

Arthur And The Whale

A short story by

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Boilerplate Stuff

Published by danjonesbooks in 2020

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First published in 2017

"Remember. If you see anything untoward, report it. And don't be a hero. Well, goodnight, Arthur."

So said Mr Dawkins, the Floor Manager at the Natural History Museum and Arthur's boss.

"Aye, aye, Mr Dawkins." So said Arthur in response, as regular as clockwork.

Each evening they'd share this exchange before Mr Dawkins would close the museum and leave it in the care of the spry old night guard.

Nighttime at the Natural History Museum was splendid, Arthur always thought. During the day, the bickering groups of schoolchildren, their put-out teachers, the rushing, impatient tourists, the noise and the crowds made him faintly nauseous. At night, it was his kingdom, his empire of lands and times past, and he could enjoy it all at his leisure. And he was being paid for it.

He wasn't paid much, to be sure, but Arthur had worked his whole life, so this was merely a bit of extra pocket money to supplement his Navy pension. But he'd

always been a night-owl, and since his dear wife Alma had passed three years ago, he took this part-time role as a way of getting out and having some sense of purpose. He didn't want to get out that much – not to the extent of having to interact with actual people, if he could help it – so night work suited him just fine.

He was obliged to circuit the entire museum, but would take it upon himself to linger in different zones each night to take in the ancient wonders in peace. One night it might be the insects, arachnids and other creepy-crawlies; on another he might stay in the geological zone and regard the unique beauty of the minerals and rocks smashed together and hewn from the Earth by its volcanic might; on another he might patrol the dinosaur exhibition, which was always horrendously crowded during the daytime hours, and read about these prehistoric beasts in his own, languid time.

Whichever exhibit he decided to alight at each night, it wouldn't detract from his nightly packed lunch routine. At one o'clock each morning he would return to the magnificent Hintze Hall, that marvellous example of bombastic, imperial Victorian architecture, and eat his packed lunch next to the head of Dippy, the Diplodocus fossil that greeted visitors as they entered the museum's main gate.

Dippy was a legend, known the world over, and Arthur enjoyed sharing his midnight lunch with the museum's star attraction. After sitting down and unwrapping his sandwiches, Arthur would tear a corner off and leave it by Dippy's head, just close enough that the old dinosaur would be able to crane that wonderfully long neck over and reach it.

How are things tonight, Arty?

"Oh, same as usual, Dippy."

Dippy munched down on his cheese and tomato sandwich (diplodocuses were herbivores, so Arthur was always careful not to pack corned beef, ham, or chicken for his nightly luncheon) and nodded.

What are you learning about tonight, then? I hear the new jellyfish exhibition is wonderful. I wish I could get to see it.

"It does sound good, doesn't it? Maybe I'll have a look tomorrow. I spent some time down in the early mammalian and reptilian section. Looked at the smilodon, and the giant crocodile. Gosh, that thing was a monster. Could swallow a man whole, I reckon!"

Mm. I remember the old crocs. Bloody big buggers, some of them. Could give you a nasty nip if you weren't careful.

"It'd be more than a nasty nip for us little folk. I remember I saw one in Australia... enormous great big thing sitting lazily by the estuary of the Mary, near Darwin. I remember thinking he could bite our bloody boat in half if he wanted."

Never been to Australia. I should like to visit one day.

"I think our travelling days are over, Dippy. No time for adventures when twilight sets over the sky."

Oh, I don't know about all that. I thought my adventures had come to an end sixty-five million years ago, and here I am. I see so many people, so many happy children every day. That's a type of adventure, I think.

Arthur produced a scotch egg from his lunchbox, took a bite and chewed it slowly as he considered this.

Have you been in touch with your grandchildren lately, Arty?

Arthur swallowed the last of his lunch, scrunched up the clingfilm, tossed it into

his lunchbox and took a swig of tea from his flask. He got to his feet with a theatrical groan, and dusted the crumbs off his uniform.

"Better get back to it then, old chap," he said.

Until next time, Arty. Have a good evening.

And so Arthur toddled off to complete another daunder around the museum, and linger in whichever exhibit caught his fancy.

He became slightly irritable whenever the old dinosaur brought up the subject of his grandchildren. He hadn't been in touch with them since Alma's passing. They had their own lives to live. The museum was more in line with his inclinations. Nevertheless, he permitted the old dinosaur his ways; after all, he was probably rather too long in the tooth to change.

Most nights Arthur would spend a few minutes engaged in pleasant conversation with Dippy in this manner, and it broke up the shift nicely.

So when happened this particular episode, which I shall now proceed to relate, Arthur was most discombobulated, for he was a creature of habit and structure. A career – well, perhaps let's specify a successful career (and let us make no bones about the fact that Arthur did very well in the Navy) – in the forces will do that for a man. He enjoyed the combination of isolation, education, and circuitousness, neatly broken up by midnight luncheon with Dippy. It was regular, it was expected, it was reliable.

So when Dippy was not there in the Hintze Hall one evening, Arthur had the shock of his life.

He had bid goodnight to Mr Dawkins as usual and proceeded to patrol the museum. He had entered the museum, you see, from an adjacent entrance, where

the back offices are, and would only arrive at the Hintze Hall after completing a circuit of the museum. But here, where Dippy's fossilised remains had stood for as long as he could remember, there was a perfectly blank space. No plinth, no dinosaur. Arthur blinked, spun around upon the spot, and blinked again, before dropping his lunchbox on the marble floor, where it landed with a clatter.

Oh, my ears! Do you have to make such a noise?

Arthur looked up, and his jaw slowly sagged open. Directly above him, suspended from the ceiling of the cavernous hall from a spiderweb of steel cables, there hung the vast skeleton of a blue whale. He tried to say something, but nothing came out.

It's Arthur, isn't it?

Arthur looked around again, sure that it was some trick.

"Dippy? Dippy!"

Dippy's gone away, I'm afraid. Gone to see Australia, or some such thing. I caught the gist from Missouri Al over in the corner, but I daresay his hearing's not what it used to be.

Arthur, still reeling, peered over to Missouri Al, the Mastodon fossil mounted in the corner of the hall. The fossil remained predictably silent, and he wondered if the blue whale was having him on.

"What's this, then?" called Arthur. "Some sort of trick?"

No trick. Dippy's gone. I'm in. But wouldn't you say I'm a tad more, oh I don't know, a la mode, as the French say?

"But I liked Dippy," protested Arthur, rather querulously. "We had a connection."

I have lots of connections, too. Three hundred and fifty-six of them, to be

precise!

Arthur grimaced at the cetaceous gag, and turned away.

"How did they replace Dippy without me knowing?"

Who can say? Time is a curious thing. You get yourself into a cosy little groove, doing the same thing every day, over and over, and then wop! Three years are behind you, and everything around you has changed. Sometimes for worse, sometimes for better. Sometimes just for the sake of change. Did you know my kind were nearly extinct as little as fifteen years ago, and since then we've quintupled in number? Whereas poor old Dippy and his friends... Well, we all know what happened to them. Oh, time! It has two hands, and so it can cut two ways.

Arthur felt morose. How could the museum replace Dippy? He was a legend, a superstar, an icon, a stalwart. "Well, excuse me if I don't stay. It doesn't feel right."

Oh come now, don't be that way, Arthur. Won't you have your lunch with me? Missouri Al says you always have your lunch here at this time.

"Yes, with Dippy!"

I think you're being rather rude, Arthur.

"And you're just being a big, dirty..." he sought desperately for the right word.

"Replacer!"

I really think you ought to share some of your lunch with me, Arthur.

By now Arthur was standing at the mouth of the whale, shaking his fist at it and remonstrating animatedly. "Well I won't, so there! How'd you like them apples, eh?"

The whale, up to now so chatty, remained silent.

Then a faint creaking noise rang out, reverberating in the great, echoing hall, and then again. Arthur picked up his lunchbox and craned his neck to see the source of

the noise. To his horror, the steel wires suspending the mighty cetacean's skeleton started to twitch, as if under the spell of a soft breeze. But it was no illusion; soon the entire skeleton gently quivered. Arthur took a step back to survey the marvellous and madcap scene. The blue whale was now rocking back and forth on its wires, creating a mighty, groaning parabola in the Hintze Hall, and at the last there was a hideous, straining screech and a violent twanging noise as a handful of the steel wires were wrenched from their sockets in the ceiling, and the head of the behemoth came soaring towards Arthur. The creature opened its mouth, wide and wide and wide, and – *snap!* There was a muffled crashing noise, and when Arthur opened his eyes everything was black.

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Arthur surveyed the tunnel he found himself in. Well, it was more like a large cupboard than a tunnel. A cupboard the colour of fresh, hot, arterial blood, with warm, fleshy panels in the sides and two rows of vast, gleaming-white bars, each taller than he, bending over him like a sort of curved jail cell. The floor squelched as he padded upon it, and what little light there was came from a tiny orifice that seemed to be far in the distance. His instinct told him that had to be the way out of this sweaty, squishy cage, yet the passage towards it seemed to be blocked by a curtain of thick webs and giant, glistening glands that pulsed in and out of the cupboard walls.

"Where on earth am I?" called Arthur.

Oh I think you know, Arthur.

The voice was coming from the tiny prick of light. Arthur decided to crouch by the edge of the cupboard, and peer towards the light.

"You! You've only gone and bloody eaten me, haven't you!"

I was hungry. And you looked so tasty!

"I'm no morsel, mate. I'll make shark bait of you, just you wait!"

Arthur proceeded to use his lunchbox to bash on the whale's white ribs, the adamant bars of his prison. They made a wonderful, percussive melody, but only caused the whale to thrash about, which he found to be most unpleasant indeed, and he ended up on his rump.

I think you need to learn some manners. Well, my digestion can take some time, so I'll happily sit here and have a snooze.

Arthur knelt, agape, unable to believe the sheer temerity of this creature.

"Why did you eat me? For my lunch? Don't you things eat those little prawn things?"

Krill.

"Right. Krill. Well, you do realise I don't carry around ten tonnes' worth of krill on me?"

Oh, and I suppose diplodocuses subsisted mainly on Red Leicester and sourdough, did they?

"That's not the same and you know it!"

I didn't want your smelly old cheese, Arthur. I just wanted to have dinner with you, just as Dippy did. Is that so wrong?

Arthur pulled his lunchbox out and inspected it. A squashed old cheese and tomato sandwich, a scotch egg, a bruised apple and a carton of supermarket juice.

The same as it had been for... what must it have been now?

"Three years," he found himself saying. He sank to his haunches, inside the whale's cupboards.

What's that?

"Three years, it's been. Since Alma died."

I know how much you loved her. She was like an anchor.

Arthur made a little snorting laugh. "You mean she weighed me down? That's a bit mean."

That's not what I meant and you know it. An anchor stops you from drifting away from where you're meant to be. Look at yourself, inside my belly because you refused to engage with what was staring you in the face. Dippy is gone. I'm still here. For now. But even though my numbers are on the rise, it doesn't mean I'm in rude health. I could be gone in nothing flat if the tide turns against me, or if some more fashionable cause pushes me aside, you humans forget about me, and I drift into extinction. Hah! Perhaps then you'd break bread with me, wouldn't you?

Arthur didn't respond. He was thinking about his grandchildren. Moreover, he was thinking about himself, and the time he had left. He unwrapped the sandwiches, left them on the floor of the whale's chest, and stood up.

"You may have my cheese and tomato sandwich, Bluey."

There was a beat of silence.

How very kind of you, Arthur. But I'm afraid I have something stuck in my gullet.

Suddenly the warm fleshy cupboards surrounding Arthur on all sides lurched spasmodically, squeezing Arthur and knocking the wind from him. He tried to cry out to the whale, but the cupboards contracted again, rippling up and down like a

concertina, squeezing him horribly. He tried resisting but was powerless; he was but an insect to this fantastic giant, and could do nothing to prevent himself being pummelled this way and that, and at the last he thought he was going to be crushed, and digested, and boiled away into nothing. But instead, he found he was not being crushed but propelled, slowly and disgustingly and uncomfortably, towards the light!

Through the fleshy webs and against the mighty slobbering glands he was pushed, and then he went tumbling over the slavering, nubbly, rolling hills of the whale's tongue, until the light blinded him—

Arthur covered his eyes again as he fell to the floor, covered in goo. He looked up to see Bluey the whale suspended from the ceiling, as magnificently as before. No steel wires had been wrenched from their holdings; no part of the skeleton has moved an inch. But Arthur was unmistakably drenched in whale saliva, and his sandwiches were nowhere to be seen. He got to his feet, looked sheepishly around, and swore he could hear Missouri Al sniggering in the corner, but he couldn't be sure.

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"Remember. If you see anything untoward, report it. And don't be a hero. Well, goodnight, Arthur."

"Aye aye, Mr Dawkins!"

So went the usual exchange between Arthur and his boss before the museum was locked up for the night. Arthur had refrained from telling Mr Dawkins why he'd

had to dry clean his uniform that day (nor did the nice lady at the dry cleaners need to know why his uniform was covered in slime; she had gone the full English and simply accepted the eccentricity as a quirk of the job).

Arthur performed his circuit of the museum with a smile on his face. He stopped at the space section for a while, and learned some facts about distant galaxies, and the planets of the Solar System. He made a mental note to visit the Science Museum more often.

At last he made his way to the Hintze Hall, where he took his lunch.

Good evening, Arty.

"Hello, Bluey. How are you feeling?"

Oh, much better, thank you. And you?

"Better than I have done for a long while. Here, what do you say to a prawn sandwich? I got some Marie Rose sauce from the Co-op."

Sounds lovely.

Arthur obligingly left a couple of scraps of sandwich beneath Bluey's skeleton, while he sat and ate the rest of the lunch.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news, Bluey."

Oh?

"I'll be giving up the night duty soon."

Oh.

"I got in touch with my grandchildren today. Haven't spoken to them in, well, almost three years I suppose. They're growing up. Amazing to see. But I can't sleep all day, work all night and then see them. So I'm giving up this game."

A beat.

"Doesn't mean I won't be around, though. I'll still come in now and then, you know, as a punter. During the day. So we'll still, you know, see each other."

A punter, eh? With all those crowds? You do surprise me, Arty.

Arthur waved away the comment bashfully.

Well, I'd like that very much.

Arthur finished off his lunch, stood up, and brushed the crumbs off his uniform.

"Well," he said. "Thanks, Bluey, you know, for..."

I know.

Arthur stood, and saluted. He always felt better giving a salute. The blue whale skeleton hung expressionless in the air, a monument to... well, he didn't quite know what, but it seemed in that moment to be every bit as wonderful and transcendent as Dippy had been, and he gave Bluey a big, beaming smile. "Well, I'd better finish my shift."

And he did.

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