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Waves

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Chicken House

Extract

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Prologue.

Our holiday house is white. You can tell it's a 1930s seaside house because it looks just like a ship that's somehow strayed on to land. Our house is right next to the beach, but on a hill, so that when you look down you feel as though the whole world's spread out beneath you, just waiting for something to happen. We come here every summer. It feels like always, forever.

'You were here as a bump,' says Mum, if I ask her when I first came.

'As a twinkle,' smiles Dad.

I hope I'll come here with my children's children, if I'm lucky enough to live that long.

In the kitchen there are photos of the whole Ditton family clan: Mum's mum, Dad, Charley, me and Sara – and that's just on our bit of the wall. Spread out all around the

kitchen walls are the other faces, faces of all the families who stay here – cousins, aunts, uncles. There are some I don't even know or recognize.

One of the weird things about a house like this is that we all think it's ours, but really it doesn't belong to anyone, or perhaps it belongs to everyone, I'm not sure.

In the photos you can see us all growing.

'Hair gets shorter, legs get longer,' says Mum, and then she touches us, a soft, light stroke, as though we were wood, and she is touching us for luck.

Sometimes I wish the photos weren't there at all, and then I look at my sister Charley on the wall. There are lots of photos of Charley. There's the Charley I never knew, aged one. She's fat, with red fluff on her head. Charley aged three stares at the camera, with eyes that look so like mine. I'm in the picture too, but I haven't got my grown-up eyes yet. Charley's smiling, but I can see her little fist squeezing my fat baby arm, and I can imagine feeling the pain of it. I don't think Charley liked me being born at all. In that photo her eyes are green. They dazzle. *'Look at me,'* they shout, *'look at me, not at that scrappy little thing on the floor.'*

Right next to that (surprise surprise) is another photo of Charley, aged four, but it IS a surprise, because in this photo she's standing in a rock pool, and her eyes aren't green at all any more. They're blue, as blue as the sky she's staring up at.

'Chameleon eyes,' says Mum, smiling, 'that change with the weather.'

It's true too, her eyes really do change colour. Mine do too. Underneath though, I think our eyes are grey, a nothing colour. A take-on-anything colour.

Fickle.

With each photo, Charley's eyes just get bigger and bigger, and she grows slimmer and taller, until the last photo.

I look at it. I don't have to see it for real because it's the picture I always have of her in my head, in my mind's eye, where our eyes aren't the same colour at all.

Charley is beautiful, and I can tell you that was a surprise. The real Charley was just Charley; irritating (often), kind (rarely), fun (sometimes), but mostly just a pain.

But the photo-Charley is beautiful – just like the sun going down on the beach behind her. It was Dad who took that last photo. I remember it. 'Just look at that child's hair in the light,' Mum said, and we all looked up, each one of us, all hoping that it was us she meant, but this time it was Charley. The sun does look like it's caught in her hair. It glitters in gold and red as it falls across her face. She's looking into a tin bucket, full of that day's catch.

'Come on, Charley,' said Dad, 'to the rock.'

Every year Dad took a photo, and ever since she was five all of Charley's photos were taken on the same rock. A huge rock, buried beneath the sea, and only uncovered by the tide. Year by year, she gets higher and higher up the rock, until that year, last year, she's finally made it to the very top: 'Charley fifteen years old,' the photo says.

She doesn't look too steady if you ask me – there's not

much rock to balance on up there. I know, I climbed it early the very next day, as though I might be able to see her from up there, spot her somewhere on the wide, empty, early-morning beach, the way Mum's never really stopped trying to do.

It's a hard climb to the top of that rock, but she's standing – that's Charley for you – standing straight up into the middle of the air, and you can see that she's laughing. Charley's laugh, the one that says: *'I've done it, look at me, I've done it.'* I used to hate that laugh. I won't look, I won't look, I'd think – and then she'd call out:

'Hal, look at me, Hal!'

And I'd pretend not to hear, and then when I did look, there she was, always at the top, always there, where I wanted to be, and waiting for me to be happy about it. Well, I'm waiting for you now, Charley, we're all waiting now.

The photo.

Her hair is as red as the sun, as gold. It flies right up into the air from her tipped-sideways head, it's as long as it ever got, just touching the elbow of her right arm. It looks as though her hair is just about to break free of her body, and fly away towards the dipping sun. The flipped-up ends of it are golden, the scalp of it a deep, deep, red. It's a burning picture.

It hurts me just to look at it.

Sometimes, when I'm alone in the kitchen with Charley's picture, I feel my head turning towards it, turning

as though it's no longer mine, and I close my eyes, not wanting to see, but she's there just the same, there behind my eyelids: *'Hal, look at me, Hal!'* she cries, and she's dancing, a little black demon of a silhouette on the rock, surrounded by red globes of light.

And she's alive, so alive that even the sun wants a piece of her, and that's what hurts most of all. That someone so alive could possibly be dying. And worse, that as she dies, we all seem to be dying too, somehow, especially Mum.

Sometimes, I think the sea that nearly killed her, loved her so much that it didn't want to give her back. Other times I just hate Charley for ever existing in the first place.



North Oxford. Now.

'How can we?'

Mum's voice comes up through the night-lit window, and into my room. This is always how it ends, every night for weeks, in Mum's wail of despair.

'How can we?'

Dad's voice comes back at her in a low, deep, wordless mumble. God, it's hot. I imagine I could open the window and be in Cornwall, hearing the sea, feeling the cool breeze fresh from the waves. It's so sticky and hot here. The midges dance around the candle flame on the garden table. Mum and Dad stop talking suddenly and look up.

'It's late, Hal,' says Dad.

'Yeah?' I shout back.

They wave and drop their voices. The lights at the end of the garden flicker and go out. I watch as the pale moon appears, and floats on the black river. Mum blows out the

candles and the smoky smell of wax drifts up to my window.

It's hot.

'Night, Hal,' whispers Mum, and the garden falls still and silent. I look up at the sky; it's never truly dark here. In Cornwall the sky's so deep and black and inky that it's just stuffed full of stars, all racing around the moon. Some nights there are so many that it feels as though some are closer to the earth than others.

3-D stars.

'How can we, Jon?'

Her voice comes up through the floor this time – it's so full of despair that I wonder why the moon doesn't drop an inch to hear her better, but it doesn't. I wonder if they'll ever stop. I wonder if they'll ever ask me what I think. I wonder where my sister Charley really is, and if she'll ever wake up. But most of all, I just wonder if we're going back to Cornwall for the summer.

'We have to, Milly.' Dad's voice is just as definite as hers, just as despairing.

'We can't . . . I can't . . .'

The long silence tells me that she's crying quiet tears, imagining that I can't hear them, can't see them anyway, in my mind's eye, where she never seems to stop crying.

'What about Hal and Sara?' he asks. 'They can't stay stuck in Oxford all summer.'

Mum mutters something – I think I hear my name and then silence. I can hear my heart thumping. And then Dad

again, weary now.

'Right, I'll take them, you stay here with Charley.'

More silence.

'Can you manage that, love?' His voice is still gentle, but it's all sad and soft and definite too. It's like Charley being half-dead has sort of broken their voices up, so that they've got more ways of telling each other things, more ways of meaning things, only just not in words.

I try to listen, to hear between the gaps. There are so many now – gaps, I mean.

'No,' says Mum slowly, after an age of silence, 'no, Jon, you're right. We need . . . no, they need . . . to be . . . I just can't . . . I don't want . . . it's like . . .'

'Trying to be a family without Charley?' he finishes for her. He's not really asking her anything – he already knows that's exactly what she means.

I listen harder, and I can almost see her nodding her head, a head so full of feelings that they're beyond speaking.

'They need you too, Milly, Hal and Sara. They need to get away from all . . . all . . .' Dad almost whispers, as though he's afraid that just the sound of the words themselves might make her change her mind.

'I know,' she says, finally, and my heart fills with joy and I thump the pillow. We're going to Cornwall.

When I wake up the sun's shining on the ceiling and the birds have stopped singing.

It's late, must be, 'cos I can hear Sara in her room chatting away to herself.

'Look,' she shouts, 'it's not dark, it's morning. Time to get up, lazybones, if you're not down in five minutes I'll go without you. WHERE ARE YOUR SHOES?'

She makes me smile; she sounds so like Mum used to on a really late school morning. I go in to see her. Her room's a total tip, no floor space anywhere, just toys and clothes flung about all over the place. She looks up at me from the middle of it all and says:

'It's mornin' time Hal, the sun's come on.'

'Were we all asleep?' I ask. She nods and turns back to her dolls.

'It's time for breakfast, girls,' she says, and I watch as she puts two of her dolls around a small plastic table.

'Are you hungry?' she asks them.

'Are YOU hungry, Sara?' I ask her back. She nods and ignores me.

'Oh dear! No milk!' she goes on. 'Mummy and Daddy are too tired from all the shoutin' to buy milk.'

I stare at her, and she gives me a quick, freaky glance from under her lashes, before going back to pretending I'm not here.

'What did you say, Sara?' I ask.

'I was TALKING TO MYSELF, Hal,' she tells me, as if I didn't already know.

I scratch my head and yawn. I wonder what goes on in Sara's head? How much does she really know about

Charley? Can she really remember her being properly alive? Or has Charley always been someone who just lies in a hospital bed, in a coma, never talking back?

'Mummy and Daddy all gone now, all 'way now,' and her voice changes, something in it makes me look up. 'I know,' she says in an excited, secret voice, 'let's play sister-dolls!'

I feel the hair on the back of my neck stand straight up when she says that – it's like she can read my mind or something.

She sits back and stares at the two doll children sitting around the table. They stare back at her. She turns her big-eyed gaze on me, and gives me the long, slow look-over, before pointing to an ugly ginger-haired troll of a doll, and deciding that it's definitely me.

'Hal,' she says, 'that's a you-doll.'

'Hey, thanks Sarz.'

But she just goes right on ignoring me, exchanging a doll at the table for the me-doll.

'Mmm, now, Sara, let's see.' And she scans the dolls on the floor before quickly pointing to the smallest, prettiest dark-haired doll and grabbing at it, clutching it to her chest, as though someone else might get to it first.

'This is me!' she says. She makes me want to laugh; who does she think is going to take it away?

Charley? suggests a voice in my head, but I delete it, 'cos that's a crazy idea.

There's a silence as Sara scans the floor again, searching.

'Now, a Charley-doll,' she half whispers to herself, and I

watch as she reaches out for a tall slim doll, with dark red hair; I watch as she lifts it up in a kind of fearful half-stroke, and drops it into the third empty chair around the pretend table. There are three children around the table now, no gaps.

It looks so right it makes me want to cry.

'All finished!' she says suddenly and quickly, and she sweeps the dolls aside, knocking them onto the floor, as though she could make it all disappear. Not just the dolls, but the feelings too.

'Hal?' she asks.

'Yeah?'

'I'm a good girl,' she says, with a sense of wonder, as though she can't quite believe it. I wish I knew what the hell she means, and why, but it's still far too early in the day for me to think about.

'Sure you are,' I say, 'and a hungry girl too, yeah? Let's get brekker.'

She gives me this sideways look she does, like I haven't quite got something, and right away I get the heart-lurch. It is so what Charley used to do, that freaky I'm-a-girl-and-you're-just-a-poor-boy-who-can't-possibly-understand thing, but Charley was older, and Sarz is just a kid. Where does she get it from?

It's in the genes, sucker, I hear Charley say. I hear Charley a lot these days. It's as though a bit of her has crawled out of her hospital bed and lodged itself straight into my head. I delete again.

Life's hard enough.

'Were you awake a long time, Sarz?'

'Time to get up, when the sun comes on.'

She sings the words as we go down the stairs, and points at the sun through the hall window.

'It's not a light really, Sara, the sun – it's a big ball of fire.'

She thinks about that one all the way through pouring out her cereal, and then she stirs her Weetabix and laughs out loud at THAT crazy idea.

'Bouncy ball,' she yells with delight. Her face is full of Weetabix, and for some weird reason I suddenly remember how small she was when she was born. How Mum never seemed to have any time for me and Charley then, either. Now it's like it's me and Sarz who are the ones on the outside, and Mum's locked away in hospital with Charley, or if she's not actually in the hospital, then she's locked away in her own head, thinking about Charley.

It's a bit like I'm seeing Sarz for the first time. Here she is, eating breakfast and staring at me again, staring at me like she's making her mind up about something.

'We're goin' to Corn-wall,' she says, managing to get her tongue round the word after a while. 'Shall we go swimmin' in the sea?'

'Sara can go swimming with Daddy,' I say firmly.

'Not Daddy, wanna go with Hal,' she pouts.

'Hal doesn't swim in the sea any more,' I tell her. She does that to me: suddenly I'm talking as though I was her version of myself. Her Hal, not mine.

'I know.' She carries on staring at me with her big blue

eyes. 'Why?' she asks.

Good question, Sarz, only I can't answer. Seems like I don't really trust the sea any more, can't seem to see the surface of it without imagining just how dark and deep and dangerous it might be underneath.

'Are Sara's eyes blue like the sea?' I ask back, but for once she isn't distracted.

'Hal's eyes are like the sea,' she says, and then she sighs deeply. 'And Charley's in the sea.'

I feel my mouth fall open, but no words come out.

Sara just carries on spooning in the mush, as though what she's said is completely normal, which for her it is, I suppose.

'Who's in the sea, Sara?' I ask, just to make sure I heard right. 'Charley's in the hospital, not the sea.'

'Fish and crabs and Ariel the mermaid and the big fat lady and all the little fishes and Guppies and Daddy and Sara, but not grown-up girls, grown-up girls can't go in the sea. There's a man in there with a fork an' temper . . . and sea flowers . . . that gets you!' And she's gone, just slipped away into her own world, where I know there's no point at all in trying to follow her.

Mum comes in then. 'Morning you two, cuppa tea?'

She looks as tired as ever. She isn't really brown any more, and she isn't young-looking either. She's a weird grey colour, like she lives in a cave underground all the time; or maybe that should be in a hospital. She lifts the blinds and lets in the sunlight.

'Guess what?' she says.

'We're goin' to Corn-wall?' says Sarz.

'Family grapevines, eh?' laughs Mum, but somehow still manages to look sad.

'Hey!' I say.

'Hey Hal-boy, what are you up to today?

'Dunno, bike maybe? Boat? Mates?'

'No going out on the river without Dad around, ok?'

'Sure,' I say, keeping it light and cazh. 'You?'

'Just the usual, Charley. Shopping. Cooking, and—' she looks at Sara, 'and a little bit of cuddling might be nice.' Sara leaps into her arms, right on cue, and Mum sinks her head into her shoulder. I watch her as her eyes close in the sunlight, and it's truly weird, it's like Sarz has some special secret thing that Mum just has to breathe right in, all the way down to her very soul. She opens her eyes and sees me staring. She winks at me, including me, but I know I can't ever make her feel quite so good as Sara does.

'See ya later,' I say.

'Hal?'

'Yeah?'

'Hal, will you come and say goodbye to Charley?'

'Sure.'

'And Hal?'

'Yeah?'

'Think of something to leave with her, something special the nurses can chat to her about, something she can remember you by.'

'Sure.'

'And Hal?'

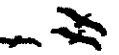
'Yeah?'

'Love you, only-boy.'

'Yeah. You too.'

I open the kitchen door. The sun's so hot, and the river's all the way to the bottom of the garden. I get out the fishing line and rods and hooks, and set myself up under the willow tree with a book. Truth is I don't want to say goodbye to Charley. I don't even really want to see her again. She's just not there, she's hit her head on a rock and can't move, can't speak, can't talk, can't even breathe without sounding like a machine! Call it coma, call it PVS, call it what you like – if you ask me, she's dead already, though, and the worst thing about it is that Mum and Dad just can't see it.

I start to think about what I could possibly leave her – a new brain, perhaps?



I drag my way through the hot dusty streets all the way to the hospital, but Mum's already there, sitting by Charley's bed. She's talking. She talks as though Charley's just asleep, not in a coma and definitely not dead. She talks as though the whole world is sitting up, waiting, holding its breath and just waiting for the moment when Charley finally sits herself up, smiles, and shakes out her long red hair. Her hair keeps on growing.

How gross is that?

Anyway, I know what Charley would do if she did wake up. She'd stretch and yawn and say something. I try to imagine what she might say. 'Sorry', that would be quite good if you ask me. Sorry for being such a totally self-obsessed arsehole. Sorry for going out and falling off a wave and not quite killing myself. But sorry's not really Charley's style. Hers would be more like this:

The scene: a hospital. A beautiful girl's eyes flutter awake.

'Oh, I've been in SUCH a wonderful place,' she'd say, and then she'd smile her secret smile (*'Look at me, Hal, look at me'*) and she'd look straight at me, and I'd know she'd seen things I'll never see, been to places I can't even begin to imagine.

Still, even that would be better than having to look at her the way she is now. Now I don't want to look at her at all. I hate it. She doesn't even look like Charley. She looks like someone dead. Her mouth slips. I sit outside the door on the sweaty plastic chair and listen to Mum.

'The sun's out, sweetheart,' she says. Yeah, right, Mum, scintillating stuff, that'll bring her right back to life! 'And I've brought you some gorgeous snapdragons to smell. Why is it that the yellow ones smell so pale and the orange and red ones so hot? Here, try.'

I peep, urgh, she's holding them up to Charley's nose. I wait to see what happens, but Charley's breathing doesn't change at all.