Do you have a story to tell? Send non-fiction submissions of approximately 600 words to inyourownwords@telegraph.co.uk; or In Your Own Words, *The Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, 1 Canada Square, Canary Wharf, London E14 5DT. We regret that submissions cannot be returned or acknowledged.

In your own words

A line in the sand

My father was the youngest in a family of ten children, and he was considered a bit of a nuisance – not only because he was, but because *his* father had died shortly before his birth, leaving the family strapped for cash.

My grandmother managed to get all the children a good education by the energetic writing of begging letters. Gladys, the second eldest, became a physiotherapist and, unlike some of her other sisters (there were seven girls and three boys), she was kind to little Tony, my father. She read him stories when she wasn't at college, and helped him learn to swim. (All the children apart from Tony – who was spared the ordeal by his father's death – had been taught to swim by the dubious method of throwing them into the local swimming-pool and encouraging them to make it to the side.)

Gladys was old enough to have been my father's mother, and remained especially close to him all her life. She always remembered his birthday, 5 November, and when Gladys was a very old lady, a tiny little figure not even 5ft tall, she said to my father, 'Tony, wherever I am, wherever you are, I shall always remember you on your birthday!'

Shortly after, she died at the age of 90.

My father, being the youngest, found it a terrible burden to see his siblings die one by one before him. He did not voice these sentiments to me, but my mother told me how he felt. So, on his birthday, following Gladys's death, I went to see my parents at their house on the south coast.

After a good lunch we faced the gloom of late autumn, pulled on our boots and

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jackets and set off along the beach. It started off with some scrubby plants, sea holly and sea spinach (delicious with scrambled egg on toast), before turning into piles of shingle – difficult to walk on. As the tide receded, sand was revealed with puddles of water. The beach is controlled by a legion of breakwaters, punctuating the coastline and creating a kind of hurdling challenge for walkers.

Across the Solent, a slash of pewter-coloured water below a dark lilac sky, the lights were beginning to come on in Cowes, and we wondered how far we would be able to walk before turning back for a cup of tea and a slice of birthday cake.

We trudged along, not exactly enjoying the walk but feeling that it was good for us to get out. Conversation didn't flow. I asked my mother about her Italian conversation class in nearby Chichester, plans for Christmas and family news. My father was walking ahead of us, thinking his own thoughts, a burly figure against the fading light.

'Let's turn back,' he shouted, his woolly hat now firmly pulled down over his ears. 'I'm getting cold… and it'll soon be dark.' He sounded at that moment like a small boy again.

We turned our backs against a watery sunset, and headed eastwards along the beach. We counted the number of breakwaters we had yet to climb over until we would reach the garden gate, and remarked on the fact that we had hardly seen a soul all afternoon. Clambering over the last breakwater into the final stretch we stopped, all three of us. For there before us, gleaming in the wet sand, written in huge letters by an unknown hand, was the one word: GLADYS. ● *Molly Verity*