

When I was a white-haired bouncing child, I was joyful. I loved everything and everyone and got excited by the smallest things. I think that's still in me, though time has worn some of the bounce out...and I sometimes reserve my excitement about little things because I've been taught that grownups don't act like that.

My dad was stationed (Navy) in Newport, Rhode Island when I was a toddler. My mother was never one to stay around the house when she wasn't working...she liked to do things. It didn't matter what it was...she just wanted to be DOING. And I was carted along to all her adventures.

She loved the beach. Even in the New England winters, when (I know now) the wind eats through your coat and hat and gloves and chaps the skin on your face.

We went to the beach that day. A blustery day, but that didn't stop us. My mother walked and picked up shells. I did what children do at the beach: explored and experienced and hopped and sloshed. I carefreely dug in the sand and revelled in the tiny details of yucky things and crawling things and dead things and knew for a fact that every shell I discovered was the most beautiful shell in the whole wide world.

It was the perfect setting for what I remember to be my first loss of innocence. My first experience having something not end like I thought it would.

I found a hermit crab. A little tiny crawler with a conch-like shell that was twice its size on its back. But it was little enough to fit in my small cold hand. And I watched it forever (maybe a couple of minutes) as it scurried to my thumb and turned back when I tilted my hand to keep it there.

As I watched the hermit crab, I swear that I fell in love with it. I fell in love in the way that children lose their hearts over things that are smaller than them; sometimes fluffy kittens or puppies, but for me...the hermit crab.

And what does one do when she falls in love with another being? Well, she kisses it, of course.

My mom wasn't far from me, but I felt independent and joyfully alone. I lifted my hand to my face and slowly pursed my lips. I poked the crab to turn around so I could get to the moving parts and not just the shell.

And I kissed the tiny hermit crab there on the beach in Newport, Rhode Island, on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, at the end of North America, on planet Earth.

And the hermit crab reached up with one of its miniscule claws and grabbed a piece of my lip.

I don't remember for sure, but I don't think I screamed. I've never been a screamer. But I certainly startled and dropped the crab, wondering what had hurt me. I stood in shock for a moment before starting to cry as children do when they're surprised by pain.

My mother came running, of course. And as she told the story throughout the rest of her life, she asked what had happened and I tried to explain through hiccups of snot and cold tears that I had tried to kiss the crab and that he "bit" me. Mom explained that you can't kiss everything. Some creatures don't like to be kissed.

But...but...but....I loved the hermit crab and I wanted to show it the same way I did with mommy and daddy.

My mom did all the mom things. She held me and cooed sweet things and even kissed the tiny red spot the crab had left on my lip.

I heard this story so many times through the years that it became my story. And as grown-ups do, I project my grownup sensibilities into it.

Maybe I did and maybe I didn't cry not only because the snip startled me and caused me pain, but because I was confused as to why the thing I loved had not loved me back.

Children learn to be cautious through experiences like this. Same with stovetops or candle flames or scissors.

But remembering it...or remembering the story at least, I feel a sadness that that little girl would grow up and have the life I've had thus far and that the hermit crab would always be with me, telling me to be careful about who I loved.

How I wish that I could have that spirit again. The trust in love. The appreciation of smallness and the connectedness to all life.

I've met a few hermit crabs over the years, but you never forget your first. And I hope that I'll never stop trying to find that little girl on the beach.