



## A second start: a new life!

**Soon after the ocean liner had tracked across Port Phillip Bay to dock in Port Melbourne, the lanky teenager - now transformed from Elvis 'flop-top' to Beatles 'mop-top' - was leaning on the wooden top-rail, casually watching as a few decks below, to his left, the four people he expected to see made their way up the gangway from shore to ship. He gave a gentle wave, then snapped a picture with the new camera his family in Cornwall had given him, just before leaving.**

That shot became etched in his memory, showing the dark-haired woman in the lead - still as fine-looking as he remembered, but into her early forties and older now - glancing in his direction and waving back; followed by a fair-haired trio of son and daughter in brightly coloured T-shirts, with noticeably tall father bringing up the rear. Unlike the lady in front, the entourage were looking upwards, possibly overawed by the size of Oriana, while she had already picked him out from the crowd lining the deck. This alone, perhaps indicated some inbuilt, unstated connection, between the two.

That sunny winter's day in Melbourne held a certain excitement, both for George and the lady he had not seen for ten years. The young man, now a shade under six feet tall,

remembered her as a very gentle person, when she was with him for a few months those many years ago, caring for him and easing him into school on his first day (from where he promptly ran away on the second!). Since then she had continued to send airmail letters on a regular basis, telling him all about life in Australia. At times he had replied too, but perhaps not as often as he should have, particularly over the past year or two. For the lady, the day was significant because it held the potential to begin to quell the torment she had gone through since leaving George - her firstborn son – following marriage to the tall blonde Australian, then departure from England, some 13 years before.

Her two children, both tall and slim - after their father - were intrigued as to what this new interloping *uncle* from '*Beatle-land*' might turn out to be like. Officially George (even his name mimicked one of the fab four) was coming to stay, billed as their mother's younger brother; in fact, almost unbelievably, 25 years younger! They had been told he would join their family household in Ballarat - a smaller provincial city, the original gold-rush capital, about 75 miles inland from Melbourne - and from there would attend a local secondary school. They were born two years apart and the interloper was a few years older than that; so would he be like a mate; or would he want to boss them around? They had discussed all this in detail and in private, out of their parent's earshot; and by this day when the visitor arrived, had formed a joint, albeit somewhat secret understanding, that all their questions were on the verge of being answered.

Their father, it could be said, was outwardly pleased to welcome the lad, now a young man, whom he realised could in time become his stepson. But if pushed he would have admitted to a little apprehension about the newcomer's arrival, and whether his presence might impact on the well-formed nuclear family he had labored to raise, a family that existed within a wealthy, but still rather conservative, wider clan. The man's uneasiness tracked back to those circumstances he remembered only too well, when he had last seen George as a toddler in Yorkshire, and had then swept the young child's mother off her feet, away from the boy and out of the country. Afraid to take him with them! Afraid to take him back to the cackling tongues in his antipodean hometown.

George took it all in his stride. For him it was like an adventure in the geography classroom: the only subject at secondary school he had had much time for. He wasn't quite sure what to expect from, or how to react to his newfound family, but he did know that he had been enthralled to see the ruins of Pompei, along with the Suez Canal and streets of Colombo, plus all the other delights on the way. Now, he was even more captivated by the thought of getting to grips with this vast land of wonder called Australia. It was seeing the place, rather than meeting the people, which underpinned the real fascination for the young man ... though of course he very much appreciated their well-timed invitation. At that time, the British Government was subsidizing emigration to Australia – the journey cost just ten pounds - but though George appeared to outsiders like a sponsored immigrant, his passage had in fact been paid in full, by his stepfather to be. Thus there was no limit on the length of stay, or long-lasting obligation to the new country: it could be a month, or if things went well, a lifetime.

So the blossoming young man from Cornwall fitted into the format of his new family's way of life in those comparatively wilder and for him, more stimulating lands of Australia. Simulated test matches in the household driveway saw mop-haired George fast bowling to his blonde-topped 'bruncle', while their father/stepfather - still a handsome gent, but now with receding hairline - sent down leg spin and 'googlys' to confound them both. On such occasions sport took the form of facilitator-in-chief; the three of them - from different generations and dissimilar backgrounds - becoming best mates.

George quickly took on the guise of budding Aussie male, but beneath a more outgoing exterior there remained some of the baggage he had arrived with just a few months before. On occasions he would sneak out to the back garden, after dark, to enjoy a 'fag', then after a few months he managed to pluck up courage to confront his stepfather on the topic. The two of them were in the kitchen one evening when (after considerable thought and consternation) George blurted out:

*"Hey John, do you mind if I smoke?"*

John, probably fully aware of the night time escapades, replied coolly:

*"Feel free George; you can burst into flames if you like!"*

It was a laconic, typically Aussie-style response, that George remembered for years after, and perhaps a small brick in the wall to help cement their genuine friendship.

With his mother's only daughter there was a more subdued relationship. It lacked the camaraderie of backyard cricket, or catch-frisbee on the beach, to get things going. There was instead an understood, but perhaps in those early Australian years, somewhat inexplicable bond. Much later George was able to see the similarities between his half-sister and his younger daughter: looks, character and voice, right down to the way they laughed ... more of a chortle really. They were both quite arty, something obviously handed down from generation to generation, both with luxuriously long and wavy, straw blonde locks, and through quite different modes of work they each dealt with the natural world in a caring, loving way. These two – sister and daughter, almost forty years apart - were similarly free and alternative personalities, one refusing to drive, the other refusing Facebook. Like differently aged peas from the same pod, they were remarkably alike. Over the years George was captivated by both.

But if he had known then, the detail which came to light later, about his birthright and upbringing, he may have held a different attitude vis-à-vis this quite major move to a new land and unfamiliar home, ten thousand miles distant from his country of birth. At the time, he simply thought he had come to stay with his older sister and her family, for a while at least – an extended holiday of sorts - and he was going to make the most of their invitation come what may. If he ended up staying for good, then so be it; at sixteen the world was his oyster.

***George recalls the events at that time:***

*“From where I stand now it all seems a bit beyond belief. There I was, sweet sixteen and - apart from a bit of cavorting around in the school bus on the way home from the Christmas party - never been kissed in earnest. Yet somehow, I'd managed to travel half-way round the planet on my own, and didn't seem particularly concerned about leaving the familiarity of family I had known throughout my childhood, in favour of adopting a relatively unknown and quite different model, in another country.*

*Looking back, it seemed an extraordinary thing to do, but then again teenagers are resilient and resourceful creatures, though often quite single-minded.... obnoxious at times! I loved geography and maps and the thought of travel to anywhere and everywhere: faraway countries and mysterious capitals were like a magnet to my youthful mind, at that time. Nairobi for example, where I was to end up later in life, seemed a particularly mysterious and alluring place. As well as all that, back in Cornwall I was under severe threat of being thrown out of school, and though I might have been quite willful at times, I was not stupid: I knew it could seriously affect my prospects of any future studies and work and suchlike, so I grabbed the lifeline when it came hurtling towards me - from 'the land down under' - and hung on resolutely.*

*Ever since I became aware of the grand charade regarding my early life, I have often wondered just how my emigration to Australia was organized (with the person who was actually travelling – me - knowing very little, if anything, about it). Now with the benefit of hindsight I can sense a clever continuance of that cover up, which began before I was born. I was not privy to any of the necessary details, such as birth certificate; passport and tickets, etc.: everything was arranged by the elders in the family: my grandfather and my aunties. At sixteen of course, I could have been fully involved, but that option was never offered: the detail was all done for me somewhere in the background, by the people who had contrived to deceive, right from the start. Looking back, I should have been more inquisitive. Why is my father's name not on the certificate? Can I play a part in obtaining MY passport? It could have saved a ten-year wait for the truth!*

*But perhaps even more importantly I would also loved to have known just what the people who steered that course thought would be the end result. Had it all been planned for a long time, perhaps even mooted when my mother kissed the groom, then left me behind in the Yorkshire Dales. Something like:*

*“And don't forget mam, I want George to come out to live with me as soon as he is old enough to travel on his own. Around sixteen, I think.”*

*Or perhaps it all came about on the spur of the moment - a result of my errant behaviour at school and home – in order to save me from self-destruction ... akin to:*

*“You’d better send him out to me as soon as possible dad. I’ll work out what to do once he gets here. He’ll be better off in Australia.”*

*It wasn’t so much that I had been seriously misled at the time – that, I suppose was part and parcel of the whole thing – what consumed me more, was the exact intention of those who were involved in planning my transfer from family in England to something similar in Australia. Did they envision me living with my mother Dorothy as her younger brother and become an uncle to her kids, or was the plan for her to disclose the truth and nothing but the truth, and thus take me into the fold as the eldest of her three kids? I suspect the latter; but feel it may have failed to materialise because - and this is a bit of pure guesswork - John, her Australian husband, who was bound to have had considerable influence, simply had second thoughts, and contrived to veto the idea of full disclosure. This may have been at the very last minute (even perhaps after I had arrived on their doorstep); something of a repeat from years earlier, when he had conspired (with my grandmother) to separate me from my mother, as a three-year-old.*

*Having said this, John did become a very good stepfather to me (though only in actions, never in name) and I became fond of this large man, whose lithe six-foot-two frame turned to a pronounced five-foot something stoop in later years; swept back blonde changing imperceptibly to balding grey. He was a particularly loving and generous person: a gentle giant in all respects. Soon after arrival in Ballarat I remember being in awe as he showed me around the family’s large clothing store, in the middle of town. It was like something from the gold-rush days (100 years before) with him in his central command post receiving cash from the various departments, which zipped across the space on wires, just above head height. As a footnote I must add that just a few short years later this historic building was demolished in favour of a sixties concrete and glass affair. It was a big mistake by him and his two brothers. Today’s town planners and heritage groups would had had a field day with such irresponsible ideas.*

*Many years later, when I was well into my third decade of life ‘down under’, John wrote to me, throwing some light on the circumstances which prevailed in those days, when I was a toddler in Yorkshire; a situation which may still have influenced his thinking around thirteen years later, when I arrived to join his family (though he never confirmed*

whether - after I landed on his Australian doorstep - he again declined to take me on board as his adopted son). His type-written letter went as follows:

**My role, all those years ago, leaves much to be desired. I was about 23 at the time and had spent from 18 to 22 in the army. My father died while I was in Japan, and my mother had died around the same time I met Dorothy in Scotland, during the music and drama festival in Edinburgh.**

**I went to her home in Yorkshire and lived with your family. I don't know what your memory of this time would be - there was quite a table full. As you know your mother was the eldest of six siblings (you were in fact deemed the seventh). Dorothy's mam and dad were wonderful people and you were very much part of their large family. Our romance blossomed and she had the task of telling me she had a child by an airman, already married.**

**When we decided to get married, Dorothy asked me to take you to Australia. I was faced with the decision, which has haunted me ever since. I had very little money and was 12,000 miles from home. I wanted to get back to Australia as soon as possible and arriving in Ballarat with a ready-made family troubled me. Things can be tough enough now for unmarried mothers, but in those days, prejudices prevailed that were straight out of Charles Dickens.**

**But the deciding factor was the love for you of Dorothy's mam and dad. Mam told me to take Dorothy to Australia, give her a good home and look after her. So, I am the black sheep; Dorothy didn't have a choice. She left you and her heart behind in England. I must confess to my youthful combination of bliss and ignorance. I did not understand the depth of her emotion. I suppose even then it was in her mind that somehow, she would get back to you.**

**I find this letter very difficult to write – it seems quite inadequate that I thought I did the right thing at the time.**

**Love, John.**

He had written the letter a few years after I had confronted both my mother and him (on separate occasions) about the true details of my birth: my mother across the kitchen table and John over a beer at the saloon bar of the 'Old Coloners' club, a rather musty wood-panelled affair, catering specifically for the elite, white men of Ballarat town. I suspect that in part, he wrote to me because the health of his wife – the love of his life - was deteriorating, and the guilt which had been there for more than thirty years, was welling up. It was, I think, for him a cathartic exercise: an attempt to cleanse his soul of prior wrongdoing. I doubt that it worked.

Reading the letter, it became plain to see that John was indeed the main reason for my life without a mother, and in retrospect the bitterness I had felt towards my mother was

*to some degree misplaced. What did I do about it? Well, nothing very much really. If I had been angry, I would have confronted him, but he was too nice a guy for that; if I had been more considerate, I would have approached them together, in an act of reconciliation. But it pains me to say now, that I was too uncaring, or perhaps just too timid, to confront either of them on a topic as thorny as this. In hindsight I have to admit I come across to myself as a bit of a wimp on the whole matter; when I should have taken the bull by the horns to at least try to make right some of the wrongs that had been done, both to me and to my mother. But I stepped back into the shadows to hide. If I had had the courage to confront the issue head on, it could have been a good thing for all concerned, which might have cleared the air and put things right, long before, first John my stepfather and later Dorothy my mother, passed away.*

*After that, we never talked about anything much to do with my place – fact or fiction - in the family; it was a topic that was swept, quite firmly, under the carpet. On a number of occasions I tried to refer back to the fact that I was aware of the real circumstances that underscored my own existence and when my mother's health was failing I did mention that I had come to know the son of my real father (the nine-year-old boy who had attended a family meeting, along with his parents, just before I was born). Her response to such news (from an alien world) was always much less than enthusiastic. By then, the myth that had been concocted so many years before, and continued on when I arrived in Australia, had in her mind, become a warped sense of reality. Since those early days she had buried her head in religion, which increasingly, seemed to form an escape blanket, under which to hide. For better or for worse, I left it at that. If I had been expecting her to jump for joy and throw her arms around me saying 'welcome back my son' I was sadly deluded. The time for that was well and truly over!*

*And so, from time to time, I would visit and - at surface level - they would treat me in very much the same way as they always had done. I had arrived from England as the uncle of their children: five and seven years my junior. Five years later they attended my wedding at a (much frowned upon) Roman Catholic church in Adelaide; they were there billed as my elder sister and her husband. Later still, and across the years, I would travel from Adelaide with wife and young son, then later new partner and daughters, to stay for a few days with my adopted Australian family in their Ballarat homestead, or*



*vacation houses in the Grampian mountains, or Queenscliff beach. Decades rolled by and nothing much changed: I was always her brother, his brother-in-law, their uncle!"*

*It seemed like there was an unwritten law of silence on these matters; and yet, once I had plucked up the courage to confront each of them at separate times – mother, father, son and daughter – in reality they all knew the truth. But still the charade continued, year after year, after year ... until both father and mother died. How incredibly stupid!*

*At my mother's funeral a few years ago, my brother and I decided to tell it like it is ... not like it was. So we both stood at the front of a small group, in the Anglican church which my mother and step-father had attended for sixty years. And we both called her OUR mother! It may have been a somewhat shocking moment for some of the onlookers, but it was, I believe, a truly liberating instant for my brother and I. Finally; finally, no dirt under the carpet. No soiled linen! No longer any necessary secrets! No faik nuiz!*

*If only I had been a more courageous extrovert (rather than this introverted mouse I tend to be) I perhaps should have one day rung a huge clanging bell, before jumping onto the dinner table to proclaim the truth for all present; not singularly and behind closed doors, but out in the open, so that the intimately involved throng could be able to hear and inwardly digest, together! I am sure such impulsive action - if I had only had the guts to take it - would have been a huge relief to all concerned, sitting there, looking on in awe! It would have lifted the veil of disguise - the punishment of untruth - after so many years of consolidated lies.*

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