Opening extract from

The Village by the Sea

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Published by

Puffin Books

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WHEN Lila went out on the beach it was so early in the morning that there was no one else there. The sand was washed clean by last night's tide and no one had walked on it except the birds that fished along the coast – gulls, curlews and sandpipers. She walked down to the sea with the small basket she carried on the flat of her hand, filled with flowers she had plucked from the garden around their house – scarlet hibiscus blooms, sweet-smelling spider lilies and bright butter-yellow allamanda flowers.

When she came to the edge of the sea, she lifted the folds of her sari and tucked them up at her waist, then waded out into the waves that came rushing up over her feet and swirling about her

ankles in creamy foam. She waded in till she came to a cluster of three rocks. One of them was daubed with red and white powder. It was the sacred rock, a kind of temple in the sea. At high tide it would be inundated but now, at low tide, it could be freshly consecrated. Lila took the flowers from her basket and scattered them about the rock, then folded her hands and bowed.

Just then the sun lifted up over the coconut palms in a line along the beach and sent long slanting rays over the silvery sand to touch her on the back of her head. Enjoying their warmth, she stayed bowed for a little while, her feet still in the cold, whispering waves. The sun lit up the pink and mauve waves with sparkles. Far out, stretched along the horizon, was the fishing fleet that had been out all night, the sails like white wings, or fins, lifting out of the sea. They were anchored and still: they would not return before sundown.

Later in the morning more women would come and offer flowers at the sacred rock. Some would say a little prayer for the safety of the fishermen at sea because they were all the wives and daughters of fishermen. Some would simply bow, like Lila, and say a greeting to God. It seemed a good way to start the morning. There was no real reason

why they prayed to this rock rather than any other rock, but they needed something to which they could offer flowers and red *kum-kum* powder as they said their prayers, and the large flat-topped one that stood in the shallow water and was easy to approach was the most convenient one. It was not so far away as the temple in the village at the far end of the beach, nor did they need to give money to a priest who would perform the *puja* for them. The women preferred to do it themselves.

When Lila's father still owned a boat and went to sea to fish, her mother used to bring flowers to this rock in the sea, and pray. But he no longer fished, he had sold his boat to pay his debts, her mother was too ill and weak to get out of her bed, and it was Lila who came to begin the morning with an offering of flowers to the sea. Sometimes she felt it was the best time of day for her, the only perfectly happy and peaceful one. Emptying out the last petals from her basket into the waves which quickly carried them away, she turned and walked back up the beach to the line of coconut palms now gilded by the sun. It was time to start work.

She climbed over the dunes that were spangled with the mauve flowers of seaside ipomea into

the coconut grove and passed the white bungalow that was locked and shuttered. It belonged to rich people in Bombay who came only rarely for their holidays. Its name was written on a piece of tin and tacked to the trunk of a coconut tree: *Mon Repos*. What did that mean? Lila had never found out and she wondered about it every time she walked past it, up the path that led through the coconut grove.

The morning light was still soft as it filtered through the web of palm leaves, and swirls of blue woodsmoke rose from fires in hidden huts and mingled with it. Dew still lay on the rough grass and made the spiderwebs glitter. These webs were small and thickly matted and stretched across the grass, each with a hole in the centre to trap passing insects. Butterflies flew up out of the tussocks and bushes of wild flowers – large zebra-striped ones with a faint tinge of blue to their wings, showy black ones with scarlet-tipped wings, and little sulphur-yellow ones that fluttered about in twos and threes.

Then there were all the birds flying out of the shadowy, soft-needled casuarina trees and the thick jungle of pandanus, singing and calling and whistling louder than at any other time of the day.

Flute-voiced drongoes swooped and cut through the air like dazzling knives that reflected the sun and glinted blue-black, and pert little magpie robins frisked and flirted their tails as they hopped on the dewy grass, snatching at insects before they tumbled into the spider's traps. Pairs of crested bulbuls sang from the branches. A single crow-pheasant, invisible, called out 'coop-coop-coop' in its deep, bogeyman voice from under a bush, and a pigeon's voice cooed and gurgled on and on. It was the voice of the village Thul as much as the roar of the waves and the wind in the palms. It seemed to tell Lila to be calm and happy and all would be well and all would be just as it was before.

But when Lila came to the log that bridged the swampy creek and led to their hut on the other bank, she looked at the hut and knew that nothing was as it had been before, and nothing was well either. The hut should have been rethatched years ago – the old palm leaves were dry and tattered and slipping off the beams. The earthen walls were crumbling. The windows gaped, without any shutters. There was no smoke to be seen curling up from under a cooking pot on a fire, as in the other huts in the surrounding groves of coconut and banana.

Her two sisters, Bela and Kamal, stood at the door brushing their teeth with twigs they had broken off the neem tree at the back. They had not washed or changed for school. When she called to them, 'Why don't you dress? You'll be late for school,' they answered, 'But you haven't even made us our tea yet – *you're* late.'

Lila threw down the little basket at the door and went in to make a fire. She knew she ought to do it before she went to the beach. Then she could put on the pot of water and have it boiling when she came back. But somehow, when she woke up in the morning, she felt she had to flee to the beach: she couldn't face the dead ashes or the dirty cooking pots of the night before until she had been out on the beach and seen the sea and scattered flowers on the sacred rock. Now she had been there, she would collect firewood, light it and make tea for the family. She wished Bela and Kamal would understand.

She made them their tea silently, throwing a fistful of tea leaves and another of sugar into the pot of water on the smoking fire she had built. The three sisters sat on their heels, waiting for it to boil and for their brother to bring them some milk. Once they had had a buffalo but she, too,

had been sold to pay debts. Now milk had to be bought from a cowherd in the village.

They sat on the threshold, looking down the path that led through the coconut grove and soon they saw Hari coming along with a small brass pot of milk in his hand – all they could afford. Unlike the two little girls, he had washed and was dressed in clean khaki shorts and a shirt. The small girls ran to take the milk from him, Lila poured some into the pot, and soon it was ready and they carried their metal tumblers of hot tea out to a string bed under the frangipani tree and sat there and sipped.

'What about Father and Mother?' asked Hari.

'I'll take Mother's glass to her,' said Lila.

'But Father's asleep,' said Bela and Kamal together.

Hari's head sank low as he stared at the empty tumbler while Lila pushed and shoved and made her sisters change into their indigo blue skirts and white blouses that all the schoolgirls in the village wore, and found their few tattered books with which they set off for school. Then Hari got up and said he would see them to school and stop in the field on his way back to do some digging and watering.

Lila went in with a tumbler of tea for her mother. She stopped to add a little extra milk to it. Then she went past the curtain in the doorway to the room where her mother lay on the string bed on some old grey sheets. She herself looked like a crumpled grey rag lying there. She had been ill for a long time. No one knew what was wrong. She had no pains and no fever but simply grew weaker and weaker all the time. Now she could not sit up to drink her tea. Lila had to lift her head and help her drink in little sips from the tumbler. She was very gentle and careful because her mother seemed so frail one hardly liked to touch her.

She also kept her head turned away from the heap that lay on a mat in a corner of the dark, shadowy room. The heap did not stir but made a grumbling sound of obstructed breathing and also stank. Lila could smell the fermented toddy even from a distance – it was a smell she had known and hated since she was a small girl. She kept her nose wrinkled up and wished her father would throw himself into some other corner to sleep and not foul her mother's room with the stench of drunkenness. But no one dared tell him, least of all her mother.

All she said was, 'Lila, have the girls gone to school?'

'Yes.'

'And Hari to the fields?'

'Yes, Hari to the fields.'

'Then you must sweep and go to market and cook, Lila.'

'Yes, Ma,' said Lila, although she did not need to be told. She had given up going to school long ago, so that she could stay home and do the cooking and washing and look after the others. She got up to start.