

THIS BOOK IS A

GIFT TO MY DAUGHTER

BY REBECCA SKINNER

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REBECCA SKINNER

TAMARA IS BORN



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'THE MOMENT A CHILD IS BORN, THE MOTHER IS ALSO BORN. SHE NEVER EXISTED BEFORE. THE WOMAN EXISTED, BUT THE MOTHER, NEVER. A MOTHER IS SOMETHING ABSOLUTELY NEW' - Rajneesh

PREFACE

'There comes a special moment in everyone's life, a moment for which that person was born. That special opportunity, when he seizes it, will fulfill his mission. A mission for which he is uniquely qualified. In that moment he finds greatness. It is his finest hour.' - Winston Churchill

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defining moment. Noun. A point at which the essential nature or character of a person, group, etc is revealed or identified. An event that typifies or determines all subsequent related occurrences.

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Some defining moments can happen so subtly, like a lightly dancing breeze, that we are hardly aware of them. Others, like wild lightning strikes, are so powerful they can take our breath away with their enormity. But, the one thing they have in common, is that they all contribute to shaping our destiny.

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The conception and birth of my daughter Tamara proved one of those zig zag paths of incredibly powerful forked lightening that determined the path of my life forever. And it was the start of my intuition.



IT IS A FINE
SEASONING FOR JOY
TO THINK OF THOSE
WE LOVE.

MOLIERE

CHAPTER ONE - MIRACLE OF LIFE

'BEFORE YOU WERE CONCEIVED I WANTED YOU
BEFORE YOU WERE BORN I LOVED YOU
BEFORE YOU WERE HERE AN HOUR I WOULD DIE FOR YOU
THIS IS THE MIRACLE OF LIFE.' - Maureen Hawkins

"Oh my God. Just get this baby out", I screamed after the millionth contraction ripped violently through my beleaguered body. I was well past controlled breathing, far beyond hot towels on my back, and during each contraction was way beyond speech. And the worst part was I was still only two centimetres dilated after what seemed like a lifetime of agony.

Though desperate for a drug free birth, I knew the time had come. An epidural was my only option to cope with this mind-blowingly painful posterior delivery. Nothing went to plan, even at the very end. But a healthy baby was the goal, even though to my exhausted and delirious brain and body I felt sure at one point that I was giving birth to a giant watermelon.

But at 10.23pm on 30 August 1984, after 21 hours of labour, my slippery little baby girl was laid on my chest and, with an overwhelming animal instinct, I began to gently lick her clean.

Though that certainly came as a surprise, it probably shouldn't have. To be truthful, my first instinctive inkling occurred around nine months before. Waking one morning, I felt decidedly different. I looked at myself in a full length mirror but nothing seemingly had changed. "Something has definitely happened to me" I announced to boyfriend Andrew but it was soon forgotten in the rush of everyday life. Then my period was a week late, my breasts excruciatingly tender. I was being violently sick.

Surely I couldn't be pregnant? That was definitely not part of the life plan. I was still half in the throes of travelling around the world and was now in Australia, the furthest I could possibly be to my homeland, England. OK, so I was living with Andrew and he was very keen for me to stay on. And, he had even asked me to marry him. But we had used several forms of contraception.

MIRACLE OF LIFE

A pregnancy test confirmed it, and I cried all the way from Niagara Park to Woy Woy where we broke the news to his family. Despite the shock, the one thing I knew right from the start was that I wanted this baby, and so did he. And something deep inside, perhaps intuition again, told me this would be the only child I would ever have.

Of course it came as a shock to everyone we knew. We hadn't known each other long and any plans I may have had to return to England obviously had to be abandoned. Andrew's parents were not impressed. They felt far too young to become grandparents, after all they were only in their early 40s and Andrew was only 20.

The one person I dreaded telling was my father, but his response was a total surprise. He was over the moon with delight and sent a telegram the moment he heard. For a medical scientist his summation of the situation was, to say the least, unusual. "There's a baby up there in the clouds that has looked down and chosen you as its parents. All my congratulations." For such a critical and judgemental father, that was not only a huge surprise, but acknowledgement that finally, I had done something right in my life. And it was something that would change the path of my destiny forever.

Perhaps I'd tempted fate by deciding to travel round the world. My close girlfriend Jane Adams when farewelling me at the airport had declared accusingly, amidst a mass dose of tears, "You'll meet someone, get married and never come back." When you're in your mid-20s, single and trying to get as far away as possible from unrequited love, I suppose that was a possibility always on the cards.

The sickness continued month after month, not helped by the fact we lived not far from an abattoir and when the wind blew in our direction, it meant none of my healthy pregnancy diet stayed down. After three months I was thinner than I'd ever been. And I thoroughly enjoyed it as I knew it wouldn't last.

My visa for Australia was running out at the end of the year and despite being pregnant, I was told I had to return to England and be sponsored back out.

MIRACLE OF LIFE

I would be four and a half months pregnant and 29 years old. A few weeks later on Andrew would turn 21 on April 1st.

I was sad none of my family wanted to come out for the big day, not even my father, who sent a taped message to be played during the speeches. But he promised to come out once the baby was born.

What we planned as a small wedding grew rapidly in guest numbers until pregnancy emotion and exhaustion culminated in a huge row with Andrew's parents, as I declared I didn't care who else they invited, as I wouldn't be there. It was the first time I saw my father-in-law-to-be cry.

Then, just weeks before the wedding, Andrew was kicked by a horse, a hazard of a farrier's job, and was rushed to hospital. The upside was it gave me the idea for a great tongue-in-cheek article that I wrote for the local paper I was working for.

With next to no money, I hired a baggy white dress and white straw hat, removing the dirty marks with a white-out stick and we bought Andrew a second-hand silk jacket in Sydney plus a hat which he swapped on the day for a very country looking cap.

The wedding was held at a picturesque horse stud on the Central Coast and I romantically arrived with my one bridesmaid, Andrew's sister Felicity, in a horse drawn carriage. The problem was the only step down was extremely steep and hard to negotiate with my, by now, enlarging bump. As I propelled myself forward in my seat, I fell like a lead weight, and more than ungracefully, into Andrew's, luckily outstretched arms.

I suspected our celebrant had been drinking, especially when he called Andrew Anthony; the photographer was hugely late so we only got one or two pictures and Andrew's mother taped tennis over the wedding video but none of that really mattered. The most important thing was my life had taken a quantum leap. I was in Australia, I was married and I was having a baby!

MIRACLE OF LIFE



March 17th, 1984 - the wedding of Rebecca and Andrew

MIRACLE OF LIFE

Over the next few months we moved to Bumble Creek Farm & Riding School, free accommodation in exchange for running a riding school. We set about creating a nursery farm, full of baby animals to amuse the children while their parents went riding.

I was still working as a journalist at the Central Coast Star and Andrew was still shoeing horses around the trail rides, but luckily his brothers Matt and Ben plus Felicity, all keen riders, were more than happy to help out. I loved the rustic setting, the early morning feeding of the animals, cooking beasts on a huge spit for the riders at the end of the day plus frequent visits to the Tall Timbers pub in Ourimbah.

Alison Veld became a close friend and confidant sharing her knowledge of child rearing and even window cleaning as my nesting instincts kicked in. Her husband Tony painted wonderful animal murals on the nursery walls while their eldest son Anton drew animal pictures on the curtains.

A second hand bassinette was bought plus plenty of frilly white and yellow bedding and baby clothes; pre-natal classes were attended and I read every book I could get my hands on about pregnancy and childbirth. A natural, drug-free birth was definitely for me.

Two weeks past my due date, I was hot, huge and horribly uncomfortable. I had endured hospital stints with toxemia of pregnancy, I had read all the novels in the house and I was desperate to hold my baby in my arms. I tried all the recommended tricks to kick off labour but even bouncing along the riding trails in our black Suzuki 4WD failed to do the trick.

So I distracted myself in the kitchen and made my first ever cheese soufflé for dinner. It was a resounding success because at 2am the next morning I was awakened by pain and as I stepped from the bed, my waters broke.

MIRACLE OF LIFE



The early stages of labour at Bumble Creek Farm before heading off to Gosford Hospital

MIRACLE OF LIFE

Andrew was, by then, awake and though I quietly tried to creep over his brothers sleeping peacefully on mattresses on the living room floor, the house was quickly abuzz with excitement.

The hospital warned of a long first labour, recommending a hot shower and a nice hot cup of tea, but the pump that brought the water up the hill from the creek had broken, yet again, and both were out of the question.

At 6am we arrived at Gosford Hospital, blissfully unaware of the following long and difficult hours ahead. But as I finally held my child, I experienced the most profound feeling that this was what I had been put on earth for, I had found my true purpose, my mission. Suddenly at one with a universally powerful life force, I was now part of the never ending circle of life and death.

After I was told to rest and my little bundle had been taken to the nursery, I became suddenly aware of the distinctive cry of my newborn, echoing somewhere in the annals of my brain and I knew I had to be with her. I rang for a nurse and asked to see my child but was told there were 32 babies crying in the nursery and I was definitely to stay put and rest. But nothing could keep me away.

Pulling the mobile drip along with me, I somehow found the nursery and went immediately up to one of the 32 crying bundles in identical bassinets. It was only much later that I looked at the name on the bassinet and realised I had instinctively found the right baby.

Stroking her tenderly, I sat for hours, sobbing uncontrollably, both for the unknown that lay ahead of me and for my own mother, whose wisdom and support I so sorely missed.

CHAPTER TWO - MOTHER'S MESSAGE

'WE NEVER KNOW THE LOVE OF A PARENT
UNTIL WE BECOME PARENTS OURSELVES '- Henry Ward Beecher

When I was very little my favourite time of day was first thing in the morning, when I would snuggle up in bed with my slumbering parents.

My mother, Dorothy, would boil a kettle next to the bed for a cup of tea and we'd talk and cuddle. My favourite stories were about when both of us were born. High blood pressure meant my mother at 44 had to have a caesarean with me, a general anaesthetic meant she forever regretted not being the first person to see and hold me.

Despite being a doctor my father, Edward (Teddy) followed the protocol of the time and waited outside the operating theatre, chain smoking cigars. He readily admitted the birth had been very frightening and at one point he had been asked to make a decision. If it came to the crunch, who did he wish to be saved? Mother or child? With the selfishness of a small child, I was always delighted when he repeatedly reported, Who to save? The baby of course.

But, like the long caesarean stitch marks across my mother's abdomen, the scars of childbirth never disappeared. She continued to be haunted by high blood pressure, and despite medication, my first life defining moment occurred a week after my 19th birthday when, out of the blue, she collapsed from a stroke and died soon after, only three years after her own mother had died. My life changed irrevocably.

Born Dorothy Louise Jopling, my mother was known as Dotty as a little girl, growing up in Italy with her brother William, mother Louisa Ellen, and father Thomas Atkinson. Her father, a chartered accountant, had been brought out from England by the company, Armstrong-Whitworth, when they set up an armaments factory for the Italian Government in Pozzuoli, outside Naples, in 1886.

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE
A DREAM TO CREATE
THE FUTURE.

VICTOR HUGO

MOTHER'S MESSAGE

Meanwhile, Louisa had gone out to Italy in 1907 as a nurse, to look after her sister Rosie, then pregnant with her first son, Valentine, Val. After helping with both Val and his brothers birth, she found her nursing talents to be in great demand as Theatre Sister at the International Hospital. At age 30 Louisa volunteered to nurse casualties of the Messina earthquake in northern Sicily, treating survivors in the open air whilst also organising food and shelter for them. The following are some reports of the disaster.

"On December 28, 1908 at 5:20 a.m. local time, a devastating earthquake occurred along the Straits of Messina between the island of Sicily and mainland Italy. Measuring between M6.7 and M7.2 on the moment magnitude scale, the Messina Earthquake, also known as the Messina-Reggio Earthquake, caused severe ground shaking throughout the region and triggered a local tsunami, with waves up to 40 feet, which struck within minutes of the earthquake."

"Many homes were completely destroyed, as many unreinforced masonry buildings collapsed. One hundred years following the 1908 earthquake, it remains the deadliest event in Europe with an estimated 60,000 to 120,000 fatalities. Rescuers searched through the rubble for weeks, and whole families were still being pulled out alive days later, but thousands remained buried there."

"The Italian navy and army responded and began searching, treating the injured, and evacuating refugees (as did every ship). Looters soon had to be shot. King Victor Emmanuel 111 and the Queen arrived. The disaster made headlines worldwide and international relief efforts were launched."

It is highly probable she was awarded The Messina Medal for nursing victims of the tragedy.

Louisa first appears in the census records in 1881 aged two, living in Islington in London and her father, Daniel Henry, gave his occupation as an Insurance Collector. Her mother was Mary Ann Georgina. By the time Louisa was 12 the family had moved to Hackney and in 1901, when she was 22, her occupation was listed as an Underclothing Assistant, presumably in a shop. This job must not have suited her as she then trained as a nurse at Holborn Union Infirmary.

MOTHER'S MESSAGE

In 1903 her sister Rosie married Henry Edwin (Harry) Gleim in England and they moved to Vomero on the Bay of Naples. Harry was working in insurance, but later teamed up with his bother-in-law, Charles, who came out to Naples a little later.

At the time of Louisa's arrival in Italy, the Gleims were holding musical evenings at their home every Sunday. Harry was a gifted pianist and they invited other friends and neighbours to join them. Louisa went along regularly and so too did another Englishman, Thomas Atkinson Jopling, who apparently had a particularly good singing voice. They also enjoyed evenings at the San Carlo Opera.

Thomas at 48 was much older than Louisa and was believed to be a confirmed bachelor. But a close friendship developed through their love of music and he proposed. They married in 1910 and the following year Louisa at the age of 33 gave birth to William with a doctor arriving in a pony and trap to assist in the birth. Dorothy was born in 1912, just one year later.

They lived in a large white house, 5 Villa Cicerone in Pozzouli, built to house Armstrong-Whitworth managers, overlooking the Bay of Naples. Life in Italy, as both my mother and her brother remembered it, was a non-stop party, even though they were both aware of the threats of German bombardment.

Dorothy and William ran around barefoot, playing with the village children in the sunshine. For two hours a day they were home schooled by Louisa at a table under a large shady plane tree in the garden. Both children were also taught to play the piano, which they adored.

Thomas had a boat, plus a sailor, Antonio, who looked after it, and he used to take his children plus their cousins and parents for picnics along the coast, to Amalfi, Sorrento and to the nearby Isle of Capri. The children were particularly enamoured with the Blue Grotto, a sea cave on the island, where sunshine passes through an overwater cavity and shines through the water, creating a stunning blue reflection illuminating the cavern. William revisited it many times as an adult and I think I still have the tiny blue pendant he brought me back from there when I was a young child.

MOTHER'S MESSAGE



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Louisa Jopling when she was a young lady.

Louisa and Thomas Atkinson Jopling with Dorothy as a baby.

MOTHER'S MESSAGE



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A family portrait with Dorothy and William when young in Italy.

MOTHER'S MESSAGE

Another one of Louisa's brothers, also named William, came to Italy for a visit. He was a gifted artist and had painted a picture of Louisa in her nursing uniform before she went to Naples. He painted another one of little William aged around three during his visit and the original painting included two donkeys which used to carry small barrels of wine up to Villa Cicerone. But tragedy struck back in England when he fell out of a boat and drowned in the upper reaches of the River Thames, while collecting stones for a rockery.

After the First World War, when William was eight and Dorothy, seven, their father retired, and the family decided to return to England. It was just before Mussolini came to power as leader of the National Fascist Party, but his strength was growing and he strongly opposed foreigners owning property in Italy. Rosie and Harry stayed on for a couple of years, enrolling Val and Arthur into the International School in Naples, but returned to Muswell Hill in North London once Mussolini's rule began in 1922.

Also in Italy at the time was Louisa's brother Charles (Charlie), who she had brought back on the Armstrong-Whitworth coal ship on one of her visits home, to nurse back to health in recuperative sunshine, as he was making a slow recovery from TB of one hip. Once recovered, he set up a business exporting gloves and leather goods, married Vera Frederique Kuntzler, and had two sons, Felix and Roger, both born in Naples.

However, by now the Jopling family had bought a house in High Barnett in London at 121 Leicester Road. At William's first Latin class at New Barnett School the headmaster, Mr Walker, told him to stand up and translate some Latin. Though he'd never learnt any Latin his fluency in Italian luckily got him through. Dorothy, meanwhile, attended the Girls Grammar School at High Barnett and at age 11 William became a pupil of Queen Elizabeth Grammar.

MOTHER'S MESSAGE



When William was 13 and Dorothy 12, their father suffered a heart attack. My mother used to tell me the story about how she ran into the sitting room, quite unaware of what had happened, and swore she saw angels rising into the air. Apparently she matter-of-factly asked her mother, "Have the angels come for Daddy?"

Perhaps the angels were a little early, or maybe it was just the lace curtains blowing in the breeze, but the fact was her father was taken to hospital where he died the following month.

MOTHER'S MESSAGE

It couldn't have been easy for Louisa bringing up her children alone, but she had good nursing skills plus plenty of experience as the eldest sister to a brood of siblings. She was the second eldest of 12 Franks children and her siblings swelled to 13 when her parents adopted another girl. In chronological order her biological siblings were Daniel, (then Louisa), Rosina Rosie, Daisy, Herbert, May, William, Lily, Charles, Arthur, Ernest and Leslie.

Dorothy did well at school and left with her school certificate, returning to Naples to stay with Charlie and Vera to work as a nanny to Felix. Meanwhile William had trained as a doctor and fallen in love with Mary Harvey and the day after their wedding they sailed for Rhodesia (now known as Zimbabwe) where he was going to work.

William was often away tending to the sick and researching into tropical diseases, particularly leprosy, and it proved a lonely time for his new young wife. So she would have been pleased that Louisa plus Dorothy, after her stint in Naples, went out and stayed with them in Rhodesia.

I remember the colourful stories my mother told of this time. How people would sit beside the road, sometimes for days, waiting for the doctor to drive past. I was particularly impressed to hear about one man who was in excruciating pain and my mother watched as William pulled out the offending teeth, minus any form of pain relief. One night, when their jeep broke down, they had to sleep in the vehicle and my mother awoke to discover a snake happily curled around the steering wheel.

Apparently she became quite enamoured with an English man with red hair that she met in Rhodesia, but Louisa was keen to divert her interest and they returned home to London.

MOTHER'S MESSAGE

Dorothy and William had clearly both inherited the family's musical talent. William began composing music and Dorothy was so gifted that she was offered a place at a prestigious music college to train as a concert pianist. But Louisa pleaded with her not to leave her and not to go. And my mother, being the dutiful daughter that she was, gave up the opportunity. But I always felt she regretted it.

Mary went on to produce a brood of children: Daphne Lou, Mark, David and Richard. Dorothy met Robert Turner who was working for the War Office, and they fell in love, and married. She got pregnant very quickly and her labour was terrifying as it was during the war and the house next door was being bombed. Her baby was stillborn. But soon after she fell pregnant again and nine months later John was born.

She told me how Robert spent plenty of money on his hand made shoes and his golf, but nothing on her and baby, John. She felt they were at the very bottom of his list of priorities. As a result they divorced when John was only a few months old. My mother used to tell me how desolate she felt as well as how desperate for money she was at the time. She and John were living in the garage of someones home and one day, when she was as low as she could go, a letter arrived in the post from Louisa containing money. The timing, she admitted, could not have been better.

After nine years in Rhodesia, William, Mary and their children returned to London and a big welcome home party was organised. They invited old friends of William's from medical school, Hilary Nusbaum who was also his best friend from school, plus Teddy Renbourn. Of course Dorothy was there too.

Teddy was immediately struck by Dorothy and became so enamoured that he accusingly asked William, "Where have you been hiding her?"

Teddy was handsome, charming, funny and very passionate and my mother, understandably, fell for his obvious charms.

CHAPTER THREE - FAIRIES AND FAMILY

BUTTERCUPS IN THE SUNSHINE
LOOK LIKE LITTLE CUPS OF GOLD.
PERHAPS THE FAERIES COME TO DRINK
THE RAINDROPS THAT THEY HOLD.
.- Elizabeth T. Dillingham, A Faery Song

I so wish I remember more of Granny Joplings stories. But I do remember loving hearing about her life when I stayed overnight sharing her double bed (and the potty underneath it!) when my parents went out, as she lived in the cottage adjoining St Catherines House.

The ablution facilities were, even to a small child very primitive, as Granny cut up newspaper into squares and tied it up with string to be used in the toilet! My brother John, being 12 years older, has better memories of our maternal grandmothers siblings. He remembers her eldest brother, Dan, who was an orchestral violinist and music teacher and we think, a priest.

John says, "I can remember his appearance (at the Joplings house), 121 Leicester Road, and he made quite an impression. He had a characterful face craggy and boozy looking. Granny made a fuss of him. Oh yes...he was dressed in the long grey robes of a priest, drank Granny's sherry and played the cello."

According to the family tree he was married with ten children, so am guessing if he was a priest, his religion must have been Church of England.

I well remember driving with my mother to Margate to drop my grandmother off at her sister Mays house for holidays. And I remember being devastated when Granny copied Mays short permed hairstyle. Until then she had wonderfully long white hair which I used to love to brush when I was small. I used to tease her that she looked like Snow White, but only from the back!

I also loved playing the board game Going to London with her on her round brass table, which I inherited and continue to treasure.

FAIRIES AND FAMILY



My mother, pregnant with me, standing on the circular lawn which surrounded the Redwood tree in front of St Catherines.

FAIRIES AND FAMILY

There are so many happy memories of St Catherines, particularly the occasional sunny summer breakfasts at the outside table on the paved area between our adjoining houses. But at night it was a different story. Often John would take me on his 'soldiers' as shoulders was far too hard to say, in the darkness to bring in the coal for the kitchen boiler. It was there that he would terrify me with scary stories of Bubba Yaga, the fearsome witch of Russian folklore, as he would carry me round the ominously rustling rhododendron bushes.

I both loved, and hated, the bedtime stories John would tell me. Some were so terrifying that I couldn't sleep. Others were magical tales woven around our lives and those of our mystical namesakes, Princess Beckeo and Sir John-a-Lot. There were plenty of castles, dramatic duels and romantic rescues, but John would always stop at the most exciting part, and dash unceremoniously out of my room, leaving me begging for more. One terrifying occasion I've never forgiven him for was when he hid in my wardrobe and after I'd been tucked up and kissed goodnight, he leapt out at me scaring me senseless. I remember being delighted that my violent screams resulted in him receiving a severe scolding by my father.

Though John's bedroom was on the same upstairs level as my parents and mine, he decorated a special room in the attic with fishing nets and seafaring memorabilia where he would go with his friends. One, Ivor Woods or 'Woodsy' was a regular visitor. I loved to interrupt and annoy them, I guess to get my own back for John's merciless teasing. Our cousin, John Maurice, son of my fathers sister Sylvia, also used to visit us and both he and John apparently learnt to drive on the circular St Catherine's driveway.

Every Saturday was a family shopping expedition into Camberley. I was always given the choice: a drink and cakes with Granny at Betty Brown's tea shop; traipsing round the music shops with John who would always buy me some wine gums; or supermarket shopping with my parents, with the possibility of being bought a small toy. I enjoyed them all and was shocked to hear many years later that Betty Brown's had been closed down as it was operating as a brothel! Granny would have turned in her grave.

FAIRIES AND FAMILY

We had wonderful family holidays when Granny would come too. On one occasion both grandmothers were invited. On a skiing trip when I was two and a half I remember the joy of planting sticks in the snow with my father.

But I must have still needed afternoon naps because I remember falling asleep being piggy backed by John as we walked around the snow-covered village. We always stopped for afternoon tea and cakes in cosy cafes, and I distinctly remember being devastated as I had, yet again, slept through the much anticipated occasion.

I also loved family visits. Auntie Mary and Uncle Willie would come almost every Sunday and spend time with both Granny and us. As I grew up Uncle Willie would call me 'his little fish' as I loved to swim.

There were less frequent visits from my father's sisters and their husbands. And I have only vague recollections of my father's mother Sarah visiting as she died when I was four. I remember her as being very tall and stout. I knew her as my nana from London but my baby name for her, Nana Lutty, stuck. When visitors came we used the big sitting room and the large formal dining room so it always felt like a glamorous, grown-up occasion.

Having mastered sliding backwards down the long bannisters of our sweeping staircase, my main aim in life was to jump down one entire section of the stairs. There were 20 to master. First four steps, then eight, and I'd land with a bang, skidding across the hall on the Indian silk rug, much to the annoyance of my father!

Another game was playing hide and seek around the giant Redwood tree in the middle of the large grass circle at the front of the house. Daffodils would appear under the tree in spring, while nut and fruit trees exploded in a frenzy of blossom.

I loved to make daisy chains and hold buttercups under my chin, to see if I liked butter! In May around my birthday there were always armfuls of bluebells to pick in the woods.

FAIRIES AND FAMILY



A high, uneven stone wall surrounded the grass circle and each afternoon, when my father arrived home from work, I would run to the garage to meet him and he would patiently hold my hand as, one by one, I negotiated the wobbly stones back to the house.

There was a proper swing in the garden where my birthday parties were held and my little friends and I would compete to see who was wearing the most petticoats. In the rhododendron bushes there were a maze of secret passageway and, until it got overgrown, a grass tennis court and summer house down one of the many leafy pathways. The two and a half acres, bounded by a pig farm on one side, and fields with horses on the other, was only limited by my creative imagination.

There were so many hiding places where I could disappear into make believe. A forked tree near the garage was my sailing ship (and from there spied for hours on the neighbour's son's wedding reception); hidden beneath the low branches of a tree by the road, was my secret look out.

FAIRIES AND FAMILY



Some parts of the garden were fairy glens glittering in the morning dew, others forbidden forests where wicked witches would roam. The normally uneventful garage became a place of horror when, one day, my fathers home-made ginger beer caused a terrifying explosion. But the most exciting part of the garden was the sealed up secret passageway hidden in a deep thicket complete with a badgers' set. The underground passage apparently led from a church in the village right into our garden, an escape route for persecuted congregations.

Another special spot, past the tennis court, far away from the house, was where a giant beach tree presided like a powerful god over a deep sea of golden autumn leaves. From one of the lower branches John had made a rope swing with a seat made from a thick branch of wood. If you shut your eyes tight and made the swing go as high as you could into the branches, you could escape to any magical place you wished.

One day my mother and I were enjoying a stroll past the beach tree with my precious second birthday present, our Labrador, Binker. His favourite trick when young was giving me huge red welts all over my body (by mistake I'm sure)

FAIRIES AND FAMILY

with his sharp new claws. Young and excitable, he loved nothing more than carrying a large piece of wood in his mouth.

Spotting the swing he leapt up to grab the wooden seat, falling backwards into the deep leaves, screaming out in pain. One of his legs was hanging at a very strange angle. While my mother nursed the suffering pup, I was despatched to Granny's house to ask her to summon the alarm.

But Granny was by then deaf and distracted and wouldn't listen to my pleas for help, instead making me sit down for a nice cup of tea and a slice of her favourite rainbow cake. My mother was forced to give up waiting and appeared, dog in arms, none too happy to find a tea party in progress.

Binker was taken to the vet and his leg securely plastered. But that night the naughty dog chewed all the plaster off, so had to be returned to the vet for a re-plaster. But when he chewed it off again, my father took the situation in hand, plastering it himself, so securely even Binker's sharp baby teeth could not destroy his handiwork.

Binker's initiation into our family had not been easy. Billiecat, a gift for my first birthday, was thought to be male until, the day Binker arrived, she was discovered in the greenhouse behaving extremely oddly. First, poor Binker was scratched to within an inch of his life so he had to be put in the bath and soaked in Dettol, then we noticed Billiecat had made a little nest and in it were an assortment of furry squeaking kittens.

Billiecat was my baby and my constant companion. Often I would follow her on her morning strolls, fascinated as she stalked unsuspecting moles, voles or little birds. Other times I would dress her in my doll's clothes and secure her in my toy pushchair and take her for walks while Binker bounded along beside us. Walks past the boundaries of our garden were always exciting. Binker would find the largest stick (or tree) he could find and run along behind us, knocking us, or other innocent walkers, flying with his lethal weapon.

FAIRIES AND FAMILY

BINKER

Binker - what I call him - is a secret of my own,
And Binker is the reason why I never feel alone.
Playing in the nursery, sitting on the stair,
Whatever I am busy at, Binker will be there.

Oh, Daddy is clever, he's a clever sort of man,
And Mummy is the best since the world began,
And Nanny is Nanny, and I call her Nan.

But they can't See Binker.

Binker's always talking, cos I'm teaching him to speak.
He sometimes likes to do it in a funny sort of squeak,
And he sometimes likes to do it in a hoodling sort of roar.
And I have to do it for him cos his throat is rather sore.

Oh, Daddy is clever, he's a clever sort of man,
And Mummy knows all that anybody can,
And Nanny is Nanny, and I call her Nan.

But they don't know Binker.

Well I'm very fond of Daddy, but he hasn't time to play,
And I'm very fond of Mummy, but she sometimes goes away,
And I'm often cross with Nanny when she wants to brush my hair.
But Binker's always Binker, and is certain to be there.

- AA Milne, from Now We Are Six

FAIRIES AND FAMILY



Down St Catherines Road were vast public woodlands, where we would discover a variety of circular fairy picnic spots, vacated by the wood nymphs, of course, only seconds before our arrival.

At the top of St Catherines Road was an area of bleak mountainous army land, where official exercises were sometimes carried out, which I lovingly called the Island Desert. My favourite walks were with John when he'd fill my mind with wondrous stories of knights and battles, sieges and rescues.

FAIRIES AND FAMILY

The highlight was balancing precariously as I walked along a fallen down tree, which I firmly believed was inhabited by fairies.

From a baby seat on the back of my mother's bicycle, we progressed to a car with canvas roof and sides. Negotiating the new mini roundabout in Frimley Green, I found myself spun from the car and splattered on the tarmac. Hideously embarrassed, my mother yanked me back into the passenger seat and made me promise not to tell a soul what had happened. Alas, the gossip lady who ran the chemist shop, had the word around the village before we'd even made it back home. Once I had mastered my own bicycle John and I would cycle round the Island Desert and sometimes even further afield, past the boys home and playing fields, into the housing estate leading to Frimley.

I remember our, now so old fashioned, phone. We would pick up the receiver and a lady would answer and ask what number we wanted to be connected to. If the phone rang, I always had to say, "Hello, this is Deepcut 5233" and it took quite a few years before the system became automated. But my mother remembered the very first radio which she said looked like three pieces of coal in a box.

My father had a cine camera and projector and he would often play a movie about kittens playing with balls of wool and Charlie Chaplin films to amuse me and my friends. He also recorded many cine films of me growing up as well as holidays, and I've always been sad that I never inherited them.

I remember our first television and though it was black and white I thought it a miraculous invention. Dr Who was my favourite show but when the terrifying daleks came on, my father would stand and shield me from the screen. We only had two channels and when John was a regular performer playing the guitar on the 'Dorris Henderson Show,' we used to go and watch it at the Bartlett's house as their television could pick up more channels!

Though I loved our house and garden, I was aware how isolated we were, and for much of my childhood wished we lived in a housing estate, overflowing with children I could play with.

FAIRIES AND FAMILY



My father and I by the St Catherines sign

FAIRIES AND FAMILY

The only nearby children in St Catherines Road were the Fergusson boys opposite, Jonathan and Alastair, whose father was a commercial pilot, and they also owned an adjoining chicken farm. Their grandmother lived with them and she and my grandmother were close friends.

Though my mother tried her hardest, inviting the boys one at a time to play and for Sunday lunch, they were always far too boisterous for me. One day she served up roast chicken and only then realised that both boys refused to eat chicken for obvious reasons. She saved the day by announcing it certainly wasn't chicken, it was in fact 'widgen'.

But the final straw with the boys came when I was playing at their house and they lured me into a deep pit of watery chicken manure. Convinced I was going to drown, the more I screamed, the more they laughed and when they finally pulled me out, I was a dripping, stinking, horribly embarrassed mess.

My favourite playtimes were round at Elm Cottage on the village green. Home to the Bartlett family, our local doctor Calum and his wonderful wife, Alice. Michael was their oldest son, followed by Catriona, who I called Tri, aged around six months younger than me. Then Sam, Calum-Ian and Joanne followed. It was always fun and raucous and I adored sleeping over.

Alice would always press a sixpence into our hands and tell us to go to the Mons, the sweetshop round the corner, so there was always a sugar-filled midnight feast. I was always disappointed when Triona refused to sleep over at my house as she always said it scared her.

The worst visit I ever made to the Bartlett's house was after I'd fallen through the French doors into our little sitting room, trying to surprise John who had been playing the piano.

FAIRIES AND FAMILY



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Baby Becca is happy to share her mum's headscarf!

FAIRIES AND FAMILY

The glass cut into my left wrist, creating a massive spurt of blood. Quickly wrapping the wrist in the first thing that came to hand, a huge kitchen towel, my mother drove me at high speed to the Bartletts. Once they realised we weren't there for a social visit, Calum calmly took us into his little surgery where he examined the damage.

Because of the danger of losing the use of my hand, he took us to the nearby hospital, where he proceeded to stitch up the jagged cut. I remember the pain being intense and my mother trying to distract me by asking what presents I would like for being so brave. I was four years old and still have the scar of the five stitches he gave me.

As a result I was subsequently rewarded with a doll which walked, talked and wet itself plus my very own desk. But what thrilled me most was John's horror upon discovering a large trail of blood through the house. So worried was he that he ran a good half hour from our house to the Bartletts to ensure I was all right. I was thrilled to realise how much he loved me..

I was three when I went to Lyndhurst School in Camberley and the highlight of my first couple of years was when I was chosen to take part in the school's Christmas play. My only words required were, What is your wish my Lord? However, even these proved too hard as at rehearsals I kept asking, What is my wish, your Lord?

As a result I was given the non-speaking part of a baby angel which was far preferable as it meant I could wear a gorgeous pink fairy dress complete with silver stars. Apparently my father, watching the performance from his seat, nearly swallowed his cigar, when I danced onto the stage

FAIRIES AND FAMILY



On holiday in Spain dressed up in a torreador's cape

FAIRIES AND FAMILY

.Oddly enough, in my mid-20s I was telling the story to a group of people in a local pub and lo and behold, one of the listeners was the girl who stepped in to take my place, as she had proved word perfect!

Christmas was always a time of wild excitement and, of course, even more toys. One year we had visitors so John shared my bedroom, which I thought was just wonderful until I woke to discover a huge bulging pillow case at the bottom of my bed, and nothing at the bottom of poor Johns. Santa had only left him a measly envelope bulging with money and I felt bereft for him all day.

But with church to go to, then home to a huge fire burning in the big sitting room grate, the soft tinkling of the festive angel chimes and a massive table groaning with food, crackers and threepenny bits in the Christmas pud, there were plenty of distractions.

A knock on the door from carol singers, especially in the snow, was magical, as was watching the intricate snowflakes fall outside my bedroom window. One year we were totally snowed in so my mother and I had to walk all the way to church, which I thought was spectacular.

I could always tell if snow had fallen overnight as the normal sounds of morning were muffled and ripping open my curtains to discover a white wonderland outside was always a dream come true.

Every New Years Eve or Hogmanay as the Scottish Bartletts used to call it the family would stage a huge party at their home that would culminate just before midnight. Then Calum would lead the guests out onto the village green where we would follow him as he played the bagpipes.

People would run out of their homes to take part as we all joined hands and on the stroke of midnight, in true Scottish tradition, we would give a rousing performance of Auld Lang Syne.

CHAPTER FOUR - CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY

FOR DEATH IS BUT A PASSING PHASE OF LIFE;
A CHANGE OF DRESS, A DISROBING;
A BIRTH INTO THE UNBORN AGAIN;
A COMMENCING WHERE WE ENDED;
A STARTING WHERE WE STOPPED TO REST;
A CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY;
A GIVING UP OF SOMETHING, TO POSSESS ALL THINGS.
THE END OF THE UNREAL, THE BEGINNING OF THE REAL.

-Edwin Leibfreed, The Song of the Soul

Growing up, my mother was a constant in my life. She was the nurturer and the peacekeeper. Though I remember so fondly my father playing with me as a small child, as I grew up it became harder and harder to please him.

He was highly critical and extremely domineering. He was also highly critical of others, never believing anyone else could live up to his hugely high standards, and as a result in later years had few friends, relying totally on my mother for company. Despite her giving nature, sometimes I know she found this very difficult and when he was at home, she had no time for herself.

But anyone who remembered him when he was young always commented on his sense of humour and sociable personality. As I got older I found his sudden changes from dour or angry to life of the party, to be quite incongruous. And sometimes, when he had a few drinks, downright embarrassing.

I clearly remember his secret handshake that was always accompanied by the question, "How dyou, ger-nu?" It worked well when I was young but jarred as I got older.

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY

I also remember all his Yiddish sayings: anyone clumsy or inept he called a shlemiel; anyone making small talk that big-noted themselves he called a schmooze and anyone displaying overly sentimental behaviour he called a schmaltz. And he always called backsides, tuches.

When I was young he would often pat my mothers tuche and pull her onto his lap, which made me feel extremely uncomfortable.

If I'd been born a boy I would have been brought up in the Jewish faith. I often wish I had been as I found the Jewish side of the family fascinating: the Feasts of the Passover where everyone would wish each other Mazel Tov, or good luck; the Bar Mitzvahs the celebrations when the boys came of age.

My mother was always the sociable one, who brought the families together. But as I got older, family visits petered off. And after my mother died, he became quite reclusive.

My father was born in 1906 in Poland and never spoke much about his childhood or what life was like growing up as the eldest son amongst three sisters, Rose, Sylvia and Muriel.

I know his grandfather lived in Russia and his father, Marcus Renbom was one of a twin, and had one sister who settled in Baltimore in the US and another who lived in London.

Marcus was a White Russian, though my father used to say his family were Polish Jews. It seems anyone from the area of Belarus could claim to be a White Russian as Belaya Rus translates into White Russia, now an independent country.

Coincidentally, when I worked my passage on a cruiseship from Sydney to Southampton, it was the Russian Belorussiya. But White Russian also referred to the Russian émigrés of 1917-20, known as the white émigrés, as many were part of the White Movement which fought against the Red Guard the Bolsheviks.



CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY



The term is also often broadly applied to anyone who may have left the country due to the change in regimes, with between 900,000 and two million Russians leaving between 1917 to 1920, just before the Revolution began. Marcus appears to fall into this latter category since he escaped Russia apparently by getting his toes broken (probably by his own hand) in order to avoid the war.

When Marcus left Russia he settled in Plonsk in Poland, which was originally part of the Russian Empire, and set up as a jeweller and watchmaker, and there he met and married Sarah Shiman.

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY

When the First World War was imminent Marcus and Sarah moved to London with their two young children, Edward and Rose. An older daughter had died at the age of five from pneumonia.

Sarah's two brothers, Abraham and Jack and sister Jessie, plus her mother Gertrude, also moved to the UK. My brother John remembers that Jack was the bachelor rake of the family!

Teddy and Rose were very close growing up, after all there was only a two year age gap between them, but because she had already lost one daughter, Sarah was always very protective of Rose. As a result, she was badly spoiled and what resulted, so her sisters said, was a very bad temper!

Marcus set up a new jewellery business in Islington and the family, soon joined by two more daughters, Sylvia and Muriel, lived above the shop.

As the children grew, Teddy was given his own bed sitting room on the first floor. During their teenage years Teddy and Sylvia became closer and used to accompany each other to dances. Both also loved biology.

Sylvia particularly enjoyed dissecting frogs and both dreamed of becoming doctors. Teddy bought himself a skeleton and his favourite use of it was scaring his sisters!

Teddy was always very clever, and I suspect, being the only boy, was encouraged in his studies. But he told me his father refused to pay for his medical training, so he tutored younger students to pay his fees. He gained an honours degree in physiology before entering medicine. Then he won a bursary to Barts, St Bartholomews Hospital, where he made several friends. One was William Jopling, another was Williams best friend Hilary Nusbaum whose Jewish mother had been imprisoned during a pogrom, a violent riot that killed many Jews.

Once qualified Teddys first job was in a Harley Street medical practice. It was around this time he changed his surname by deed poll to Renbourn.

DO NOT GO WHERE
THE PATH MAY
LEAD. GO INSTEAD
WHERE THERE IS NO
PATH AND LEAVE
A TRAIL.

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY



My father in his military uniform

IF YOU LOOK DEEPLY
INTO THE PALM OF YOUR
HAND, YOU WILL SEE
YOUR PARENTS AND ALL
GENERATIONS OF YOUR
ANCESTORS. ALL OF
THEM ARE ALIVE IN THIS
MOMENT. EACH IS
PRESENT IN YOUR BODY.
YOU ARE THE
CONTINUATION OF EACH
OF THESE PEOPLE.

THICH NHAT HANH, VIETNAMESE MONK, ACTIVIST AND WRITER

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY

This is the extract from the Supreme Court of the day.

NOTICE is hereby given that by a deed poll dated the 20th day of December 1940 and duly enrolled in the Supreme Court of Judicature on the 15th day of January 1941.

EDWARD TOBIAS RENBOURN M.D. of 26, Welbeck Street, London W.1 at present residing at Botany Bay Farm Weston near Hitchin in the county of Hertford, Medical Practitioner lately called Edward Tobias Renbom and sometime called Tobias Renbaum known as Tobias Renbom a naturalised British subject renounced and abandoned the use of his said names of Edward Tobias Renbom otherwise Tobias Renbaum otherwise Tobias Renbom and in lieu thereof assumed the name of Edward Tobias Renbourn.

Dated this Fifth day of January 1941. EDGAR DUCHIN, 37, Bedford Row, W.C.1., (082) Solicitor for the said Edward Tobias Renbourn.

His first marriage, when he was still a student was in 1932, to a girl called Musia Alexandra De Bouk, an artist and another White Russian, whose father was a doctor who lived in Golders Green. After a traditional Jewish wedding they got a flat together in Sloane Square.

At the outbreak of World War 11 Teddy became a Major in the Royal Army Medical Corps and served in the Middle East and Far East. He returned on leave, without letting anyone know, and found Musia with another man. That led to divorce.

Returning to duty, no doubt broken hearted, he worked in a variety of operational research fields, concerned in particular with problems relating to the efficiency of the fighting soldier in respect to his complex weapons, equipment, rations and clothing.



CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY

A great friend made during that time was Lt Col Alexander (Sandy) Reid who was involved in research into jungle and mountain conditions of man pack wireless sets and speech intelligibility. That friendship continued for the rest of Sandy's life.

Then Teddy's father Marcus had a heart attack at the age of 58 and Teddy of course returned for the funeral.

Two years later Teddy met a model and they married, but the family apparently didn't approve and the marriage only lasted less than a year. My father told me that they lived with his mother, which put an undue strain on their relationship.

Though I am not aware of him being involved in any direct combat during his wartime service, I know he treated many wounded soldiers. But what happened during the war, and at his hometown, Plonsk, must have devastated him.

At the outbreak of World War II there were about 6,000 Jews in Plonsk, but others estimated 8,200. The German army occupied the town on September 3rd 1939. Some Jewish men were sent to the forced-labour camp of Nosarzewo, and Jewish women to the forced-labour camp in Spierc. Few of them survived.

A closed ghetto was established in May 1941. The Jewish Community was liquidated when 12,000 Jews from Plonsk and the vicinity were sent to Auschwitz..

After the war he met and married my mother Dorothy. According to my father, John was around six when they met and was constantly asking him, "When are you going to marry my mother?"

Following periods as a lecturer in Applied Physiology at the London School of Hygiene, Teddy joined the Ministry of Defence, directing the Army Personnel Research Establishment (ARPE) at Farnborough and bought St Catherines House in Frimley Green in order to live close by.

My grandmother bought the adjoining cottage. The wedding took place when John was seven.

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY

According to my aunts, my mother was very loving and affectionate and linked the family together making a habit of phoning them all up every Saturday night. John Maurice remembers, "Your mother was one of the most beautiful people I have ever met. She was beautiful in every way."

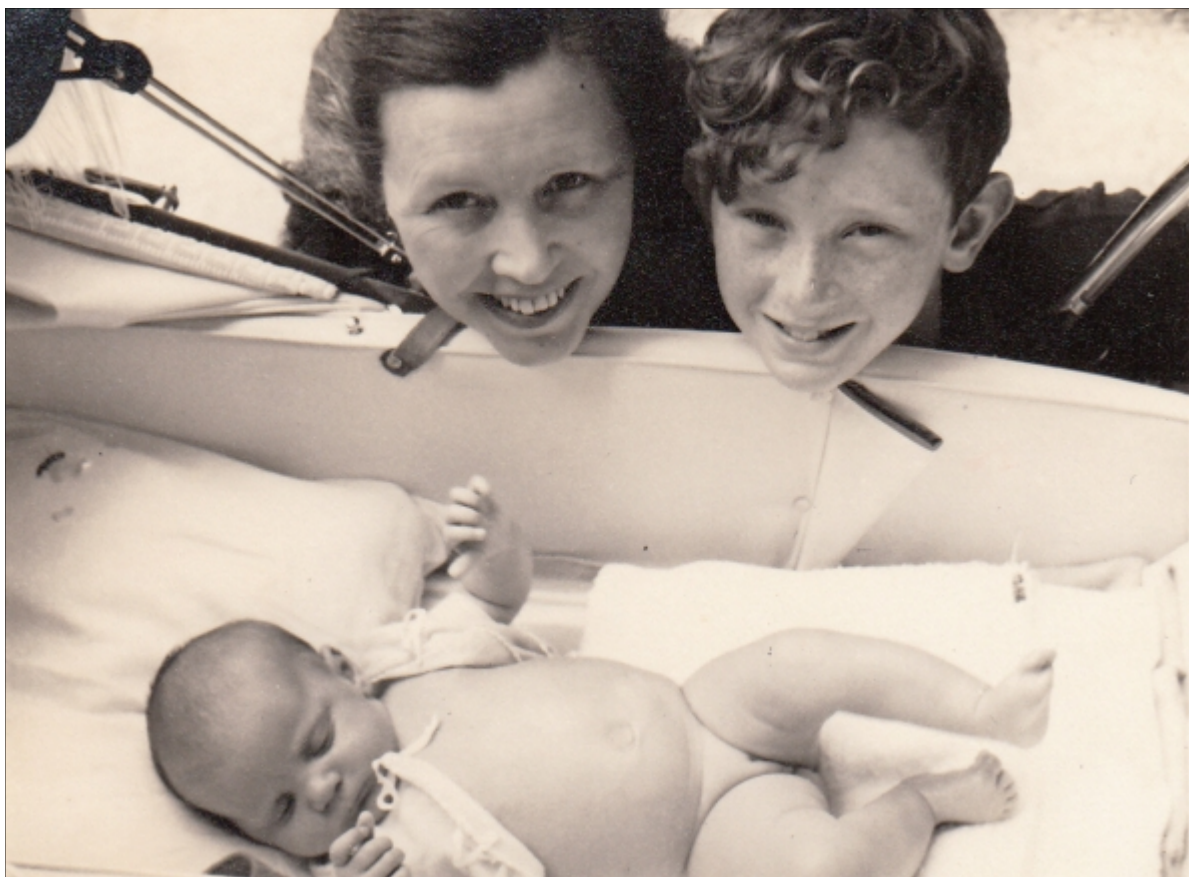
.He built up a research team concerned with various facets of military ergonomics. The team included textile technologist, applied physicists, statisticians, applied physiologists, medial hygienists and experiential psychologists. Principal Scientific Officer was his great friend, Sandy Reid, who worked as part of that team for more than 20 years.

Sandy's son Gavin said, "They subsequently published a number of papers together, in the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps and the Journal of Physiology. I best remember Teddy (or Uncle Teddy as I called him) for his publication of The Life and Death of the Solar Topi: a little known, but intriguing classic, which was commended in the academic journal Western Folklore for its historical insights (The Wrong Topi, by De Caro and Jordan, 1984)."

Gavin said, "Your father was indeed a remarkable man, and most memorable in terms of intellect, wit and sociability. Mainly what I have in memories of your father are: events (e.g. parties at your lovely house); occurrences (e.g. our family borrowing your beautiful green Daimler); and advice (e.g. especially to my late sister Margaret, who was often in a pickle, and benefitted greatly from Teddy's wisdom). He was the first author I knew in person; and the first person to contact me when my father died."

So secret was their research work that on the odd occasion when my mother was sick and my father had to take me to work with him, he would have to leave me at the sentry box with the guard on the gate as I was not allowed into any of the buildings!

Growing up I remember my father ensconced behind his desk, writing and reading for what seemed like endless hours. I was not allowed to disturb him.





TURN YOUR FACE TO THE
SUN AND THE SHADOWS
WILL
FALL BEHIND YOU.

MAORI PROVERB

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY



There were always excuses from my mother for his outbursts of temper. "He's such a brilliant man." "He's very busy with important work." And her frequent warnings, "Be very quiet," and "Don't answer him back." And occasionally, when I'd been naughty it would be, "Wait until your father gets home. Then you'll be punished." And on quite a few occasions the punishment was a hard smacking.

One day they painted their bedroom and I thought how sad it was that it looked so plain. So I took my crayons and drew what I thought were lovely pictures all over the walls. I must have been very young at the time because I remember feeling so confused when I was punished for something I thought they'd love!

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY

Of course later on, I realised that my father was writing a variety of scientific papers, which were indeed very important, so much so that many can still be found on the internet, nearly 20 years after his death.

My father's favourite outings were to the Officers Club in Farnborough where he was a member. We often went for curry lunches on Sundays. When young I was sent off to play with other children in a separate room, which I mostly hated, but when older I was allowed to join them for bowls of curry and plenty of delicious side dishes. Sometimes my parents would go for a pint to their favourite pub in Frimley, The White Hart, and I would have to sit outside in the car with a bag of Smiths crisps, that in those days came with separate salt in a tiny blue bag. Or in summertime if I was lucky, a choc ice from the machine outside the pub.

At the age of 60 when I was aged around 11, he retired from the Ministry of Defence and decided to become a psychiatrist. This required doing the equivalent of an internship at Brookwood Mental Hospital, often working multiple shifts there. My mother and I would visit him for dinner at weekends if we hadn't we would hardly ever have seen him.

During this time my mother, a trained nursery school teacher in music and movement, was working with Alice Bartlett at the nursery school which was set up in their home at Elm Cottage on Frimley Green. In school holidays I would go in with her and was always amazed how she could concentrate with all the noise and excitement of so many small children.

Apart from a passion for the piano, my mother also loved botany and knew the names of every flower, plant and tree. She was the one who taught me that if I got touched by a stinging nettle (which really does give a sting), to rub the area with a dock leaf, often growing nearby. I so loved spending time with her especially in the outdoors. She would play 'pooh sticks' with me by the stream in the garden, which in later years became polluted from the pig farm next door. In the days of swill-fed pigs, she would gather the potato peelings and organic waste in the large pocket of her apron and we would go and throw it all to the pigs.

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY



One day her engagement ring slipped off with the peelings and she was devastated. But obviously she was not meant to be parted from it as around a year later, when throwing the pigs scraps out again, she noticed something glinting in the sunlight and discovered her missing ring.

John adored music, and though he was a great pianist was desperate to learn the guitar. Thank goodness for our grandmother, who bought him his first one. But in those days John was enduring the worst of my fathers bad temper and criticism. He did well at school but moved of home as soon as he could, going to Kingston College of Art. The UK folk scene was just emerging and his musical career with it. He met Judy at college and I remember the huge row when her parents came to the house to discuss the fact that she was pregnant. A Registry Office wedding swiftly followed, along with the birth of Joel and later Jessie. But my mother was thrilled and adored her grandchildren.

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY

When I failed the 11+ exam and was therefore not entitled to go to a selective grammar school, my grandmother stepped in and offered to pay for me to attend a private school. I distinctly remember the abject misery when I learnt of my failure and was so desolate my teacher, Mrs Armstrong, took me in her arms onto her lap and cuddled me until I could stop crying.

I was sent to Farnborough Hill Convent College, a school for both borders and day girls which I never really enjoyed. But academically I did improve, passing 13 OLevels when the average was eight. I did enjoy drama, art and English and school concert performances were always a highlight. But when I told the school careers officer that I wanted to be a journalist, I was told, 'Nice gels don't do that'. And my father agreed. So I had no idea what my working future might hold.

By the time I turned 13, I was, according to my father, very difficult. One reason may have been that I had my first boyfriend, Joe Muskett, who was working at the pig farm, which was where I first set eyes on him. He was three years older than I and to me, very handsome. But my father banned me from seeing him so we would leave each other secret love letters in a hollow tree in the garden and meet up whenever I could sneak out of the house. It was terribly romantic, that is until my so called best friend spilled the beans. I never forgave her for her betrayal.

By the time I was 15 we were allowed to see each other under supervision, later I was allowed to attend folk clubs with him and eventually we lived together in Guildford after I'd left home and was working at the Surrey Daily Advertiser. Our relationship lasted until I was 22.

My grandmother was, by now, suffering from dementia and was living at Brookwood Hospital. My mother was often in tears after our visits to her as she often didn't recognise us. When I was 16 she died and my poor mother was bereft. My father wasn't prepared to take over her payments to keep me at school, but I was more than happy to leave at 16 and go to Farnborough Technical College to do shorthand, typing and English Language A Level.

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY

During this time my parents spent every evening at the kitchen table where my father would dictate, and my mother would type on an old manual typewriter. This was how his book, *Physiology and Hygiene in Materials and Clothing* was painstakingly created, based on his research with the Ministry of Defence.

A little later William and Teddy decided to write a book together enlarging on Williams book, *Advice to Travellers Abroad*. But the liaison proved disastrous with both of them claiming the other had re-written their work and so furious were they that it caused a major family split. My father refused to have William in the house again and my mother was heartbroken. She would try and phone him when my father was not around, but if he caught her speaking to him, sparks would fly. She had lost her mother and now, effectively her brother.

After working in several jobs as a secretary, which I really hated, my mother took me to a careers advisor and it was suggested I do a Fashion Writing course at the London College of Fashion and London School of Economics. I adored the journalism part and was now even more determined to follow my original career idea.

My 19th birthday was coming up and I was allowed to have a party and since my grandmothers house lay empty, it was the ideal place to house a group of noisy teenagers. My mother did most of the work in making food and moving furniture in and out.

The Sunday, a week later, June 2nd, 1974, I was sleeping in after a late night out with Joe, and she was cleaning the bedrooms before going to church. I remember her vacuuming under my bed and saying, "This house is far too big for me to manage myself. You never help me. It'll be the death of me."

I must have dozed off because the next thing I remember was my father coming into my room and telling me to get up because my mother wasn't well.

CROSSROAD OF ETERNITY



I felt little concern at the time and remember taking my time. When I finally got downstairs I discovered she had been pouring milk into the coffee cups when she had collapsed. She was paralysed down one side, and was apologising profusely for being such a nuisance. My father helped her onto the sofa in the big sitting room and I remember kneeling by her, holding her hand and telling her how much I loved her. The ambulance took three quarters of an hour to arrive and my father and I drove behind it. By the time we got to Farnham Hospital, the place where I was born, she was unconscious and shaking, with her tongue pinned down. It was, without doubt, the worst moment of my life.

After several hours at the hospital, my father insisted we go home. Not long after the phone rang and he ran to answer it. He collapsed on the stairs weeping and said, "Your mother's gone." Its been 38 years since that moment, and I still cannot recall it without tears.

The light went out of my life in that first defining moment, and nothing would ever be the same again.

WE ARE LINKED BY
BLOOD AND BLOOD IS
MEMORY WITHOUT
LANGUAGE

JOYCE CAROL OATES