

CHILDREN OF THE WAVES

By Wendy Percival

The small boy playing on the rocks was unaware that he was being watched. The onlooker, a tall thin girl, sat nearby, her watery outline and pulsating shadowy shape the only indication of her existence and then only to a certain few. Even when her silver hair appeared to flutter into his face, even when he inadvertently touched her as he climbed over the rocks he remained ignorant of her presence.

Appearing suddenly bored, the girl shifted her gaze across the beach and surveyed the holiday makers. She watched others of her kind mingle among them, silently and secretly brushing against them, assessing. The waves sighed back and forth against the shingle and the watery figures appeared to wax and wane with each wave. All of them were children.

Leaving the rock, the girl slowly made her way amongst the crowds and approached the soft grey figure of a boy of an age similar to herself. He turned to her as she drew near.

'Not here. Not today,' he said. They stood and looked across the bay.

'Our chance will come,' she said.

As the daylight faded, the figures gradually gathered together around the boy and girl.

'Come,' said the girl. 'It is dusk.' The group turned towards the sea. Forming a line, they slowly walked in to the shallows and as the wave breathed in and took the shingle from the beach it took them also and they disappeared beneath the surface.

As the next day dawned a heavy mist crept across the sea and churned around between the breakwaters. As it lifted, the wispy figures of the children again came into view. Families began to arrive on the beach, colonising the limited areas of sand along the high tide mark. By mid-morning the sun was bright, the sky cloudless and the beach busy with children playing. The translucent forms roamed between them, unseen by all. Except one.

Alice sat on a low wall which divided the shingle from the promenade. She watched the figures meander among the people on the beach, as she had done many times before. They were only just visible to her now. She had been aware recently that as she got older they were no longer as clear to her as they used to be. She knew by next year they would have faded completely and then it would be too late. She sighed suddenly, frustrated and angry. Had she not returned here religiously for all these years, waiting, prepared? Surely the opportunity would not be lost? Her anger subsided as the memory of the day when she first saw the children made her shudder.

It had been a sunny day, as this one, with fluffy clouds dotted in a clear blue sky. It had been the last day of their holiday - the last chance to spend a day on the beach. There had been more sand then. She and her brother had built a giant sandcastle among the rocks with a channel from its moat towards the sea to entice the water to surround their turrets. But now the tide was coming in and the family were busy packing up. They had been urging her to bring her bucket and spade. 'Come on, Alice,' called her mother. 'Time to go. Come and put your things in the bag.'

She had run and deposited her toys and then dashed back to see the waves break into the channel.

'Now where are you going?' said her mother in exasperation, pausing from the packing to turn and watch her run off.

'I just want to see if the sea gets up to the moat,' called Alice over her shoulder.

Her father and brother had almost reached the top of the beach by now. Her mother was beginning to lose patience with her. 'Alice, please, it really is time we went. There's a lot to do. In case you've forgotten, we're going home tomorrow.'

'In a minute!' panted Alice, scrabbling on to another rock to get a better view. 'Just one more wave and then I'll come.' And then she saw them. A crowd of children had encircled her castle and were staring at her. They seemed to have come from nowhere. She was puzzled and confused. She took a hesitant step back from them but her foot slipped on a pile of mossy green seaweed and she fell backwards into a deep pool which was even now being swelled by the encroaching tide.

In theory Alice could swim well enough to save herself, but instead she became disorientated, confused by masses of children swimming underwater around her. They gestured to her, enticing her to follow. She became calm, even intrigued, and happy to respond. She kicked her feet and attempted to move in their direction. One child hovered and stayed back from the group, holding out his hand. Gently she floated towards him, reaching out, trying to make contact. Closer and closer she came, stretching out her fingers. She kicked a little harder. Nearly there. He smiled, encouraging her. She pushed herself as hard as she could, willing her fingers to reach his. There was barely an inch between their fingertips when a moment's hesitation allowed her to register with alarm that the boy's face was completely transparent. Too late to check her actions, her fingers brushed those of the apparition in front of her. For a second there was blackness, then a strong firm hand clasped around her wrist and she felt herself being launched out of the water and dragged on to a rock.

The teenage boy who had hauled her out, held on to her while she coughed, wretched and spluttered. He stood up and called to someone, and then sat down and grasped her hand. 'Did you see them?' he asked urgently. She nodded. Speech was impossible yet.

'I've been there,' he continued, 'I saw them, too. I still do. Well, I won't now, of course. It's your turn now. Are you OK?'

She nodded again but she wanted to ask so much. She tried but her throat was so raw and her voice none existent. Only a grunt emerged followed by racking coughs but he understood what she wanted to ask. His name was Andrew, he told her. He spoke of the children and gently he explained to her what she now must do.

There followed the anguish of her parents, the hugs and tears and blaming themselves for allowing her to stay at the water's edge. It was a while before she had the chance to contemplate her experience and address all that Andrew had said.

When they'd asked her months later how she felt about a holiday in the same resort she was adamant. They must go back. And they did, and for many years afterwards but now this would be the last. Not only had she long since outgrown family holidays, but soon she would no longer be considered a child and the power she had would vanish for ever. Surely her chance must come this time.

As she scanned the beach now she noticed the figures were starting to congregate. They were milling around near the breakwater. She stood and put up her hand to shade her eyes, desperately trying to make out what was attracting their interest. She could vaguely make out movement through the translucent bodies. She began to make her way down the beach. Almost all the figures were near the breakwater now. They formed a blue-grey haze, merged together as they were. As she got closer she could see a boy, about 9 years old, climbing on the breakwater, trying to balance along the edge. Paddling in the shallows was a little girl of about 3 or 4. She looked up occasionally at the boy and giggled when he exaggerated the wobbles in his acrobatic act.

Alice felt her insides tighten. Was this the moment? What if she failed? She tried to break into a run but the shingle slowed her progress. 'Wait!' she called inside her head, 'Not yet, I'm not there yet!'

The boy on the breakwater was near the end now, about to negotiate the next upright post which disappeared into the deep water below. The look on his face told Alice that he had caught sight of the children, and as he made the inevitable error and lost his footing, she was already in the water. Ignoring the milling mass of shadows she plunged into the place on which her eyes had been fixed as she saw him go. She flailed about in the water trying to find her quarry. When her fingers located an arm she felt a surge of relief but it was premature. As she dug her heels into the sea bottom and made to haul the boy out of the water, she realised that the watery phantoms were not about to relinquish their prize without a fight. She pulled with all her strength to try and bring the boy to the surface but to her despair she could see hands all over his legs, arms and around his neck dragging him down.

'How can I possibly do this?' she screamed silently, 'One against so many!' Then she recalled how she had reached out to them and almost followed, but Andrew had somehow

broken the spell. How though? Surely he had just used his strength to pull her out. Then she remembered. She had hesitated. Why? Something had caused her to pause momentarily. But what? When the answer came to her she immediately dived under the water and found the boy's face. He was focused on one of the figures. She thrust her hand through the phantom's head, breaking the communication between boy and ghost. It worked. At once she found she could lift the boy from out of the water and drag him on to the beach. As the crowds gathered around she looked up and watched the spectres turn and walk away, fading and then disappearing as they went.

The boy looked at her, and like she had done, he coughed and choked, unable to speak. She knew from his eyes what he wanted her to say and she felt he understood not only her confirmation but also what fell to him now.

Later, when all the crowds had gone, she stood on the promenade to say goodbye to the sea. She knew that she would never come back here again. She had repaid the childhood debt. Now she was free to begin the adult chapter in her life.

THE END