

Summer of '47

(True in every remembered detail)

I was eight years old when we went to Teignmouth for our summer holiday. That was Saturday 9th August to Saturday 23rd August 1947. Me and my sister June, she was three and a half years older than me, and she'd just had her birthday - in June, so she was 12, and Daddy and Mummy. I don't remember much about June being there; I suppose 12-year-old girls don't want to have anything to do with eight-year-old boys. Anyway, I had been looking forward to it for such a long time. School had finished and the summer holidays felt like I'd never have to go back, even though I really knew I'd have to. I'd been saving for ever. Daddy used to give me church things to deliver to people, on my bike; they always gave me a thre'penny bit. And I was also given thre'pence each week pocket money. So I had nearly 10 shillings to spend. (10s = 50p) Mummy had packed a big trunk with all our clothes in it, it had been collected by GWR, and sent Luggage in Advance, so that it would be there when we arrived.

It had been a long cold winter, "severe" they called it. It had snowed on and off for four months from December to March. I was always being told to "wrap up", 'cos we couldn't get any more coal. Daddy lit the fire in the parlour first thing in the morning, then after lunch, Mummy used a shovel to carry the red-hot coals into the lounge grate. It was a big manse and that was all the heating we had. Coal was so short they had turned off 1400miles of gas street lights, and they were always telling us to save electricity, or it would be switched off, and it often was. The bed sheets were damp. Mummy put hot water bottles in our beds, and we wore bed-socks, and had piles of blankets and eiderdowns. The windows streamed in the daytime, and then froze at night, leaving pretty patterns in the morning. 22miles of the main road out of London going north had been blocked by 10-foot snow drifts; there were 20 foot drifts in the countryside and lots of villages were cut off. When the big thaw came, so did the floods all over the Country. I saw a photograph of the main street in Teignmouth covered in snow, and it said trains had been cancelled from London to Penzance through Teignmouth. I worried we might not get there. But after the coldest winter of the century, we had the hottest summer. We also had the advantage of Double British Summer Time, to save fuel, so it meant long, light, and hot evenings right up until 10 or 11 o'clock. Because there was no school, we were allowed to stay up later.

I s'pose 'cos it was a special occasion, we went to Bristol Temple Meads station by taxi instead of by bus. The only other time we went by taxi, was when Grandma Gunston, that's Daddy's Mum, came down from Birmingham. I liked it, 'cos it went by the back roads instead of the main roads. The train was The Cornish Riviera. It was a corridor train, with small compartments of two rows of padded seats facing each other; sliding doors and big windows. I was allowed to sit by the window, as long as I didn't touch anything, 'cos it was dirty. "And don't put your head out of the window, or you'll get smuts in your eyes." It was so hot, we *had* to have the little windows pushed right back. I remember watching the telephone wires rising and falling, and listening to the clickety-click of the rails. Mummy had made sandwiches for the journey, but they were warm and floppy and rubbery. But we always ate everything we were given, we were *made* to, "Think of all the starving people." I loved the bit after Exeter, and Dawlish Warren, when the train suddenly came out onto the seaside. At Dawlish it ran along the

front, and I could look down into the town. Then there was a short bit under a high footbridge, before it swung round at the end of Teignmouth seafront, and stopped at the station. We didn't have much luggage, 'cos it had gone on Luggage in Advance, but Daddy lifted the cases down from the rack, and we got out onto the platform. We knew from last year where we were going; just a short walk over the bridge and there we were, no 2.

I remember Daddy telling someone that he'd found the guesthouse in The Methodist Recorder; Mrs Waddington charged £2 10s 0d a week each, which included breakfast, dinner and evening meal. Mummy gave her our ration books; everything was rationed, and since America had stopped its support now that the war was over, everything was hard to find. The shops were empty and the queues were getting longer. Even fish and chips were threatened; potatoes were in short supply because of the bad winter, and fish (oily snoek) was being imported from South Africa. But somehow, the mood was cheerful; the war was over, the winter was over, the summer was glorious, and Princess Elizabeth had just got engaged. Mummy and Daddy's room was at the front, and the trunk was already there waiting for us in front of the bay window. We helped Mummy empty it and put our folded clothes onto shelves, and our buckets and spades next to the door ready. Daddy said wasn't it funny that on holiday, men wore shorts, and women wore longs, because they changed their frocks for slacks. The bathroom was at the end of the corridor at the back of the house, and was shared with all the other guests. I can't remember where June and I slept. I think there were four tables in the dining room, one of them was just for two people. We had the table in the window; and there was a family of three, Mr and Mrs Fallon and their son Ian; he was about June's age. Mrs Fallon, was round and dumpy and wore glasses. Mr Fallon was tall, ginger-haired with a moustache, he also wore glasses. He made a point of chewing everything 14 times, so that it took him for ever to eat, and his food must have been cold by the time he'd finished. The only thing I remember about the food, was the stuffed marrow; rings of soft gooey flesh with a hole in the middle, which was filled with mince-meat, swimming in thin gravy. Most of it I swallowed whole; it was the feel of it, not necessarily the taste, that made me heave.

After we'd eaten our meal on the first evening, Daddy said we'd go for a walk along the front as far as the lighthouse. The front was a wide promenade, behind that was a grassy area called The Den. There were sunken gardens which we walked through, smelling the heavy scent of tobacco plants and night-scented stocks. Behind The Den and across the road, were fashionable hotels and a cinema called The Riviera. In the middle of the front, was the pier, with its shelters and amusement arcade, and at the end was the theatre. Round the lighthouse, guarding one side of the narrow river mouth, on the other side was the headland called The Ness, the road followed the shoreline into the wide harbour. It was littered with fishing boats, nets and ropes and pots, and the calling of the seagulls. Looking up towards Newton Abbot, you could see the bridge which spanned the river. It was a lovely evening, and Daddy said, "Let's hire a rowing boat and go across to Shaldon." He wandered down onto the beach and talked to a fisherman. Then he called us down and we climbed into the little boat. The fisherman pushed us off into the clear flat water, and Daddy took up the oars. We were soon out into the middle of the estuary, trailing my hand in the water, looking down at the sandy floor and the waving fronds of bright green seaweed, darting fish and crawling crabs. Suddenly the water got a bit choppy and the

current became stronger. We were now level with the mouth and were being sucked out to sea. We were all becoming a bit concerned. And as Daddy furiously rowed, we realised we were still heading in the opposite direction, out to sea. We were helpless. Fortunately help was at hand. Our plight had been spotted by someone with a motor boat, who came to our rescue, took us in tow and delivered us safely back to our starting point. Daddy had been charged five shillings (5s = 25p) to hire the boat, a huge sum of money.

One morning we walked back to the end of the front and the little lighthouse, and as we turned into the harbour, we spotted the ferry, which plied its course backwards and forwards across the estuary to Shaldon, where we had tried to row on our first evening. The fare was just one and a half pence ($1\frac{1}{2}d = 1\frac{1}{2}p$), Daddy had paid forty times that for the rowing boat, and even then we hadn't reached our destination! Shaldon was a pretty ribbon village along the bank of the estuary; we found a café, Smugglers' something it was called, and had coffee, sitting at a table on the pavement outside, looking back across the water and the harbour, to Teignmouth. As we walked back to the ferry, I noticed a watch lying in the gutter. I picked it up. It was still going. It was a lady's watch, just the right size for my little wrist. But my excitement was quickly dashed, "We'll take it the police station. Someone will be looking for it," said Mummy, "If no-one claims it, after six months it'll be yours," and she put it in her handbag.

During the war, the town had been bombed 21 times; 228 houses had been destroyed, including the hospital, and 2000 damaged, 79 people had been killed and 150 wounded. The previous year when we had first spent our summer holiday in Teignmouth, there was still some scaffolding and barbed wire, and concrete tank blocks on the beach, but this year it was all gone and we spent nearly all day everyday playing on the course sandy beach, and in the calm warm water. We all changed into our swimming costumes, Daddy's was maroon, a full-body affair with straps over his shoulders, made of wool which sagged when it got wet. Mummy had a tight fitting rubber swimming hat, though I don't remember her ever going in the sea. Daddy would help me make sand castles and sand boats, dig tunnels and channels down to the sea. I would keep running backward and forwards down to the water's edge to fill my bucket, and then pour it into the channel. Depending how high or low the tide was, we could dig down until we found water. If the tide was coming in, we would try to build up protective sand walls to save the castle, but we never managed it, the sea always won. When Daddy had had enough, he'd say, "Why don't you go and ask that boy over there to play with you?" but I never did, I was far too shy. Anyway, we were spending more and more time with the Fallons, and Ian would play with me sometimes. Mummy rubbed Nivea cream into my shoulders, but I still got badly burned in the fierce sun, and my shoulders, back and ears blistered, and peeled. For several days, I had to have a towel round my shoulders when I was playing on the beach. One day we hired a pedal-boat, and we all got on, Mummy by Daddy's side, June on the front and me on the back. Daddy did all the pedalling; I tried, but I couldn't reach the pedals. At mid-day, a queue would form on the front, waiting for the Lyon's ice-cream van to arrive. The ice cream came in small, card-covered circles about the size of a small biscuit, and just over an inch thick, they cost tuppence each. ($2d =$ a bit more than $1p$).

At the end of the front, nearest to the town, was the church, built on the hillside, so that its square tower was visible from all around, but Daddy was a Methodist minister, so we never went inside. In fact, on the Sunday of the middle weekend, I don't remember going to church at

all, which was unusual, 'cos at home, we had to go three times a day, and the rest of the day we were only allowed to read – no games of any kind; I hated Sundays. Maybe that's why I don't remember Sunday on holiday; but then holiday means Holy day. The shops in the town may have been almost empty, but I can remember Mummy seeing a queue starting to form, so she joined it; you always got in the queue first, and *then* asked what you were queuing for! Some small, local, early apples had just been brought in. We handed the watch in at the police station, and they took my details, I felt very important. There was a Forte's restaurant, with white tablecloths and silver teapots, and waitresses in uniforms with little starched tiaras. Ice-cream was served in little silver dishes on stands. I don't know why, but June was once allowed a Knickerbocker Glory; it wasn't her birthday, maybe she paid for it herself. Anyway I didn't get one. It came in a tall thick glass. It was made with layers of ice-cream and chopped strawberries and raspberries, with a fan-shaped wafer sticking out at the top, and eaten with a long-handled spoon. I didn't care. I didn't want one anyway. We passed the post office where, when we came back the next year, we bought stamps of the London Olympic Games. I loved the second hand shops, the windows always had little porcelain souvenirs with flags and crests on them, and names of places.

I loved going out along the pier, looking down at the green water through the cracks in the wooden deck. I always made sure I took some of my pocket money with me. I could change it into pennies at the entrance booth. Drop a penny in the slot, flick the lever and watch the penny whizz round. I'm not sure what it was supposed to do, but it always ended up in the box underneath. There was the crane you could steer, for lifting up little presents and dropping them into the slot at the front for you to take away. Except that the crane never did what you wanted it to, and no-one ever won anything. I liked the labelling machine. For another penny, you could stamp out your name, or anything else, on a short metal strip. At least you always got what you paid for; a souvenir to take home. One evening we went to the theatre at the end of the pier, and saw a variety show call The Fol-de-Rols, lots of singing and dancing and men telling funny stories.

Again, I don't know why, but June was allowed to go to the pictures with Ian, but without me. I don't remember what they saw. I thought it was Annie "Get Your Gun", but that didn't come out until 1950. There was a fair on The Den; with a carousel and smaller roundabouts, carnival horses, a shooting gallery, and lots of little booths, but my favourite was the swing-boats. I'd pull the rope in front of me as hard as I could, and the boat would swing higher and higher, giving my tummy a funny feeling. It was the same sinking feeling I had during the second week, when I knew it would all end soon, and we'd have to go back home; I dreaded it. But the end did come, and somehow the train journey back to Temple Meads was not the exciting experience it had been two weeks earlier.

But Princess Elizabeth got married in November, and I got my watch back from the police in Teignmouth!

Howard Brayton

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