

## Too Fast

by Sue Hitchcock

She was wild when she was young. Most children learn by watching and copying. My nephew used to wander about with a scrap of paper in his mouth, imitating his grandad, who rolled his own, stingy cigarettes, more paper than tobacco.

Anna was a born scientist. Her first word was “see,” demanding confirmation that the sweets were gone. She was impatient, running off rather than wait for her mother, the sort of child lost in Woolworth’s, to be collected by her anxious parent. At nursery she was aggressive, fighting to be first with a new toy. A fight at the top of the slide led to a fall, followed by earache and the decision to try a different school.

It was a mistake.

“Do I have to go to school?” she was miserable.

“Since Polly went to live in America, I haven’t got any friends.”

You can’t stay home on your own. Dad and I have to go to work.”

She started to get fat. Her class teacher thought she was slow. Anna spent a lot of time staring out of the window. She couldn’t see the point of it all.

The choice of secondary schools in our catchment area were either a strict girls’ school, where she would be a square peg, punished for not fitting, or on the other hand a poorly achieving school in the Tottenham half of the borough. We decided to move house and just made it in time to qualify for our preferred school. The head was Molly Hattersley, Social Democrat wife of the Labour M.P. Roy Hattersley. A beginning we hoped for the revival of our unhappy daughter.

The transformation was slow.

At first it was just the smile. Two new friends opened up the possibilities she could envisage. One was the daughter of two artists, the mother making jewellery to sell at Camden market, the father, a sculptor, ginger bearded, like Anna’s Own father. The other girl was the daughter of two writers, and was living with her father.

Anna was still overweight and not showing any particular talent. Sports involving running were too much of a challenge. Then in her second year an enlightened sports teacher planned visits for the pupils to out of school activities. A trip to Malden in Essex to try out sailing, brought a new gleam to her eye. She returned with badly blistered hands, but an elation we hadn't seen before. She had always been a good swimmer, and water was obviously her milieu. Later that term she visited the Lee Valley rowing club, and she now knew who she was. Despite being only fourteen, we allowed her to make the two-bus journey through Tottenham after school. The women who rowed together made her laugh, and as her spare fat disappeared, the fine tall girl with long arms and legs became a promising crew member.

At the club Christmas party she and a young man were voted the couple most likely – to do what, was not spoken, but by sixteen, she had moved in with him.

She was still at school, and studying sciences for A-level. It made me very anxious. All I saw of her was a weekly visit for money, and clean laundry. Yet she became very organised, timetabling training sessions, school and homework.

At school, her prestige was enhanced by her arrival in her boyfriend's red sports car. Finally she passed her exams and left for University in Nottingham, home of a very good rowing club.

When Anna died aged forty eight of melanoma, probably caused by too long rowing with her back to the sun, she had lived a full life. Her motto, written in her notebook was "finished is better than perfect." A piece of advice to us all, to stop prevaricating. Life is too short.

My poem for her woodland funeral:-

As a child Anna was like the sun,  
All pale and bright, eyes curious and bold.  
Without a fear, sometimes she'd run  
To find the truth of what she had been told.  
Then when she grew, her zest for life was strong,  
She'd work and play so hard and long.  
She'd row each day and soon the sun  
Caught sight, said "you're the one  
I'll touch to make you mine!"  
She lived and loved until the time  
The sun said, "You've had your share!  
"Your friends may grieve. Why should I care?"  
But now the earth cries, "Give her to me!  
"Together we can grow a tree!  
"With love she'll show you every leaf,  
And secretly give shade to friends beneath"