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"It's all right," he said. "Don't be frightened. I want you to stay. I want you to listen to me. I've come a very long way to talk to you, and I haven't got long."

His tail thrashed suddenly, showering me with water, and that made me laugh. But then I could see it was serious. He was rolling from one side to the other, rocking himself violently. Now I saw what it was that he was struggling to do. He was trying to back himself out into deeper water, struggling to keep himself afloat. I wanted to help him, but I didn't know how. All I could do was stand there and watch from the shore. It took him a while before he was out into deeper water and able to swim free again. He was blowing hard. I could tell he'd given himself a terrible fright. He swam off into the middle of the river, and then just disappeared completely under the water.

I stood there for ages and ages, looking for him up

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and down the river – he could have gone anywhere. I was longing for him to surface, longing to see him again, worried that he'd never dare risk it again. But he did, though when he came back towards me this time he kept his distance. Only his head was showing now, and just occasionally his fin. "I've got to watch it," he said. "The tide is going out all the time. Grandfather warned me about it, they all warned me. 'Stay clear of the shore', they told me. 'Once you're beached you're as good as dead.' We can breathe all right out of the water, that's not the problem. But we need water to float in. We can't survive long if we get stranded. We're big, you see, too heavy for our own good. We need water around us to survive. If we're not afloat we soon crush ourselves to death. And I don't want that to happen, do I?"

Maybe I got used to him speaking to me like this, I don't know. Or maybe I just wanted to hear more.



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Either way, I just didn't feel at all scared any more. I found myself walking back along the shore to be closer to him, and crouching down again to talk to him. I had things I needed to ask him.

"But I still don't really understand," I said. "You said you'd come to talk to me, didn't you? That means you didn't get lost at all, did you?"

"No, I didn't get lost," he told me. "Whales don't get lost, well not that often anyway. We tell each other where we are all the time, what's going on all around the world. What we see we share. So each and everyone of us has a kind of map of the oceans, all the mountains and valleys under the sea, all the rivers and creeks, the coast of every continent, and every island, every rock – it's inside our heads. We grow up learning it. That's why we don't get lost." He paused for a while, puffing hard through his blowhole. Talking was exhausting for him, I could see that.

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"But we do get tired," he went on, "and we get old too, and we get sick, just like people do. We've a lot more in common with people than you know. We've got this earth in common for a start – and that's why I've come all this way to see you. We don't just share it with whales, but with every living thing. With people too. I've come to help you to save yourselves before it's too late, because if you save yourselves, then you'll be saving us too. It's like Grandfather said: we can't survive without you and you can't survive without us."

I didn't have a clue what he was on about, but I didn't dare say so. But I felt his eye searching out my thoughts. "You don't really know what I'm talking about, do you?" I shook my head. "Then I think the best thing I can do is to tell you about Grandfather, because it all began with Grandfather. When I was little, Grandfather was always going off



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on his travels, voyages of discovery, he called them. All over the world he went. We hardly ever saw him. Sometimes he was away for so long we all thought he was never coming back, and he wasn't all that good about keeping in touch either. He was a sort of adventurer, my grandfather, an explorer. He liked to go to places where no whale had ever been before.

"Then one day - it was some time ago now, when I was quite little - he came back from his travels and told us an amazing story. Ever since I first heard that story, I dreamed of going where Grandfather had gone, of seeing what he had seen. Grandfather had gone off to explore an unknown river, to follow it inland as far as he could go. No other whale had ever before dared to go there, as far as anyone knew anyway. All he knew of this river was that a couple of narwhals had been beached there in the mouth of the river a long time ago.