

Opening extract from
Sea Creatures

Written by
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Published by
CAVA BOOKS
(Fiction imprint of
GINGERCAT BOOKS)

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CORNWALL

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JENNA

Our house was full of the sea. Dad was an artist and the seashore's kleptomaniac. He filled every space in the house with shells and stones, feathers, driftwood, smooth pieces of glass, and tiny pink and grey shells, which he threaded up and turned into necklaces and bracelets for me. Pieces of eggshell that had fallen from the sea-gulls nests on the cliffs would find their way onto the mantelpiece, along with clumps of dried kelp and sea grasses. Then he would disappear into his studio – the glasshouse in the garden – and paint. Sometimes I would sneak a peak through the glass and watch him work. I was so proud of my dad.

I inherited his squirreling instinct. Not my sister, Olivia, though. Her grown-up house is entirely minimalist and uncluttered. Not a thing out of place. Nothing found and rescued. All new. Modern. 'She's got a good eye for a piece,' dad said. Olivia lives in London and 'does' Sotheby's and the Royal Academy, and buys from smart Mayfair galleries. She takes tea in Fortnum and Mason and dinner at La Gavroche. She has a Harvey Nichols credit card. She never comes back to Cornwall. She is married to Michael, an investment banker in the City.

Lobster pots, nets and lamps cluttered our house by the sea in the old days and, for a while, half a broken sun-bleached wooden dinghy lay in the living room. Olivia and I, and Charlie, our brother, perched on top of it while dad took photos and sketched us for a painting. Then mum put her foot down and made him move it back down to the beach.

That was before everything changed

I found a sketchbook in a box a few weeks ago for a painting dad did, called Sea Creatures. I remember he told me it was an, ‘analogy’. I wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but the painting was of us children on the beach, along with a starfish, representing Olivia, a seahorse representing me, and a crab that was Charlie. There were also some old photographs of us children with mum and dad. I took them out and hid them in my satchel, the old brown leather school satchel I still use, even now. It smells of the past and things faintly familiar. Every time I open it I hear the school bell, the scrape of chairs. Good things and bad things.

Dad did quite well as an artist. He sold his paintings to local galleries and to others as far away as Truro and Exeter, and even London. Once, one of his paintings was hung in an exhibition at a gallery in St Ives, and we piled into his battered old Ford estate to go and see it. But mostly he earned a living from commissions. His work was popular and he did well enough for us to be able to live in a cosy whitewashed cottage with black window frames and a pretty garden, down at the bottom of a narrow lane between the high hedges. It was called Beach Lane Cottage, and it was just outside Looe in Cornwall.

I was literally a sea baby. Mum and dad were out on the shore one evening and mum said: ‘Oh my God, Brendan, I think she’s coming.’ There was no time for her to get back up to the cottage.

Ten minutes later I was born on dad’s coat on the sand, with the tide charging in. He wrapped me up in his coat and rushed back to the cottage to call the hospital. We left mum on the beach with the kelp and the crabs and the Atlantic thrashing towards her. Not long after, with mum safe, we were all on our way to Liskeard.

That was it, my entrance into the world, my beautiful world where the sea creatures live and the sky breathes out its fresh, wild air as warm as tropics or as cold as the Arctic. Mum didn’t know she was having a girl, but her guess was right.

Later that night there was a beautiful moon – a sliver of a curve glowing on a blue-black sky. Dad painted me with that moon, curled up in a seashell.

Whilst dad painted and combed the shore for ideas, mum ran the Blue Moon Café along by the river in West Looe. It had a curved bay window with blue frames, wooden floors and an old fireplace. Mum found eight different tables, and chairs to go with them, from the second-hand market and she tie-dyed a couple of old sheets to make eight patterned blue-and-white tablecloths. In one corner she set up a small stall selling trinkets and other bits and pieces: shell earrings, little boxes embedded with shells, and pieces of sea-smoothed glass which dad found on the beach, silver bracelets made from bent forks and spoons, wind chimes, and tin fish, flattened and beaten so you could see scales and dimples on them.

She baked and prepared everything herself – bread, cakes, biscuits and scones, and hot dishes like Welsh rarebit, egg and chips, and bacon sandwiches. It was open all year round, and in the winter she did a special for lunch, like steak and kidney pie or a hotpot. The café was always busy, mostly with local people because the visitors tended to stay over in East Looe, where all the shops and the beach were.

Mum had a smile like the sun breaking over waves, and a good word on her lips for everyone.

They were creative people, Rowena and Brendan Moon. Dad was a dreamy absent-minded Piscean while mum, on the cusp of Aquarius, had a practical side to her own artistic nature. No time for dreaming. Up early to make sandwiches for the shop. Baking at night. Scrubbing floors and tables. Feeding children; baths, colds and chickenpox, whilst dad painted on, and the smell of oil and linseed permeated our world.

Everyone loved dad. And he loved them back. He'd spend time at the local pubs, listening to the fishermen's stories, joining in the sea shanties, then stumbling home in the early hours.

Mum had a friend, Mary-Ellen, a potter, who helped out when mum was really busy. She made pots and dishes to sell in the café.

Then Olivia arrived.

I was just about to turn seven and my brother, Charlie, was a bright happy little four-year old, adored by us all. It was a happy house, full of sunshine and smiles. At least that's how I remember it.

Olivia was a handful, even at a month old. A screamer. A demander. Suffering from colic. Awake night and day. Mum was exhausted. Dad was exasperated. He was just gaining ground as a respected artist; his work was in high demand and it was more than his temperamental personality could cope with.

It was chaos. I remember the screaming. I remember stroking Charlie's hair through the cot sides, late at night, when he was crying; no, make that sobbing. Mum had no time for him. He was abandoned because of Olivia, not because mum wanted to but because she had no choice.

Charlie fell quiet. He'd play in the corner of the nursery, muttering in his baby language, watching videos and clutching his old rabbit.

Days, weeks, months passed, and although we muddled through, everything was on the verge of falling apart. Dad had begun spending more time at the pub than he did in his studio. He and mum argued a lot and she was exhausted. Once I heard him say that Olivia was a changeling, put there by the Piskies as a punishment. I didn't understand what that punishment could be for, and mum was really upset and irritated. She had no time for folklore. She had to carry on the practical tasks of running the café. Dad hadn't sold a painting for a while, and so the money from the café was all we had.

Eliza, a girl from the village, started to look after us; dad should have taken over in the afternoons but, mostly, he wasn't there. His studio was empty.

I was at school, way up on the top of Lark Hill. I used to dawdle home across the fields and along by the cliff instead of taking the road. Mum would scold me when Eliza told her I wasn't back until gone four-thirty. I just wanted time to myself, before I had to help Eliza with Olivia and Charlie, or get the vegetables ready for supper. Sometimes

dad wouldn't come home for supper, and it was way after I'd gone to bed that I'd hear him coming up the garden path, shuffling, banging the gate behind him. Even then he might not go into the house, but stumble into his studio in search of more whisky from the stash he thought was secret. But we all knew about it. One morning I found him asleep on the studio couch. Mum had locked all the doors.

I didn't understand what had happened to my father, why he preferred to be out at the pub than home with all of us. Every night I prayed for him to change and go back to being the old dad, and I prayed to the Piskies to help us.

We stopped going to the beach together, dad and I. So I went on my own. By then I knew the seashore better than anyone – its tides and dangerous areas, its secret caves and rock pools.

I couldn't bear to see my parents falling apart, too tired or angry to talk to each other about what was happening. It was taking its toll on me too. My teacher complained about me falling asleep at my desk in the afternoon. It was a small community and everyone knew what was going on. She asked my parents to find another way of dealing with their problems, one that would allow me the freedom to do my homework and get a good night's sleep. I think that teacher must have known that I was the one who got up in the small hours to take Charlie to the toilet, or to soothe Olivia, because mum was too tired to hear and dad was blotto in the studio.

How long can something like that go on without cracks starting to show and something breaking? It was routine for such a long time that no one really noticed what was happening to mum. She was exhausted, of course, angry with dad and tetchy with us if we didn't do what she asked right away. Olivia was the worst but she was the youngest

and mum had a soft spot for her, so her misbehaviour often went uncorrected. I took the brunt of it but it didn't bother me really. I did my chores, and made myself scarce when I needed time to myself, or when mum was having a rant. I watched her beautiful face begin to crumple at the edges and ripples, like the grooves the sea made across the sand, appeared on her forehead.