

The Next Wave

I lean my back spine to spine against the coconut tree, and wonder if the next wave will be the last.

Always I have loved the sound of the sea. It was with me when I was born; it was with me as I grew; and it is with me now, while I wait. I do not remember the first time I walked in the sea, or floated on a wave. But I do remember playing, here by the water's edge, laughing and chuckling as the water gurgled around us and our mothers sat on the sand cleaning the tuna our fathers had caught. We had no thought for the future, then.

Here it comes, slowly breaking, pattering gently towards my feet. No, this time it does not reach me.

I remember when this island was – oh! so much wider. There were houses, and streets, and wide cleared spaces where we used to play football. Ahsan, he was the best of us – he was fast, and he was clever, and always he was scoring many goals. He would find it harder now.

The waves are red; the sun is going down. Soon it will get cold, and I will be alone until the moon rises. I hope the sea does not take me then, in the darkness. I want to see the last wave.

Perhaps I should have gone in the boat with them. Poor Shaffa, she found it hard to leave me. She is a good daughter. But I said no, you must go. For me, away from here, there is no life. I belong in this place – you go, your children must have a new life. She cried much, and implored Azan to take me by force. But Azan knew, as I knew, that the boat was too full of people already.

I am tired of this waiting. If it were not for my bad leg I would go and walk around my island. But looking about me, I see this would not take long. Maybe twenty paces. When I was young, I would have danced all round this little droplet of sand in the time it takes a coconut to fall.

When I was young, I would have thrust the waves aside with deep strokes of my paddle, as all the men pulled in time together and the spray went flying and the salt stung our faces and the glory of the hunt was on us. When I was young, I'd have hauled him from the ocean, the great fish, and when we were back I'd have stood him next to me on the sand, to show how tall he was. When I was young, I would have taken Meena from the village, and carried her as she beat me on the back with her small fists, then I would have kissed her, and she would have kissed me, then whispered in my ear so that my neck prickled. Then, we would have lain together in the dunes, under the stars. The dunes used to be yonder, where those waves begin to break now.

Will it be this one? Yes, at last. It covers my feet, soaks into my shorts, and laps around the coconut tree. All the sand is gone, and soon we will follow it beneath the waves, the tree and me.

The sun is sinking.