

## A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

ou'll love this strange and rather brilliant adventure about tall tales, belonging and finding friendship. There is a lot about fish, boats, barnacles and the sea – but there's also a lot about family and finding your feet (well, flippers). Fishy jokes aside, Richard Pickard won my special chairman's prize at our *Times*/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition because I'd never read such an original, funny and bonkers story – it won first plaice with me, you might say . . .

BARRY CUNNINGHAM

Publisher Chicken House

## THE PECULIAR TALE OF THE TENTACLE BOY



Chicken House

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## Text © Richard Pickard 2021 Cover illustration © Maxine Lee-Mackie 2021

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arina Minnow loved to tell tales. How else was a girl supposed to have any fun in a quiet seaside town like Merlington? The place was so uneventful that the local paper was dominated by the yo-yoing prices of pollock, and so obsessed by fish that on the seafront alone there were seventeen fishmongers all vying for power. In Marina's opinion, having to grow up somewhere as dull as Merlington

without any imagination was a fate worse than death.

Most people knew they had to take what Marina said with a pinch of salt. 'She'll be a great writer one day,' her mother Sally would tell strangers as they walked down the beach, Marina loudly translating the cries of a seagull or musing on the alien origins of a peculiar-looking shell. Though it was a budding talent in her mother's eyes, Marina's tales drove some people round the twist, especially her school friends and their narrow-minded parents. She would never set out to cause harm with her stories, or to intentionally mislead someone – but the trouble was she could be quite convincing.

At the last summer fair, when her classmate Peter Featherfin had polished off a family-sized eel pie all by himself, Marina had launched into such an extraordinary tale that he'd been convinced he would wake the next morning with a jellied stomach and puff pastry hair. 'You'll turn into an eel pie!' she'd cried, as he licked the last crumbs from the plate. Marina had been dragged from her bed and round to the Featherfin home to apologize, so that Peter too might finally get some sleep. It always seemed

worthwhile, though, as the thought of life in Merlington without a healthy dose of drama was more boring than Marina could possibly imagine!

It was never exactly busy, but by October the town was dead. Today, just a few solitary fishermen lined the surf as they pulled in their final haul of the day – crabs, plaice and shrimp – and the multicoloured fronts of the shabby beach huts glinted in the fading sun. Marina and her classmates, Edie, Wendy and Daisy, had been wandering aimlessly through the cobbled streets since school had finished an hour earlier, picking at a polystyrene tray of soggy chips. Now they weaved a ragged path along the beach of shells and pebbles, which ran from the pub at the harbour's edge to the cliffs that rose sharply from the water once the shore was lost at high tide.

Marina could feel the story on the tip of her tongue before she even knew what it was.

'Make sure you throw that tray in the bin,' she called to Wendy Whitby, a know-it-all girl with sharp features like a bird. 'If it's washed into the sea, a jelly-fish might fall in love with it. You'll only be helping to break the poor thing's heart in the end.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Wendy,

rolling her eyes. 'It's a piece of rubbish, why would a jellyfish think it was another jellyfish?'

'They don't have eyes; how could they know? Jellyfish are sensitive creatures,' Marina insisted.

Edie laughed, sensing the elaborate story which was building in her best friend's mind.

'I heard that fish sometimes get stuck in those plastic six-pack rings for beer cans,' said Daisy Baitman, a quiet girl who rarely got involved in Marina and Wendy's disagreements. As soon as she realized that she'd spoken up, her mouth dropped into a perfectly formed 'o' and she hid her face behind her braids, backing silently away from the group.

'That's true!' insisted Marina. 'Humans are always invading the ocean and causing damage to the delicate life. There was once an eel...'

Oh, here we go, thought Wendy.

"... a huge, great, slimy rope of an eel that sat still for almost a decade. He'd hang his head from the nook of his cave and hardly move for anything. Tiny fish would swim by and not even know he was there before they suddenly found themselves halfway down his throat. The eel sat still for so long he was almost welded to the rock, making a wonderfully comfy home for barnacles. Weeks, months, years would pass, and he'd barely open his eyes – just his mouth, which opened and closed with the tide. It wasn't until one day, when a deep-sea diver was exploring the reef, that the eel, in a moment of curiosity, opened his eyes to be greeted by the man's huge glass diving helmet. But the eel didn't even notice the man. All he could see in the dark polished mask was his own quizzical face reflected straight back. He'd never seen another eel before, having not left his cosy cave in such a long time. He didn't even know what it was he was seeing, but he immediately fell in love.

'Yet it was in that moment that the diver turned, flapping his strange plastic feet, and made a break for the surface. Up, up, up, he swam in a cloud of bubbles. The eel did not know what to think, or know where his new love had gone, but for the first time in what felt like for ever he swam. He swam free of his rocky home, tearing a whole miniature village apart around him as barnacles and seaweed flew aimlessly through the water. He swam after the diver as fast as he could, as the world ahead grew brighter and warmer than he'd ever thought possible. His cloudy, tired eyes ached at the light, but he knew nothing except the

fear he'd never get to see that beautiful face again. Then, as the strange rippling surface came into view the light was blotted out by a huge shape on the water and ...

'Nothing.

'The eel thrashed and pulled but he was no longer in control of his own movements. He was being dragged out of the sea in a rough, heavy net, and hoisted into the cold air that whipped his skin painfully.'

Marina's friends stood around her in a tight semicircle, their mouths hanging open as she hooked them to attention. All except for Wendy, who had wandered slightly down the beach and had taken to throwing chips at a dozing seagull in irritation.

'What happened to him?' cried Thea Marigold, a small girl from the year below who had joined the group mid-story with an unseasonably huge strawberry ice cream.

'He was thrown in a cool box and driven down the Thames,' continued Marina, matter-of-factly. 'He ended up at the Dagenmoor pub in east London. Three pounds for a pie and mash on Mondays.'

At this final indignity, Wendy, who was daughter

of the local pub landlord, could take it no longer. 'That is a complete load of rubbish!' she cried. 'How could you possibly know all of that? You've never even been to London.'

'She's right,' Daisy added, having found her confidence again. 'My parents take me there every Christmas and a pie and mash would cost way more than that.'

'It so is true,' snapped Marina. 'Everything in London is half-price on Mondays – it's because the city workers all take a packed lunch of their leftover Sunday roast.'

'I can't bear it any more!' bellowed Wendy, scowling at the group. 'Eels, beer cans, polystyrene tubs...I'm sick of all your stupid stories. Why can't you live in the real world like the rest of us? Your mum is just another fishmonger, like everyone else in this town. Why do you think you're so special?'

Marina could feel the back of her neck beginning to grow hot.

'Wendy, give it a rest,' Edie begged, running a hand through her long, dark hair in frustration. 'You know it's just a bit of silly fun.'

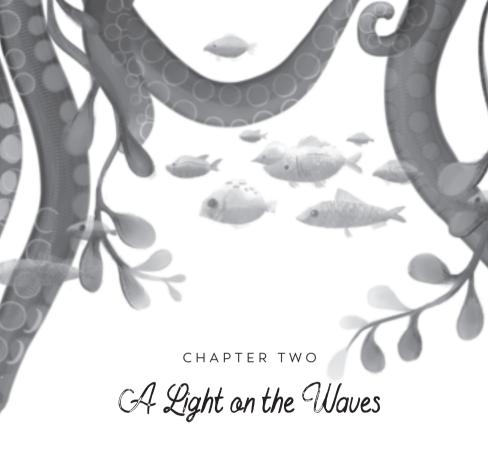
'It isn't fun, though,' Wendy barked, turning to

Marina. 'All you do is tell great big lies, and everyone laps it up.'

'I think they're funny,' smiled Thea.

'That's because you're a child!' cried Wendy, knocking Thea backwards – a dollop of ice cream dropped to the floor with a sloppy squelch. 'The whole town lets her get away with murder. She thinks she can make up any old story and everyone will just believe it. And you guys think she's funny? Well, I think she's a no-good liar. A *liar*!'

'I am *not* a liar!' burst out Marina, anger surging through her bones. Without even realizing, she had picked up a clump of wet seaweed from the ground and it was flying through the air before she could do a thing about it. A shrill scream rang across the water as the seaweed hit Wendy square in the face with a damp splosh.



cannot believe you *did* that!' gasped Wendy, scrubbing the slime from her cream-coloured dress. 'You are going to pay for this to be cleaned, you freak. You've totally ruined it! What is wrong with you?'

Marina's throat began to grow tight, as her cheeks turned a warm, red hue. She hadn't exactly *meant* to throw the seaweed, but it had already left her hand

before she'd noticed. Being called a liar really, really hurt. *Maybe because you think it's true*, a voice in her head suggested quietly. She squashed down the thought.

'It's only a dress,' she said tightly.

'I'm sure it'll come out in the wash,' Edie backed up her friend. 'You don't need to bother with the drycleaners.'

'I'm usually *covered* in seaweed after I've been picking periwinkles on the breakwater,' offered Thea, as she wiped pink ice cream from her shoe with a tissue. 'My mum rubs fish grease into the stains and it comes out fine!'

This only managed to further enrage Wendy. 'Now you want me to rub *grease* into my dress?' she screeched, staring down at the green tinge which had settled on her lacy collar.

Marina couldn't help herself.

'Vinegar works well too,' she said, her brain fighting her mouth for control of the words that were spilling from her lips. 'Mrs Cuttle swears by it! She saves all of the soggy newspaper after eating her fish and chips.'

'We aren't babies any more,' Daisy said, stepping

forward to stand beside Wendy. 'We don't need you to make up all these bedtime stories for us like Thea.'

'Especially when they're such stupid lies,' Wendy jeered.

Thea stood up again, almost half the size of the other girls as she stuffed an ice-cream-stained tissue in her pocket. 'I'm not a baby, I just think Marina's got a good imagination.'

'And where's the harm, Wendy?' Edie asked. 'I don't see why you have to be so harsh.'

'Because it's about time you all grew up,' Wendy continued. 'And then, perhaps Marina will be able to tell a story that's actually true for a change.'

Marina felt as though her heart might burst with rage. Instead of waiting to find that another clump of seaweed had somehow appeared in her hand, she turned and ran. Her anger carried her across the wooden groynes that divided the shore and sank down into the rising tide. She climbed each one before thumping on to the sand behind, as the beach of shells and dried seaweed sloped away from the town. The toots of distant cars and the cries of salt-sodden fishermen slowly faded away, along with the voices of Wendy and her friends.

Climbing from the water in the distance ahead was the half-destroyed old pier, a battered landmark which signalled the end of the town's periphery and the beginning of miles of barren beach. The long walkway which had once connected to land had collapsed into the cold sea years ago, following a ravenous fire. Now, the pier's blackened remains rose steeply from the water at its halfway point. At the end was a mould-ridden shack, which had once been a small fishermen's bait shop. The structure swung steadily in the stirring waves on four precarious legs, and Marina idly noticed the tiny windows casting a faint glare on the water as it swayed. Or was it her imagination once again?

People said the bait shop was haunted. All of the fishermen avoided the place, keeping their boats at a distance and dodging the murky waters nearby. Marina had heard the stories – of peculiar shadows on the sea and the strange, snapping sounds which carried through the darkness...

No, enough stories for one night.

Marina stomped through the sand towards the shallows, crushing shells and kicking at stray seagulls as she went. Suddenly, she became aware that she was being followed. Turning around sharply to give

Wendy a good what-for, her eyes were met instead by the smiling face of Edie.

'Did you see how angry Wendy was?' she said, suppressing giggles as she bit her bottom lip. Marina's irritation melted at once. Amusement bubbled inside her and before long, the two girls had fallen to the sand in fits of laughter.

'That was incredible!' cried Edie. 'She'll be fuming for days over that stupid dress! She thinks she's so grown up and important.'

'I don't know why I did that,' snorted Marina, righting herself on the damp ground as she winced at the memory of their argument. Being called a liar still hurt.

Edie appeared to sense what was on her friend's mind. 'Don't listen to that misery guts. I really like your stories.'

'You do?'

'Definitely. I wish I could come out with some of the stuff you dream up.'

'You don't think I'm a liar, then?'

'Well . . . I don't think you're a liar. But you're not telling the truth either, are you? I mean, obviously they're just stories . . .'

Marina started to wonder whether Wendy might have a point. Was a true story really worth more than one from her imagination? Nothing that happened in Merlington was nearly as interesting as what she could make up herself. Her dad had always loved sharing stories . . . But that was years ago. Was it something that she had to grow out of?

As she considered this, Edie took her hand and began to lead her back in the direction of town, where the streetlights were now humming to life along the boardwalk. She took a deep breath and began to concede defeat, when something in the corner of her eye caught her attention. A glimmer of orange on the dim water.

The shack on the pier, again. She hadn't imagined it this time – the faintest of lights flickering through two lonely windows, their large cracks visible even from the dusty shore.

'Did you see that?' she asked, spinning on the spot and wondering if she might be going mad. And then . . . 'There! There it is again. Did you see it? It was a light.'

'A light?' asked Edie in confusion. 'But there's nothing out there, no ships.'

'It's coming from the end of the old pier,' Marina insisted. She was caught in a trance, staring out at the gloomy building as it rocked hypnotically on its four rickety legs, waiting for the slightest sign that she was right.

'That's impossible, Marina. The pier hasn't been used since before we were born.'

'I *saw* light, coming from the window! Someone is in there!'

'This isn't because of all those ghost stories, is it?' Edie asked, exasperated. 'I know some of the fishermen think the bait shop is haunted. They all steer clear of the place, telling stories about strange noises and stuff. But, Marina, *it's just another story*.'

Marina felt a sharp jolt of pain as though Edie's words had jabbed her in the ribs.

'There was no light,' Edie continued. 'It's too far away to see anything from here, and it must be rotten solid inside. Who'd be in there now? And how would they have even got there?'

Edie was probably right. No one could live out in that salt-beaten wreck of a building, cut off from the world . . . *could they?* Marina knew that it was already too late. Her mind was running wild with

possibilities. She had to know either way.

Everyone thinks I should grow up, she thought. Well, after this, I'll prove that I can tell a true story too.

Edie stood aghast as Marina tumbled back down the beach, a low crash of thunder echoing in the distance.

'You're not actually going out there, are you? You're insane!' she yelled, as Marina hauled a rusty rowing boat across the beach with the sound of grinding shells.

'I have to know what's inside.'

'But it's not safe!'

'Wendy says my stories are lies, and even you don't think they could be true. Well, I'm going to start making real life just as exciting instead!'

The tide was coming in quickly as she pushed the boat into the shallow surf, her feet lapped by the encroaching waves. Hopping inside, she thanked her lucky stars she'd worn wellies that morning; the floor of the boat was still wet with slime from a seagull's leftover lunch.

In the invading darkness Marina slipped easily from Edie's sight. She was already invisible among the waves, even quicker than her friend had feared as the tiny boat was swallowed by the swelling sea. It was then, with a stomach-clenching gasp, that Edie noticed a very quick flicker of light in the corner of her vision. Now the worry of Marina's fate on the rough sea was trampled by a far greater one – about what might, in fact, be waiting for her inside that shack.



With all her might, Marina pulled the decaying oars of her boat through the waves. Suddenly she felt very stupid. How could she have thought that this would ever end well? Rowing out to sea on a whim, to the abandoned old pier that no one had visited in more than a decade! Her mother would be furious. Marina pushed that thought to the bottom of her wellies and focused on the task at hand. It was

too late to worry about any of that now, and there was no point in turning back. At the very least, tomorrow at school she'd be able to boast about visiting the crumbling shack on stilts – she'd bring back a piece of wood as proof, to wave victoriously in Wendy's face. She even had Edie to vouch for her. No one could call her a liar this time.

Finally, Marina reached what remained of the crippled pier's wooden promenade, which rose sharply from the sea like a ladder. She tied a simple knot with the boat's mooring rope and hooked it over a large rusty nail, securing the vessel to the pier as best she could while she bobbed on the water.

Climbing carefully on to the step-like planks, she felt very unsafe on the precarious wood which was sodden and damp beneath her feet. Suddenly, a loud bang sounded from inside the bait shop, echoing across the sea. What little light Marina had glimpsed through the cracked walls disappeared in the same instant. She froze, her heart pounding.

She'd been right – someone was inside!

Now was the moment to prove that she could have a real-life adventure. She clambered up the remaining steps of the decrepit promenade towards the bait shop, and with one swift motion, her breath caught in her chest, she swung the door open on to darkness. The smell of saltwater hit her square in the face, the stench of the sea, of cockles, shells and fish, fresher and stronger than a walk past any one of the town's seventeen fishmongers on a Friday morning. The room lay still – that is, until the rotten door itself collapsed from its hinges with a great thump to the floor, causing Marina to jump. She steadied her nerves, before plucking up the courage to call out.

'Hello?'

No one answered, the sound of her voice absorbed quickly by the damp walls. Who did she actually *think* would have answered? Had she imagined that light all along? Had the moon played a trick on her eyes?

But then, as if from nowhere, came a sound like scratching. A crab, scuttling across the floor and snapping its claws. Or maybe something else . . . A ghost? Was the bait shop really haunted, like the fishermen's stories said? Marina swallowed, her throat dry from the musty, stale air. *Possibly*. Whatever it was, she knew, deep down, that something was with her, hiding in the darkness.

'I know you're there,' she called.

And then, a strange shape formed before her eyes. A boy? A being that held the faintest outline of one, but . . .

Marina dared to inch closer, as the figure stepped into the moonlight. She stared in wonder at the creature's skin, which seemed almost translucent – the skin of a ghost. He crouched down before a small light flickered on. A candle, the one that Marina must've glimpsed from the beach. Her eyes widened as she saw that the boy's skin wasn't skin at all, but a cloak of pearly scales that began at his feet and grew more sparse as they rose up his chest. The scales glittered as the flame danced across them in a blaze of iridescent colour.

It was then that Marina noticed he was holding the candle not with a hand, but in a crab-like pincer – as smooth and hard as stone, and sharp-looking too. His other free pincer clack-clacked in a way that would have been rather menacing had it not been clear he was just as frightened as she was at this very moment. Marina felt her fingers tremble, mimicking his rust-coloured claw. She lifted her eyes to his face.

'Whoa...' she breathed.

She saw that his hair was not hair, but a mop of eight slippery tentacles which fell gracefully from a rubbery scalp, swinging at his neck in time with the rocking stilts of the pier. Each tentacle was covered in suckers that pulsated with a curious energy.

Marina swallowed hard again, found her courage, and spoke.

'Don't be afraid,' she said, angry at herself for the crack in her voice. The strange boy started at the sound. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you. I didn't think anyone could possibly be out here.'

The scale-covered creature shifted awkwardly on his feet. He appeared to understand.

'Who are you?' Marina asked. 'What's your name? Do you live out here? How long have you been hiding here all alone?'

Marina realized that she was probably overwhelming the boy with questions, which came from her mouth almost as quickly as they arrived in her head. She took a step backwards and resolved to take it slowly.

'Forget all that, let's start again. What is your name?'

'William,' he said after a pause. His voice was soft,

but broken, like when you speak for the first time on a Saturday morning and surprise yourself with an unused croak. William's voice couldn't have been used for a very long time. He spoke again.

'I've lived here for ages. For as long as I can remember, anyway.'

'You've lived here for ages?' repeated Marina in disbelief. 'How is that possible? How has no one known?'

William shrugged his pasty grey shoulders. 'I'm good at staying out of sight, and none of the sailors ever come near the pier.'

Because they think the place is haunted, thought Marina. 'But how did you get here in the first place?'

'I was brought here when I was a baby.'

'You were brought h—'

Marina was baffled. How could any of this be real? Had something snapped in her brain – had she lost the plot? Or had she fallen asleep and entered one of her own fanciful tales? It all *seemed* real enough. She pinched herself to be sure.

The sharp bite of pain that pulsed down her arm felt very real.