

From Hythe

My enduring love of the sea is rooted in my childhood and teen experiences. As a child the sea could be both fearful and fun and as a teenager it was the inspiration of many angst-ridden poems written curled up in my bed listening to its sounds. Our house was so close to the sea that my brother's strong arm could lob a stone from the landing window and it would reach the shoreline. I marvelled at the course of these missiles as they sailed over the heads of holidaymakers and plopped into the sea, widening ripples appearing in front of their eyes. I can skim stones across water now because I had an early training.

It often seems to me that I was born into a family of ready-made adults. I was the youngest of five children, my four elder half brothers and sisters all being considerably older than me. This was due to my mother marrying a bastard – her own description of her first husband by whom she had my four sibling. He left her. Then she met my dad who took them all under his loving wings and they decided to have me. I made my appearance on a hot August day. That makes me a Leo, a fiery lion. I can be just that. My brothers and sisters were given money for the Saturday morning children's cinema and when they returned they had a baby sister.

I have so many vivid memories from my childhood that it is hard to know where to begin. I suppose the earliest incident was down to my dear dad letting go of my pram after a visit to the baby clinic – all stacked up with bottles of orange juice; thick syrupy stuff that we babies used to drink diluted. Apparently my dad was playing that game where you push the pram and let go but the trouble was, he couldn't catch up with me. He hadn't considered the fact that we were at the top of a short hill sloping down from the seafront. As a result I ended up crashing into a wall with broken bottles of orange juice scattered over the path. Miraculously, I was unhurt, crying my baby lungs out so that the convent nuns flocked to comfort me, and more importantly, my dad. He was most afraid of what he was going to tell my mum on our return. Knowing my mum's temper I think I can now understand his fears. Of course, I myself don't actually remember this happening

because I would have been about nine months old but I do recall begging my dad to retell the event time and again, to gathered company.

I was born in Hythe, a small seaside town on the south east coast of Kent. When I was three years old we all moved to a wonderful semi-detached house, separated from the sea by only a piece of waste ground. This piece of land was where I later learnt to drive, long before I was seventeen. My dad was my first instructor, the most patient teacher I have ever had. My childhood in and around this house consisted of long hot summers when I was more in the sea than out. Then cold, snowy winters brought red, chapped knees and freezing wet clothes after racing down the golf-links hill on sledges made by our dads from driftwood. In contrast, the rich kids from the big houses on the hill sped down on real toboggans, smooth and fast. When you were allowed to have a go with one of these you never experienced the sharp piercing from the odd nail that hadn't been hammered down enough, like you did on our sledges. These toboggans not only travelled like bullets through the snow but they went further, depositing you at the end of the field, precariously close to the road. That made the frozen journey even more exhilarating. Our house had three bedrooms and a big back garden. I shared the smallest room with my sister Bev who was next up from me in age. She occupied the top bunk. I was jealous of her position and sometimes, when the gales were battering the waves against the sea wall I would dream my way to sleep pretending to be in the top bunk of a big ship, being tossed and turned by the heaving ocean. We would be almost shipwrecked but then saved just in time for me to turn over and snuggle up to my teddy bear.

Our road, Theresa Road, was a cul-de-sac or in plain English, dead-end. During my early childhood it was not surfaced which meant that in the winter huge puddles appeared into which the neighbours would empty wheelbarrows of rubble and cinders that they then flattened down with a lawn roller. Although there were few cars owners in the road most houses had garages because in the sixties we were told that affluence was just around the corner. I heard this had already happened in America but I was confused because they were calling it the American Dream.

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