OTHER WORLDS. THEIR FORMS WE CANNOT RECOGNISE.

ANGELA is still standing there. PETER Enters.

PETER *I'm glad you're feeling better.*

ANGELA shakes her head.

ANGELA *You're dreaming, Peter.*

ANGELA goes. PETER falls. MARY appears, with the other children. The children sing:

PETER *Mary? Where are you?*

THE COLD DEEP SONG

In the cold deep
In the hot smoke
of the cold deep.
We lie above the split lips of the earth,
tongues of magma pressing our spines.

Tongues of magma pressing our spines /
And the water shutting our eyes. (Rpt.)

The burning current
The hungry mouth of the ocean,

The current thick with too much life (Rpt.)

the current thick with too much life.

All this life has to begin somewhere.

[Song, wordless, continues under].

PETER *You have to come back!*

MARY *We can't. Don't you understand?*

PETER *Are you alive?*

MARY *Too alive. This is not death. But we can see it. It appears as colour, all colour with no edge, no boundary, in constant motion. We can see it.*

PETER *Are you afraid?*

MARY *Peter.*

PETER *Let me help.*

MARY *You can't. You can't help us.*

PETER *Please!*

CHILDREN [Whispered] *Wake up.*

Water falls on Peter, soaking him, he wakes.

16. WHERE WE FIND THE EDGES.

PETER The teacher wakes.
Sand in his eyes.
The sun is cracking the sky open, a caul of mist catches the dawn.
Police tape flutters.
The beach stretches on in either direction.
The tide tugging at his trousers.
His feet are bare.
Bleeding.

He's walked across rocks in the night, across glass and jagged shells.

The stench.

Its shadow falls across his face.

The creature has rotted faster than he expected.

Already more bone than beast, its long beak, torn from its sheath of flesh, slides cleanly along the sand.

Architraves of grey flesh still stretch from rib to rib.

He crawls across the wet sand, stands, turns his head and lays his cheek against the whale's stinking flank.

He pushes his hands hard against the body, his hands find purchase in gashes opened up by rocks or the beaks or teeth of scavengers.

He presses his fingers into the whale's side, presses further, up to his elbows.

It's cold, as cold as the deep ocean.

The rotten walls of the stomach give way, his hand encounters something hard, familiar, not bone.

It's slick with seawater.

The teacher sits down in the wet sand. He holds the plastic bottle, still with its lid on, its scummy bright blue dregs.

17. THE PRESENT AND THE COMING DOOM.

MOTHER, BINKS and ANGELA. ANGELA is looking at the ground.

MOTHER *I have good news, Sergeant. My daughter is ready to speak this time.*

BINKS *That's good. That's very good.*

MOTHER *She wrote this on a piece of paper.*

BINKS *"The sky is a crematorium."*

That's cheery.

MOTHER *What do you think it means?*

BINKS *Angela do you want to tell us what you know?*

*You don't need to be afraid, Angela.
Tell us what you know and everything's going to be fine. Isn't it.
We're going to fix it and you can go back to school.
I don't know how yet but I promise that we're going to fix it.*

Lights flicker. In the distance, one of the children wearing a whale skull mask.

Angela?

MOTHER *Speak up.*

ANGELA begins to whisper nonsensically, inaudibly.

Angela, stop it! Stop it! I brought you here because I thought you wanted to talk! Stop these histrionics immediately! Angela! Angela!

19. RIPPLES.

The police station. BINKS. MRS PARSONS arrives, holding a dressing gown.

BINKS *Mrs. Parsons.*

MRS P *They returned this to me.*

I don't know what to do with it. It was Mary's teacher who found it, in the caves, is that right?

BINKS Yeah.

The PRINCIPAL's office. PETER and the PRINCIPAL. PETER is holding a bottle of mouthwash.

PRINCIPAL *Take some time off, that's all I'm saying. The last few days... it's got to all of us. But you can't just not turn up to work, Peter. There are people here who rely on you.*

PETER *It was full of it.*

PRINCIPAL *What?*

PETER *The whale.*

MRS P *Do you think I could speak to him? I don't know, I'd just like to ask him – because someone mentioned that he thought he saw Mary, not just the dressing gown, but –*

BINKS *I don't think that's likely, it was...*

PRINCIPAL *Look, Peter, I don't like to pay attention to gossip, but*

BINKS *We'll search the caves again.*

PRINCIPAL *People have been talking.*

PETER *Which people?*

PRINCIPAL *It doesn't matter who. What matters is what they've been saying.*

PETER *What have they been saying?*

PRINCIPAL *I think it's better if we don't go into specifics.*

MRS P *My husband thinks we're being punished.*

BINKS *What for?*

PRINCIPAL *People – parents – are a little disturbed. They're frightened.*

PETER *We're all frightened.*

MRS P *I'm sorry about what happened to Martin. It's not right.*

BINKS *No, it isn't.*

PRINCIPAL *Some of them feel that you've been a little too involved in the search.*

PETER *So we're not meant to look for them?*

PRINCIPAL *I thought you'd be relieved. Doesn't some time off sound good?*

PETER begins pour the mouthwash out on the floor of the Principal's office.
Peter. Peter.

20. ACTIONES SECUNDUM FEDEI (ACTION FOLLOWS BELIEF).

EXPERT *I do not have good news. The conclusions that I have reached will not comfort you. That is not their aim.*

The children will not return. By now, I think we can be sure of this. Where, precisely, they have gone, we cannot know. As to how, or who transported them, we are likewise in the dark. There is no evidence upon which we can proceed. And in the absence of

evidence, speculation is an indulgence that my role as Expert does not afford me.

Some among you have asked where, specifically, my expertise lie, and I have to confess it is not in cetaceans – that's whales – or in disappearances, or in child psychology, criminal behavior, or somnambulism. My expertise is in situations. And I have assessed the situation. The conclusions will be recorded in my report, which, as per regulation, will be read by committee and then sealed for twenty years. The committee's report on my report will be made available to the public.

I can, however, share some of the recommendations of my report as they pertain to the local community. If I could summarise those recommendations, I would recall the phrase "Non progredi est regredi," or "To not go forward is to go backward," for those of you without Latin. We must go forward.

The capacity to forget is one of humankind's great evolutionary advantages. There is nothing at all of value over our shoulders, and there is no use getting upset. My recommendation, hard as it may sound, is to forget.

21. AN UNSTABLE TRAJECTORY.

BINKS and PETER. ANGELA lies in the bed. She appears to be asleep.

BINKS *You're leaving, then?*

PETER *I just came to say goodbye to Angela.*

BINKS *I hope it's not because...*

You did everything you could, Peter.

PETER *Is that why someone shoved a dead fish through my letterbox?*

BINKS *People are –*

PETER *Frightened. Yeah.*

ANGELA *wakes, suddenly, eyes wide.*

ANGELA *Heavier than water lighter than float soaked up into the like blotting paper sky overfull smoke is heavier than coils of it spreading out steam creeping along the inside of the lid looking for the little hole, the little hatch, we all need our avenues of escape what to do when yes when there is no. way. out. when we have set fire to the stairs, when we have plundered the elevator for spare parts to run our toaster we climb we climb up and up and through the soot, floor, ground, crumbles beneath our feet ashes, our mouths full of it, full of ourselves, swallowing unto death unto what unto the end no not the end but the lingering yes what comes next is not ashes nor is it fire it is the lingering, the earth, the sea. Heave with bodies. The tide is coming in.*

/

PETER *How can you stay here?*

BINKS *It's my home.*

PETER *But how can you spend the rest of your life here knowing that... not knowing.*

BINKS *Maybe we'll find them. Maybe they'll come back.*

PETER *You don't believe that.*

BINKS *I have to.*

22. GRAVITY PULLS US FORWARD

- We know time through gravity.
Here is the sun, the moon, the earth.
Gravity holds us like a pin through a moth on a moving board.
We. Our planet. Rotates on its axis. Still spinning from a blow landed long, long ago.
And we circle the sun, bound to it by gravity.
- And the moon hangs there in turn, bound to us. And the ocean, which is the greater part of the earth, is in turn bound to the moon,

its tides rising and falling according to the exertion of gravity from that lonely stone.

- And though time passes regardless of our attention to it, this is how we notice and understand the passage of time: by our relation to these celestial objects.
- The sun and the moon and the stars wheel above the little town. The great silken gears of the universe twist on and on, and we go on turning with them.
- Much is forgotten in the passage of time. Other things linger. Years will pass, many years, until all the participants in this story are dust. So far, only a fortnight has gone by.
- But, sometimes, a fortnight can be enough. The teacher moves away, the expert is writing up a report, the parents are still numb with shock, the police sergeant still hopeful.
- But others, further from the centre of it, more loosely held by the event's gravity, begin to move on.
- The caves are explored once more, more in hope than expectation, and nothing is found.
- The expert's report makes its way to the committee.
- The dog settles happily into his new home with the police sergeant.
- Mr. Hallicks is cremated.
- Martin slips into a coma and dies.
- And on the beach, the whale continues to decompose, until now it is nothing but a bleached collection of bones, which are beginning to crack and crumble as other children, less fearful now, pelt it with rocks, or slide along its ribs, or write their names in sharpies along its calm, white surface.
- And one morning, an ordinary morning, when the police sergeant has wandered down to the beach to fish from the rocks, he makes a discovery.
- A shape.
- A lump.
- A body.
- A small body.
- Tucked into the tusks of the whale's jaw.
- It's Angela.
- Shrunken.
- Starved.
- Thin as a rake, her hair falling out, her skin so thin you could see the veins underneath.
- Dead.

23. MOTHER

MOTHER *is smoking.*

MOTHER *You ask yourself.
Did I do everything I could?
And you answer, yes, yes.
And then you ask yourself again.
Did I do everything I could?*

/

*And then you say:
But I didn't know.
But you did. You knew. You know.*

You know exactly why it happened.

Darkness.