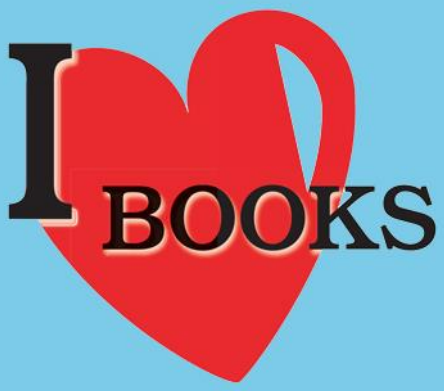


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Opening extract from

An Island of Our Own

Written by

Sally Nicholls

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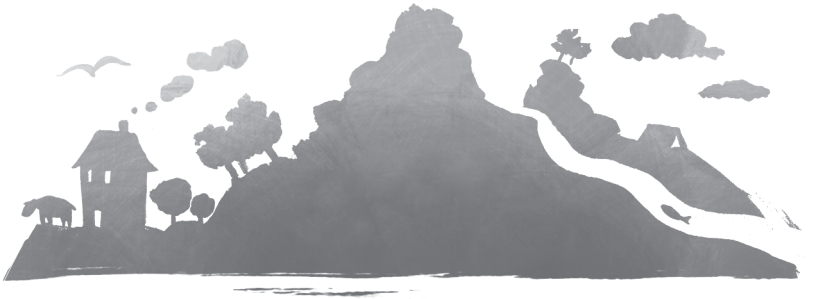
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AN ISLAND OF OUR OWN

I told my brother Jonathan I was going to write a book about all the things that happened to us last year. About the home-made spaceships, and the lock-pickers, and the thermal lances, and the exploding dishwasher, and the island that was old when the Vikings came, and Auntie Irene's treasure, and all the things that happened before we found it.

"It's going to be brilliant!" I told him. "And I've already got a title. *An Island of Our Own*! Isn't it great?"

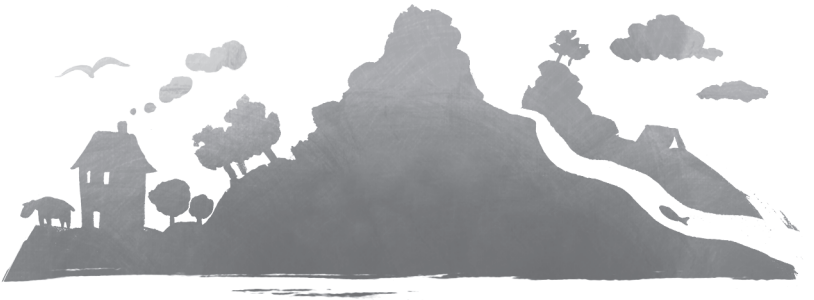
"But we don't have an island of our own," said Jonathan. "People are going to pick it up and expect it to be *Swallows and Amazons* for rich people! And then they'll read it and there'll be no island and they'll hate you! They'll put grenades through your window!"

I told Jonathan that people didn't put grenades through your window just because of what you called your book.

But Jonathan said you shouldn't underestimate the rage of a fandom. "Look at *Star Wars* fans," he said. "I would totally put a grenade through George Lucas's window if I thought it would get him to take Jar Jar Binks out of *The Phantom Menace*." Which seems a little harsh given how much Jonathan loves *Star Wars*, but Jonathan said you should never expect logic from a fanatic, which is probably true.

So I said I'd tell people at the beginning of the book that the title wasn't about a real island, but a metaphorical one (although there *is* a real island in the story – several, in fact), and also not to put grenades through my window, but send cake instead.

"There," I said. "Satisfied? Can I start now?"



STUFF YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ME

Here are the things you need to know about me. My name is Holly Abigail Kennet. I have never written a book before, which is hardly surprising, because I'm only thirteen, but I've read a lot of books, so I know that you start by introducing your characters. Like, if this was a Sherlock Holmes story, it would start with people knocking on Sherlock Holmes's door, and then Holmes would take one look at them and tell you that she's a left-handed seamstress who plays the flute and likes pickled onions, and he's a retired insomniac army colonel with a pet hamster.

I have tried doing this on people, but it's a lot harder in real life. Like, I've got a photo here beside me of me and my school friends, which was taken last year, just before this story starts. (I look different now. I'm growing my

hair, for one thing.) What can you deduce about me from this picture? Well, you can tell I'm about twelve, and you can see that I go to St Augustine's Academy, because I'm wearing a hideous school uniform that makes me look like a plum, and you can see I probably don't much care about how I look, because I've got this shaggy-dog sort of haircut, which is falling in my eyes because it's been ages since I got it cut, and also because I'm not wearing any make-up, unlike Sufiya and Kali, who are wearing not just make-up but nail extensions, and earrings, and hairspray, and all sorts of stuff which is technically banned in our school, but nobody cares.

You can also see that Issy and I are the only white kids in the photo, which I guess tells you something about where we live. It's a little flat over a chip shop in this part of London which is famous for being – I dunno – fabulously diverse and cultural and having lots of great food shops or something. It *does* have lots of great food shops. You can buy all sorts of wonderful things at the grocers' round here, like baklava, and pomegranates, and sharon fruit, and sticky Indian sweets, and great big bags of rice dead cheap. And there are shops that sell saris in hundreds of different colours, and shops that only sell Polish food, and coffee shops with Turkish hookah pipes and lots of stuff like that.

When I was little I used to love this series of books called *The Chalet School*, about a school in the Alps where all the kids came from different countries and spoke different languages and instead of doing PE

you went and climbed mountains, and someone was always wandering off on their own and falling off a cliff. Our school isn't in the Alps, and our PE lessons are dead boring, but it *is* a bit like *The Chalet School* in that everyone comes from all over the world, and not just boring countries like Switzerland, but India, and Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and Kenya, and Ethiopia, and loads of really cool places that I'm totally going to visit one day when I'm an environmental scientist, or possibly an environmental campaigner for Greenpeace, I haven't decided yet. I will have to travel there by boat, because I'm against aeroplanes, because they give off too much carbon, but I could totally get to Africa on a boat. People used to do it all the time in Victorian days. My friend Sizwe says I can stay with his aunt and uncle in South Africa, and my other friend Neema says I can stay with her gran in Pakistan, so I wouldn't even have to pay for hotels or anything.

Anyway. What you can also see in the photo is that my school bag is held together with gaffer tape. And my winter coat is a bit small and doesn't *quite* do up. What you *can't* see is that my shoes are slightly too tight, and pinch at the toes. Or that my school shirt used to belong to my brother, Jonathan, who is seven years older than me, and is way too big. I mean, Sherlock Holmes could probably see that, but you can't really in this picture because I'm wearing a blazer on top.

Sherlock Holmes might think that my too-small shoes and my too-big shirt meant that my mum didn't

care about me, but actually I don't have a mum. She died when I was eleven. And I don't have a dad either. He died when I was six. I am a real, genuine orphan. There are lots of orphans in books, but I'm the only one I know in real life apart from my big brother, Jonathan, and my little brother, Davy, who's seven.

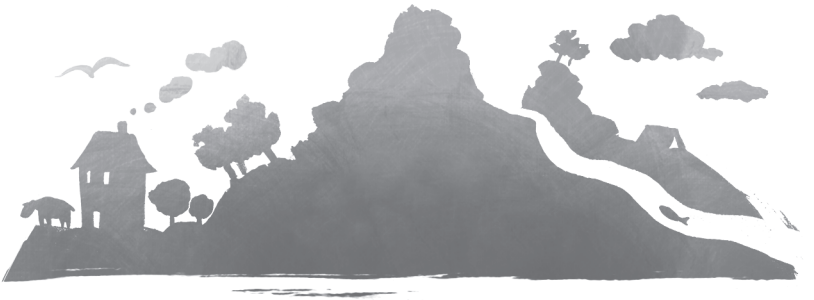
Davy and I live with Jonathan. He's our legal guardian. This is kind of weird, because he was only eighteen when my mum died, and still basically a kid.

When I tell kids at school that I live with my brother, they always ask loads of questions. Some of them are really stupid, like "Did your parents die in a car crash?" ("No. Why does everyone think that? My mum didn't even have a car.") Sometimes they just go all over the top feeling sorry for me, like, "Oh my God, both your parents are dead! That's so sad! I can't even imagine what that would be like!" This is mostly annoying, because they usually want you to comfort them. Which is *really* stupid, because *I'm* the one with the dead parents.

The question people ask most often is "What's it like?" And the answer to that one is complicated.

This book is partly about what it's like being kids who raise ourselves and partly about all the things that happened to us last summer. I don't think even Sherlock Holmes would be able to guess the things that happened to us. I'm not even sure *I* believe it happened, sometimes.

But it did.



CATH'S CAFF

Because my mum is dead, Jonathan has to earn the money to look after us. Fortunately, he already had a job when Mum died. He worked in Cath's Caff, running the till while Cath fried bacon and sausages in the kitchen, and making coffee in the big coffee machine, and clearing tables, and loading the big dishwasher, and mopping the floor at the end of the day.

The job was just supposed to be for the summer, though. Jonathan is dead clever. He was supposed to go to university in September, to study maths and physics.

He had to cancel his university place when Mum died. He pretends he doesn't mind, but I bet he does. I would, if I was him. Now he just works in the café all day, and looks after us in the evenings.

Cath's Caff opens at seven a.m., so we all get up

dead early in the mornings. When Mum first died, Jonathan was always late for work, because he is rubbish at mornings, and he is even more rubbish at mornings when he has to get Davy and me up and dressed and find the stuff we need for school and all that sort of thing. He still isn't as good at it as Mum was. It's been a year and a half since anyone shined my shoes, for example, and we're always forgetting important bits of homework, and non-uniform days, and swimming costumes, and money for bake sales. But at least we usually get to the café by sevenish now.

When we get to the café, Jonathan has to start work making people coffees and taking breakfast orders. Cath makes me and Davy breakfast while we wait. We have bacon sandwiches with lots of ketchup and big mugs of milky tea. It's my job to make sure Davy doesn't get ketchup down his school jumper, and to make sure his hair is brushed and his shoelaces tied and all that stuff. Then, at a quarter past eight, I walk him to school and get the bus to St Augustine's. That bit was easier when we both went to the same school, but as long as the bus isn't too late, I'm usually OK.

Getting back is worse. Jonathan doesn't finish work until half past four, so I have to make sure I'm on the first bus out of school, or I'm late for Davy. Davy's school *does* have an after-school club, and he's technically a member, but they charge you more for every extra fifteen minutes you stay there, so I'm not allowed to talk to my mates after school, or go and buy sweets from the

corner shop, or anything like that. I have to go and get to Davy quick.

When people say, "So your brother looks after you?" I usually say, "Actually, Jonathan looks after me, and Jonathan and me look after Davy." I am just as much a parent as Jonathan is, even though I'm only a kid. When Mum first died, I was allowed to look after myself, but Davy had to go to the after-school club. I didn't mind. My friend Sizwe looked after himself too, because his mum runs this cleaning firm and he doesn't have a dad, so we used to hang out together, which was fun. But when I turned twelve, Jonathan said I was old enough to look after Davy. Also, after-school club was expensive and we needed the money.

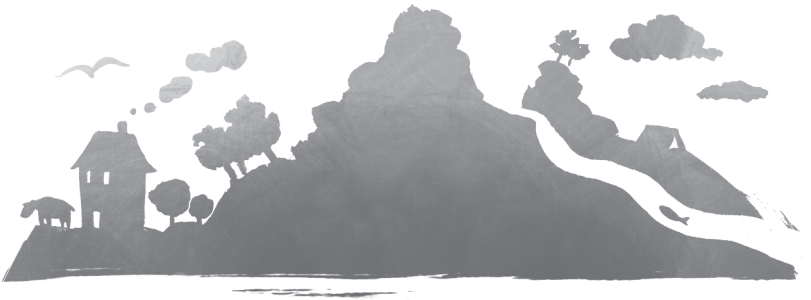
See, the thing with Jonathan is, he doesn't make quite enough money to pay for everything. He makes enough money to pay the rent and buy food, and usually there's a little bit left over. But the problem is, then Davy gets invited to a birthday party and needs to buy a birthday present. Or it's Christmas. Or the washing machine breaks. Or my shoes get too small. Or there's a school trip. And at first, we just used to spend the money in the bank, because birthday parties and new shoes and washing machines are important. But then we spent all Mum's savings and didn't have any money left. And then we went into negative money. And then we started to panic.

So now I have to keep Davy entertained until Jonathan finishes work. Sometimes we go Cath's Caff and wait for

him to finish, but it's a bit boring, and Cath only gives us free food if there are stale doughnuts waiting to be thrown out or something like that, and there aren't usually.

Davy is pretty easy to look after, though. For someone who's only seven, he's very easy, actually. I mean, I just have to make him a sandwich, and he's quite happy to go and play with his Lego or watch telly or something. I don't really *mind*. Most of the time. Most of the time I think it's quite cool, like I'm a Young Carer or a Teen Mum or something. Nearly Teen. Or big sister, anyway.

It's only sometimes, when my friends are all going off to do something without me, that I care. Sometimes it would be nice to go and hang out with Neema and Sizwe at the park, and not have to hurry off to pick up Davy.



GRANDPARENTS

Every Wednesday, Davy and I go and stay with my gran and grandad for the night. We started doing it after my mum died, when I was only eleven. Now I'm twelve, and don't really need looking after any more, but I still go. I like my grandparents.

Gran and Grandad live in this teeny tiny flat in one of those buildings that aren't quite an old people's home, but have buttons you can press if you fall over and need help, and people who come and check on you if they haven't seen you for a couple of days and stuff like that. Gran and Grandad are pretty old. Gran is seventy-nine, and Grandad is eighty-seven. Grandad had a stroke a couple of years ago, so he doesn't really talk, and half of his face is all mushed-up-looking. He can only really use one side of his body, and he has to sit in a wheelchair.

That's why we don't live with them, because Gran has her hands full looking after Grandad, and also he wouldn't be able to live in our flat because the door is too narrow for his wheelchair, and he wouldn't be able to get up the stairs.

Just because Grandad can't really say anything, it doesn't mean he's stupid. He's not. He's just as smart as he always was. You just have to take a bit longer to work out what he's trying to say, that's all.

I like going to Gran and Grandad's flat, because everything there is just the same as it always used to be. There's the same shelf of children's books that used to belong to my mum and my auntie. Davy has the same box of toys to play with that I used to have when I was little. I can sit and read a book, or watch telly, or do my homework, or whatever, and the flat is always warm, even in winter. And Gran cooks dinner – proper dinner, with vegetables and meat – and we play games.

We've always played games with Gran and Grandad. We play whist, and Cheat, and Bloody Mary, and Hungarian drinking games, with Davy on the same team as Grandad, because he always forgets the rules. When I'm feeling sad, I sometimes wish I could live here, in a tidy house with proper food every night. I can't, though. I know I can't. So mostly, I try not to worry about it.