

## Amber

My early life was spent in London, Shepherd's Bush. My mother was single and she worked as an air hostess. She met my father who lived next door; soon they were married and as a child I was delighted to have a father. We moved to a large house in the East End. My father was doing very well in the police force, following the advice of George Brown, who it was his responsibility to protect, he changed careers and studied to work in the oil industry. He qualified as a Geophysicist and we were off globetrotting. First we lived in France, near St Gaudans, close to the Pyrenees. We had a small, neat house at the top of a hill in the sunshine. There were horses in the field by the house which we used to play with. Every Wednesday I went skiing. I had a blissfully happy childhood.

After a few years we moved to Holland, to a luxury flat overlooking the sea in Scheveningen, which was a little like Brighton. I went to the international school which was set up for the Ex-Pats. I had many friends, this also was a happy time.

For a short time we lived in Essex, and here my brother was born. After that, my parents moved to Norway, and egged on by many Enid Blyton books (I was an avid reader as a child), I was determined to go to Boarding School. My parents chose a Steiner School in Sussex, near the New Forest; I was only eleven. The following three years were some of the best of my life. All the children that boarded were of mixed ages, and lived in a beautiful old country house with extensive gardens, a few miles from the main school. The food was delicious, the vegetables were grown in the garden and were organic, long before this became fashionable. Life was fun, as the school believed that if you learn to enjoy learning, you will search to improve your mind for the rest of your life. For some people, it worked. I excelled in the arts, and was told by my teacher that one day I would be an author. By the time I was thirteen all my friends were getting into drugs, I wanted out. My parents were due to live in China. I wanted to go with them, so, sadly, I left.

China was fascinating, I lived there for a year. By now I was a sports addict, and three to four hours a day, I would run, swim and work out in the gym at the Hotel we lived in. The hotels were breathtakingly beautiful. However there was something sinister about China.

When we came back from China, we sailed our boat up the French canals, it was a wonderful holiday. After that we bought a beautiful flat in Spain. We lived there for a while, there was no local school for me there so I missed school for a while. I had grown into a beautiful young woman.

We sold the flat and bought an old, run down farmhouse in the South of France. At this stage my father started his own business. Leaner years followed, but we were still happy, Jordi, my brother and I were very close, and though the property was hard work to maintain, we had fun as we had horses, lots of dogs and cats. The locals didn't mix, and I was quite lonely. I went to the local school and learned how to speak French. I passed my brevet, which is the equivalent of the English 'O' Level.

I returned to London to live with my grandparents and study for my 'A' Levels. This was not such a happy time as my Grandmother was difficult to live with and took every penny of my money.

I returned home with reasonable 'A' Level results. The next few years I lived with my parents in France, working for my Father and renovating the property. I returned at one point to Plymouth, where my parents had a flat and were working with Plymouth University. I started a course and joined the Territorials, which was very enjoyable. I dropped out of University and returning home to France worked for my Father again. The next few years were uneventful. Then disaster struck, my Grandfather became ill with cancer, my uncle (with whom I often lived with when my parents spent time in England), became seriously ill with diabetes, and my mother contracted MS. My father's business was also going through a bad time. My uncle had left to tend to my Grandfather, and I was left alone in France. For the first time since Steiner School I attempted to write. I had terrible writer's block, but I wouldn't give up, banging my head against a brick wall. I often didn't see anyone for days on end.

When my parents returned I was ill, hearing voices and seeing hallucinations. I was admitted to hospital in France following a suicide attempt. I was treated successfully and I thought that was the end of it. We sold the house and moved to the North of France, to St Malo in Brittany. There I came off my medication and was severely ill again. My Father drove me all the way back to Exeter, in the

UK, and I was admitted to Delderfield ward. I was put on medication that put me in a lot of pain, and my parents saw me every day. My Father couldn't work so my family could only afford to live in a caravan. It was a very low point for us all.

I was discharged from hospital three months later and moved into a care home. I met my long term boyfriend there, but my looks had suffered, the pills made me put on a lot of weight, and I was told I would be on them for life.

Over the next seven years I would be fighting the illness. I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia, and admitted into hospital twelve times over seven years.

Three years ago, unable to take the painful medicine they gave me in hospital anymore, I made a decision, either I would commit suicide, or run away. I chose running away. I lived on the streets for three months, spent a night as a prostitute, then I stole a meal from a restaurant and was taken to prison. I stayed there for three months. By now I was very ill.

I was admitted to Torquay mental hospital, and for once treated on other, less painful drugs. They worked well and three months later I was discharged. I moved to the Residential home I live in now and started my book.

Recently I have been a lot better and have coping strategies that keep the illness under control. There is hope now. I have told myself not to look over my shoulder at the long corridor of pain which has been the last seven years. There is a door open now in front of me leading to a lush garden, where rivers flow and birds sing. This garden is my life, given back to me.