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Sand and Ashes

by Des Holden

My childhood seems to belong to another world.

On that planet the summers were hot, and as the cliché goes, global warming hadn't been invented. Tides raced in on flat, deserted beaches and sandcastles with mussel and clam shell storm defences, topped out with penny flags bravely resisted time and rippling waves, like a sandy Canute.

In that land the toilet was a ditch at the edge of the field up the lane. Mum remembered to pack toilet paper until inside plumbing was installed. We rinsed sand off suntanned legs before being allowed in the house. The mad dog on its heavy chain growled across the yard. In the haystack, small bales stacked lethally high were camps and obstacle courses, libraries for comics and books and larders for the crisps and sweets we shared with innumerable cousins.

Another world with a different orbit. Time obeyed different rules. Each day twice as long, each night twice as crowded with stars. The future only existed as a last day promise. In that world science had not measured how long a nine year old takes to age. There was no future and the past was stepping stones across a stream; a birthday party, a white cat dead in the road, a sister coming home from hospital. Adulthood was harder to consider than teleportation.

The sand blew about in the westerly breeze, gritty in the corners of my eyes and on my lips. Grace chased lazy seagulls past our unfinished, unscaffolded sandy bungalow. Behind us, just out of sight but decades away, Jane read OK and checked her Facebook in the warm car. The spikey dune grass stabbed and irritated below the sand, another stepping stone in the now wider stream. In the river. Grace thought of the future because we held it up to her, a dark threat of need to practice her reading, her cursive writing, her sums. Everything couldn't be conveyed in emojis.

I got up and shook some of the beach back on to the dune. A little adventure for a few hundred elderly grains of sand. Together we walked along the beach to the rock pools at one end. Dad and I had found a sea trout stranded in a pool one year, its grey-brown back no camouflage for the sandy bottom. A stepping stone for all three of us.

The small silver box was much lighter now, dad's ashes already scattered on the farm, at the Hook, by his mother's grave overlooking the Barrow and on Booley and Dollar strands. Dollar Bay. He'd told us it was named for a ship that went down in a storm, carrying silver dollars. Dad was full of history, his job and his hobby. His river was wider than the sea. Grace tipped the ashes onto the rocks and sand. On the way back to the car the wind stole her flag and tumbled it down the beach.

“It can be for granddad,” she said.

How do you draw a map of a different country or another world? You can only draw maps when you've been.