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## Unearthing the truth

**In 1984 I returned to Britain. It was more than ten years after receiving the extract of my birth certificate telling me that I was the son of the person whom I thought was my eldest sister, and that my father was *unknown*. The family I thought I knew was suddenly re-formed into a new shape and I was thrown to the fringe. But with the passing of time the feeling of rejection subsided, and I became more rational, even seeing some aspects in a positive light.**

On holiday back in the UK for several months, I made it my business to find out a few more details relating to family lineage. Prior to leaving Australia, I had heard a respected luminary talking on TV in front of a studio audience, about heritage, informing them that we all have eight great grandparents, but most of us could not name one of them. Well, I had news for that guy; I didn't even know the name of my father. But as often happens, this purely by chance incident inspired me to do more about the dearth of information – true information, as opposed to fake news - that existed in my own case.

The starting point, where I had a sense that evidence might well be available relating to my early years, was a favourite and most loving *aunt* - in reality, a re-formed sister whom I had lived with through my first ten years. So after landing back in Cornwall, as anticipated, and after some gentle pressure, the lady now into her fifties gave up a number of vital clues: firstly, my real father's name, but also that he was Scottish and already married (at the time I was conceived) with a son from that marriage, who would have been around nine or ten years old at the time of my birth. The information that he was Scottish was vital, as it pointed me in the direction of a detailed search which focused on this north-of-the-border heritage.

Thus, in the late autumn of '84 and in response to my aunt's advice under duress, I travelled by train to Scotland and spent one day searching through records in the grand circular vault of the Scottish Office of Births, Deaths and Marriages. The facts that I had managed to prize from my aunt were substantiated, along with new information that I discovered whilst leafing through the files, showing my father had divorced and re-married a few years after my birth. Was I the cause? ... it seemed most likely.

But then I turned over a page in one of the documents, and immediately noticed an entry that rocked me to the core: my father had died in 1983 - the previous year, and just a few months before I had set off to find him - at the respectable age of seventy-five years. This meant he would have been about thirty-eight years at the time of my birth; twelve or thirteen years older than my mother.

It was strange how this shocked me so much, leaving me with an immediate feeling of emptiness. In those few months in England, I had come as close to my father as I ever would, but in reality, he was as distant from me as anyone could be. Yet I was moved to tears when I realised that by not progressing quickly enough - by not getting off my ass and making the journey back from Australia to Britain in good time, so that I could try to put the pieces of my personal jigsaw together - I had thrown away the chance to meet the man responsible for my being. "*Fuck it!*" I muttered to myself. "*What a fool!*".

The next day, I travelled North to Aberdeen, to try and trace the elderly widow of my recently deceased father - his second wife - who had previously been employed to work in my father's pub (and the lady whom I much later found out his first wife always referred to as '*that fucking barmaid!*'). On a cold, blustery day - I assumed like many other autumnal days on the East Coast of Scotland - I bussed out to a wind-blown 70s-built estate, not far from the sea, on the outskirts of the city.

In retrospect, it probably all looked a bit ominous, because everything around seemed to pale into shades of grey: the streets, the houses, the blanket cloud cover above; even the bus was grey! It reminded me of the song *A Whiter Shade of Pale*, only everything on that day in Aberdeen looking like a *Greyer Shade of Grey*. The bus driver I remember, an elderly guy (dressed thankfully in blue), was particularly friendly, parking in a cul-de-sac at the end of his route, and - as it turned out - was still waiting for me when I returned from my shorter-than-expected reconnaissance mission.

Unfortunately for me, the trail stopped there. Nobody answered the door of the single story, ubiquitous pebbledash apartment, at the address I had noted from my search the previous day. I remember being totally deflated. Yesterday, the news that my father no longer existed; then today in a grey, cold, windblown suburb - the sort of place I would need to be paid a lot of money to agree to live in - I found a locked door and no flow-on connections from my father. No wife, no son, nothing! Not even a neighbour to speak to.

"*Christ almighty,*" I said to myself angrily, "*To hell with it all! What's the point?*" as I wandered back to the bus, ripping up the piece of paper with the address and throwing it into the two square metres of manicured lawn, outside the front window of my once-removed, stepmother's apartment. Though what I thought were silent blasphemies and invectives, may in actual fact not have been so incredibly silent, because still irate, as I stepped back aboard the bus, my friendly chauffeur for the day said back to me. "*What was that you said lad? You OK laddie? ...in his best Billy Connolly imitation.* He started the bus, wheeled around the cul-de-sac circle and we returned, just the two of us for quite a while, conversing almost like father and son - me upset and him giving me his

pearls of wisdom – almost all the way back to the city centre. After that, I retreated to my lower bunk bed in the local Scottish Youth Hostel, protected by the castle ramparts and cannons up above ... to think of what might have been.

One other memory has always remained in my mind from that short trip to Scotland. After the grey-day's unsuccessful search, I took a local bus up the Dee River, past Balmoral, to the town of Braemar. It was a good day to unwind, and get my thoughts back in order: a blue-sky, wonderfully calm day - in complete contrast to the day before – that made the magnificent surroundings even more magnificent. I sat not far from the front entrance and exit door of the bus, and remember people clambering up and down the steps, chatting with the driver as they got on and off, as if he was one of their extended family. Invariably they carried large shopping bags and the more elderly often used a walking stick to help negotiate the steps, all speaking in a broad Scottish dialect; so broad in fact, that I could hardly understand what was being said, which made me wonder for a while if their conversation was actually based on the English language, or some other tongue I had never encountered before. I enjoyed this experience immensely; it was as if I was in Greece, or Sardinia, or some other distant land.

After familiarising myself with the small town of Braemar for two or three hours - which included a *haggis* dish, washed down with a pint of Scottish ale for lunch, followed by photos of assorted *haggis* on display in the local butcher's window - it was time to catch the next-to-last bus for the day, back to Aberdeen. On the return journey I recall meeting a rock climber, a few years younger than me, who was sitting across the aisle, and as day turned to night, we began to strike up a conversation. I desperately needed someone to talk to, and he happened to be the nearest and most likely victim. But from the start the guy was so understanding, and as our discussion progressed, he began to give me snippets of measured but heartfelt pieces of advice. There was an instant rapport between us. It almost seemed as if the bus driver from the previous day and now my new rock-climbing friend, were meant to happen; to guide me across some of the most choppy waters in my life ... back to dryland and a semblance of normalcy.

It transpired that the rock climber had just finished reading the book *From Heaven Lake*, by *Vikram Seth*, and took time to explain the story to me: of the author Seth, living in China and travelling overland, through Nepal, back to India. Seemingly disconnected to my plight at that time, I came to find the tale so full of obstacles and how to overcome them, that in actual fact it had an incredible resonance to my own situation. He gave me the book, suggesting he thought it would be a good thing for me to read at this juncture in my life. And he was dead right! It was indeed the perfect piece of writing for me, and came just at the right time. We exchanged addresses and telephone numbers - this was just before the dawn of email - but unfortunately, I never saw him again. It was almost as if it was meant to be that way, as if this fellow (I can't even recall his name) had been parachuted in to deliver the book: a one-off secret rescue mission, to help me deal with my difficulties. And just like the swimmer a decade or so before, who had saved me from drowning off an Australian beach, then after checking my pulse disappeared into the distance, I will be forever grateful to my *man from heaven lake*, just simply for being there in the right place at the right time, to help put me back on track.

After that, the whole sad tale of unfortunate timing receded in terms of its importance and influence on my thinking. I went back to Australia and got on with the real and more tangible aspects of living. Years later, on a subsequent visit back to the *Motherland* - or more aptly *Fatherland* in my case - I met a distant aunt and uncle, who were able to scratch their rather rusty brain cells and come up with some new and interesting facts surrounding my dubious heritage.

They recalled that just before I was due to enter the world, my father, who had a Pinocchio-style nose, and his first wife, who for some inexplicable reason was in a wheelchair, were summoned from Scotland, for a family conference in Yorkshire, to decide what was to be done about me. They turned up with their young son in tow, who was given into the care of my ten and sixteen-year-old *sisters-to-be*, for the duration of the meeting. The older *sister* subsequently became my favourite aunt, who many years later was to become the first to weaken, providing me with much sought after information related to my background.

It was by all accounts a rather stormy pow-wow (described in detail in an earlier chapter). My grandfather was in his early fifties, twelve or thirteen years older than my real father, whom I have since come to know was a bit of a *lad* in his day, who could try his hand at most things and thought he could talk people around to his way of thinking (as perhaps he did with my mother, which I would have to say I am ever grateful for). He spent time as a travelling salesman, amongst other jobs, before becoming a publican, which does tend to say something about his likely character. Well on this day he would have had his work cut out, as they say, to convince his older adversary about anything. This quite unique and patriarchal grandfather figure – known universally as *dad* - was born just before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with clear Victorian ethics and a stoic Yorkshire way of thinking, to boot. He could be fierce at times, as I later discovered, when I challenged him with wild behaviour from the rock-and-roll era of the early sixties.

The results of all this was that it was agreed I should be handed over to grandmother and grandfather, as their child. The family doctor was conscripted, and it was arranged that I would be born, unknown to anyone outside the immediate family, in the confines of the good doctor's home cum surgery. That was the contrived plan, which was enacted to perfection when I, George, was transported back to family and promptly anointed as the seventh child of the matriarchal *mam* (in reality my grandmother). These were incredible measures, taken to circumvent those lingering Victorian times: an era where everything on show still had to be seen to be done in a right and proper manner, particularly when it came to abiding with church and family values.

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Back in Australia, after a somewhat fruitless but nevertheless enlightening visit to Scotland, I plucked up the courage to clear the slate and talk with my mother's husband: the person who had become something of a stepfather to me, since arriving *down under*, twenty years before. He admitted that yes, his wife - the person who had duped me for twenty-six years into thinking she was my elder sister - was in fact my mother;

thus confirming the jigsaw I had managed to piece together from my favourite aunt and other family members, in conjunction with the Scottish Registry office.

So the case was closed: shut firmly like the trapdoor on a submarine. Any further search of the background surrounding my father was rather pointless, unless the main purpose was to complete the half-empty knowledge of my own medical genealogy. Now, that I knew for certain my real father was no more, the only part of the overall picture that still intrigued me was the young nine-year-old boy, who had come to the meeting in Yorkshire, with his parents, not long before I was born.

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