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When I was a child we had a shack on the beach. It was second from the end of a long row of shacks. Our shack was made of wooden planks, our neighbours' shacks were fibro - the ubiquitous asbestos panelling of the 1950s. Originally the shack had been many miles south, but the newly rich inhabitants of seaside homes had objected to the homely view, so the shacks were loaded on trucks and driven north along the beach to a more isolated spot. When I say 'on the beach', I mean it. The shacks were fixed on piles driven into the sand, and on stormy high tides the sea reached up the beach and under the shack, and our connection to land was a slim walkway across a sea moat. We pulled the boats up under the shack, and lay there on hot days in the deep cool shade, watching the life of the beach.

Our shack was made by ancestors who understood weather and tide and practical comfort. The windows were hatches that lifted in the daytime to provide shade and let the breezes in, and were closed on stormy nights and when we went away. The beds were boxes with lids, during the day the lids were closed on the made beds inside, and they became our seats. My cousin, the eldest child of the generation, had a hanging bunk bed, a frame with wire netting suspended from the roof. The youngest children slept under the table. Two families, happily co-existing for the school holidays, summer and winter. Our fathers would ride their push bikes to work - a good hour each way, while we played and explored and swam.

Our mothers maintained a routine that was simple and right. After breakfast the shack was swept and tidied, dishes done, coir mats shaken out and the towels hung to dry. Then the children were off, and the mothers sat down at the old shack table with its lino top, and played endless games of Chinese Checkers. This was a serious business, highly competitive and not to be interrupted. Children could play Checkers at other times, but the mornings were for the mothers.

After Christmas when the fathers had holidays, they went out fishing in my uncle's homemade boat. It was the colour of the early sky on a hot day, he'd mixed sand in the paint to provide grip on the deck. Four people could fish in comfort, powered by oars or a small outboard motor that was scarcely faster than rowing. These men were serious and skilled fishers. They knew the weather many days ahead. They knew where the fish would be and when they were biting. They didn't fish to fill in time, they fished to catch fish. Old family photos show washing baskets brimming with fish of a size that hasn't been seen in two generations. They came back with the afternoon sea breeze, we'd be waiting to help them pull in the boat and admire the catch. The kids would help clean the fish, and the gulls would scream and fight for the trimmings.

Not all families were skilled or interested in fishing, so a big catch at our end of the shacks was good news for many families. Our fathers would choose enough fish for a family feed - a gargantuan plate piled high with fish dusted in flour, fried in butter, steaming hot with a crisp golden skin. It seems strange now, when fish is small and expensive, to see just one poor fillet on a plate.

After the fish had been cleaned and the boat washed down and pulled out of reach of high tide (or under the shack if bad weather was on the way), the older children would take the basket of cleaned fish and sell them at the other shacks. This was a terrifying and delightful task. With warnings about not entering shacks alone, and stories of missing children

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resounding in our heads, we were often invited into other shacks and marvelled in a shy way at the different configurations, eclectic furnishings and found objects. As fishing kids, we knew about cleaning and cooking fish, and our opinions were sought quite seriously about the best recipes (flour and butter always), and when the fathers would go out again (when the fish are biting).

We children, and the mothers, were always welcome to go fishing with the men. The choice was ours, and some days we accepted the allure of travelling past the black line - the beginning of the extensive seagrass beds that blanketed the gulf and the nominal limit of our swimming zone - and sitting quietly on the swell, feeling the curve of the earth and looking back to the flat shore and the wall of mountains behind the city. These mountains were the important back marker for the best fishing spots. A dip or a peak, lined up with a prominent Norfolk Island Pine on one angle, against the powerhouse chimneys and a two storey house on the other, provided certainty for the best fishing spots on the otherwise featureless sea. Our aunty was the most entertaining fisher, she believed that fish came to singing, she had a fine voice and sang to the fish as soon as we anchored. I don't recall whether this method was effective, because as soon as we stopped I started to feel seasick. I sat miserably, listening to her singing and willing the fish to fill up our basket, until we felt the first breath of the afternoon sea breeze, when the anchor was hauled in and the little boat chugged stoically toward shore.

The strong tides along our coast meant that there was continual course adjustment to counter the northern drift on an incoming tide, the typical tide for early afternoon (the fish didn't bite on the turning tide, and were most active just before the tide was full, so fishing stopped with the tide and the start of the sea breeze). We rode the tide and rising waves into the beach, always bearing south to touch land in front of the shack.

The tides affected our swimming too. As long as we could stand up in the waves, from about 5 years old, we were free to swim unsupervised. Going for a swim in the afternoon meant starting at our shack at the southern end of the row, surfing and playing happily, to realise an hour later that we were being swept past the northern end of the shacks, then to run out of the waves, half a mile along the beach, and back in at the southern end. It was fortunate for our parents' mental state that they were confident of our ability to look after ourselves in the water, because it was difficult to see a small head bobbing in the water in front of the shack, but impossible to find that small head in the vast confusion of waves along the length of the beach.

In our many years at the shack there were fishing accidents, and deaths in the sand hills, but no drownings. We knew we were responsible for our own safety, we felt the danger in being dumped by a wave, knowing that a minute of hurt could easily transform into a panicked death, and that a watching parent could possibly pull out an unconscious child, but it was better to learn the ways of waves and tide so that you were strong and confident in the water and it played its games with you as a willing participant.