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1

Early Years

There is grandeur in this view of life, . . . whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

— CHARLES DARWIN, *ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES*

I entered the Holocene with a bump. My earliest memories are of falling out of a high chair, having my head stitched, and seeing patients waiting to be attended to by my father. So began my happy years of childhood in the English Lake District.

I was named Barbara Rosemary Matchett. However, shortly after my birth certificate was signed, I became Rosemary, my mother having discovered that Barbara was the name of my father's previous girlfriend. I still feel a tinge of her indignation at airports and doctors' offices when I am referred to as Barbara.

My parents were central figures in my early life. My mother was vivacious, energetic, and warmly loving. She introduced me to the joys of listening to the complexities of classical music, and on our daily walks she told me the names and stories of fossils, wild plants, and birds and other animals. My father, a

country doctor, had his “surgery” and office in a wing of the house. Those were the days before disposable medical equipment, and much of my mother’s time was spent sterilizing instruments and boiling surgical towels, as well as calming frightened patients and arranging appointments—all this while maintaining a large house and a garden with vegetables, fruit trees, hens, and pigs, and keeping control of two, and later three, very lively children.

My father was kind, but his demeanor could be severe. At school, he had received a classical education in Greek and Latin and had a broad knowledge of literature and poetry. He was trained in medicine in Glasgow at a time when tuberculosis was rampant. The disease was so serious and transmission so rapid that an extra year was added to the medical curriculum solely for teaching its diagnosis and treatment. He wanted to become a surgeon, and certainly this was within reach, as he was one of the top three students in his year, graduating *cum laude*. He opted instead for general practice (family medicine), knowing that it would give him a wide range of medical experience, and because he had to earn money quickly, as he was the second-youngest of his large family. Family medicine was a fortunate choice because it turned out he was unusually gifted in diagnosis. His exceptional skill in diagnosing complicated medical problems became widely known, and hospitals in London occasionally contacted him for help with a particularly difficult case. In addition, he had a passion for engineering. He designed and contributed to the first disposable syringe, now labeled as the “Matchett” syringe in the Science Museum of the Wellcome Collection in London, as well as other medical equipment.¹ His first practice was in partnership with a Dr. Patchett. We used to tease him that “Matchett and Patchett” would have made superb plastic surgeons.

My brother John, twenty-two months younger than me, and I were constantly in each other's company, there being few children in Arnside. The garden became our secret world, divided into countries with people in each speaking a different, invented language. We lived for hours in this world, going from cold Arctic to hot steamy jungle, creeping through the long orchard grass to avoid tigers, riding camels across the desert, climbing precipitous mountains, and vaulting over rushing mountain becks. Interestingly, our imaginary world with its diversity of countries had *no* wars, even though the Second World War was going on around us in the real world and impacting our lives in many ways (chapter 2).

That real world was the small village of Arnside, on the southern side of the Kent estuary in the southwest corner of England's Lake District. Arnside Knott, a hill only 522 feet high, rises steeply above the village. A climb up its slopes to the top reveals magnificent views across the estuary and beyond to Coniston Old Man, hunched in the foreground, and the other Lake District mountains behind it, each with its evocative Old English name. Throughout my childhood, horses were used to plow the fields and deliver milk and coal. Dr. Grosvenor, my father's predecessor, visited his patients on horseback. In the 1930s, the village had three telephones, the numbers being 1 for the pub, 2 for the vicar, and 3 for the doctor, my father. This shows the priorities of the inhabitants! More telephones were gradually added over time, and so was a telephone exchange as a hub. Every day my mother would send a list of the patients my father planned to visit to the operator at the exchange so that she knew where to reach him in an emergency.

The tranquility of Arnside is shattered twice a day by a tidal bore that roars up the estuary at precise intervals of twelve hours and twenty-five minutes. This leading edge of the incoming tide

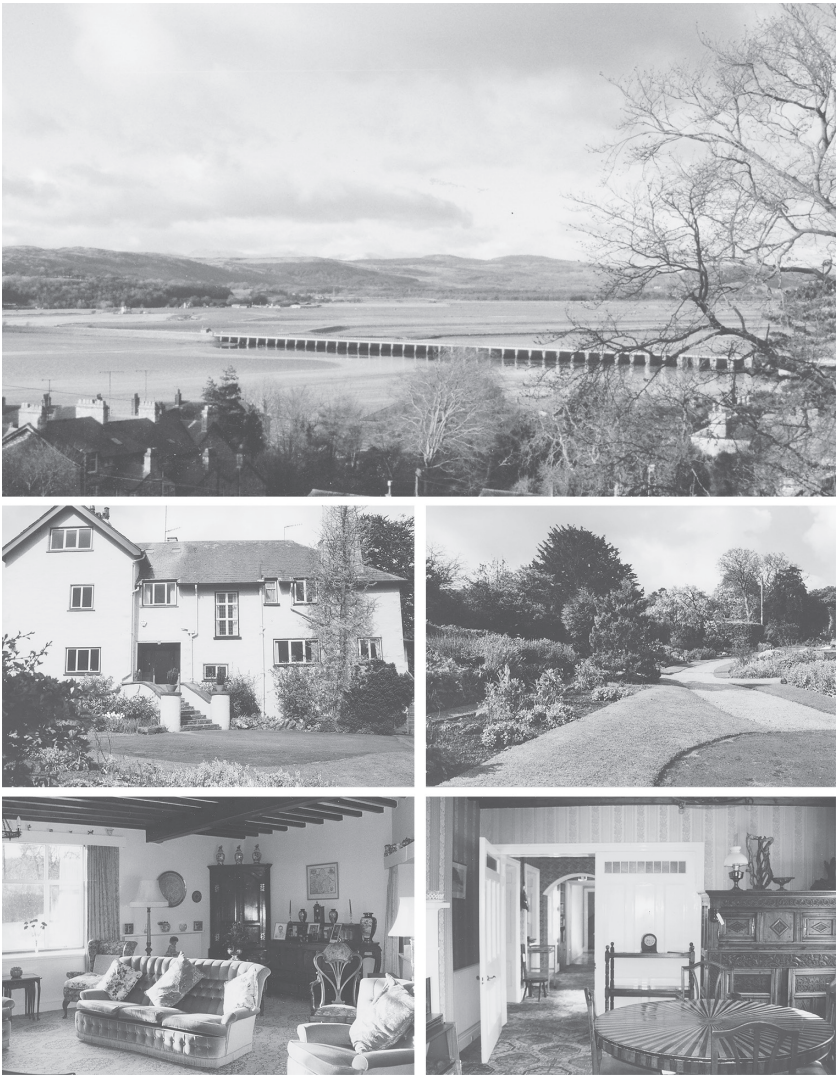


FIGURE 1. Upper: Arnside estuary and viaduct. Middle left: Childhood home, Orchard Close. Middle right: The garden. Lower left: Living room. Lower right: Dining room.

is forced through the narrow entrance to the river Kent, transforming it into a wave of water only about three feet high but of unbelievable strength. The wall of water roars past Arnside, swirls round as it hits the viaduct, and splits into two, one current passing through the viaduct, the other curling round snakelike to charge in anger back toward the open sea. The strength of the current is such that horses caught in the bore have been knocked over and drowned, and there have been several human fatalities. Today, a siren warns people half an hour ahead of the incoming tide. When I was young, there was no warning; you had to know the times of the tides and how they changed each day. This meant being aware of the phases of the moon, which altered the strength of the gravitational pull, as well as the direction of the wind. We learnt that a small bore at half-moon produces a neap tide, and a large bore at new and full moon a spring tide. A ferociously powerful bore would occur when a strong west wind was behind a spring tide. A spring tide has nothing to do with seasons. The name is derived from the old Anglo-Saxon/German word *springan*, meaning “to leap forward.” The name of the neap tide is derived from the word *nep*, meaning “lower.” This awareness of our surroundings was essential to our survival as we had to resist the temptation to walk out onto the sands to look for stranded fish in pools, collect shells, or get a closer look at the waterbirds—turnstones, redshanks, curlews, sanderlings, shelducks, and Greylag Geese—that feed on the mudflats. Another danger was quicksand, which had accounted for the deaths of many dogs, a few horses, and even humans.

The danger of the bore, a habitual tsunami, was vividly impressed on us one calm summer afternoon in 1944. My brother John and I were perched on a dry tussock covered with Purple-flowering Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), waiting impatiently for the calm waters after the bore and before the turn of the tide,

when we were allowed to swim. We had watched the wall of water displace the shelducks, curlews, and turnstones, which flew off screaming as the wave approached them. Simon, our springer spaniel, was paddling for flounders in the shallow pools, bringing them to my mother, who would later cook them for his dinner. Andrew, my three-month-old youngest brother, was asleep in his pram. Then, suddenly, we saw a child floating facedown in the stream of water swirling at speed back toward the open sea. My mother rushed into the fast-flowing current, managed to grab him and turn him upside down, holding him by his legs, and out of his mouth came a mixture of water, vomit, and seaweed. He regained consciousness while my mother was hooking out the remaining seaweed from his mouth, but he was shaking uncontrollably. We wrapped the shivering, sobbing boy in towels and put him at the bottom of Andrew's pram. My mother wheeled him as fast as she could up the steep hill to our house, urging John and me to help push, push. At the house, she told me to hold him, wrapped in a warm towel from the airing cupboard, while she filled a bath with warm water, telephoned the exchange, and told them to get my father, who was visiting a patient, and then the police to find the boy's parents. The boy, who was six or seven years old, recovered, and my father arrived shortly afterward, to my relief, and took over. Eventually, the boy's mother was found, shopping with another women, both totally unaware of the dangers when they left him to play alone on the beach. Even when they came to our house to collect him, they were still remarkably unconcerned. I was afraid they would scold him and hoped my father, who could be stern and very severe, would reprimand the mother before that happened.

Fast-forward forty-three years: Peter and I were hiking in the mountains of Nepal, high up in the Langtang Valley, with a guide, Pasang Sherpa (chapter 19). The three of us had been

walking for several days. We stayed in huts (teahouses), the type where a wooden shelf for laying down your sleeping bag creates a communal bedroom, and smoke from an open fire used for cooking curls up through a hole in the roof. Pasang was talking to the owners, who were old friends of his. We had seen nobody all day, so we were surprised when two hikers from England walked in and joined us, sitting around the fire as we waited for dinner to be cooked. Chatting with them and exchanging information, I said I was born in the tiny village of Arnside, “which you have probably never heard of.”

“Oh, yes, I have,” the man replied. “When I was seven, I nearly drowned there and was rescued by the doctor’s wife and her daughter!”

I missed the acute awareness of my surroundings when I was sent to boarding school in Edinburgh at age eight and no longer needed to perform the daily tidal calculations. They became important again many years later when we were camping on isolated and uninhabited Galápagos islands, and I had immense joy in once again being aware of the movements and timing of the tides, moon, and stars.

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