

All done ...with mirrors!



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(Where an illusion is accomplished that is purposefully deceptive)

Those who grow up only knowing the sanctuary of their true forebears, often find it difficult to comprehend why others search frantically for parents and family they have never known. The lucky majority fail to realise the importance of heritage: of knowing our past; of identifying who we really are during our short moment on Earth. For those seeking the truth, nature often wins out over nurture (even though the nurture may have been impeccable). Blood it seems is thicker than any other substitutes.

So there was I: the unknowing subject of deception - 10 years on from emigration to the antipodes – a mid-twenties gent, now standing at the dining room table in my newly rented home, nonchalantly slicing open a slim white envelope. Little did I know that the contents about to be revealed would change my life irrevocably!

I remember the exact moment. It was way before the world had succumbed to internet or email, WhatsApp or Zoom; when communication and authentication was the precinct of paper, serviced by postage stamps. The day had been quite cold, cold that is for Australia. Arriving home from work before my wife and her younger sister, with whom we were sharing the house, I was alone. I eyed the assortment of letters with curiosity. One with a UK stamp looked official. A few months before, I had secured a job with Shell, the Anglo-Dutch company, their HR section insisting on

birth details as proof of existence, to enable our otherwise impeccable relationship to continue ...passport would not suffice they said. As I withdrew the two papers from the envelope, it dawned on me that this was the response from London: a reply to my request for proof of identity that would rubber stamp my new job.

I stared at the first sheet of paper - to be more precise half sheet of paper - torn off along a dotted line. It was not a copy of the complete birth certificate, but what was termed an *extract*: a crude typewritten document in its original form, to which handwritten information, in blue ink, had been added on the dotted black lines, providing critical information drawn from the original. I turned to the second sheet: an accompanying letter, which explained that a search had found no birth certificate for the names submitted, relating to father or mother, but that a certificate *had* been retrieved for a name that I had given as my own.

Returning to the extract, It was plain to see my somewhat distinctive and decidedly Scottish-leaning Christian names were all there: the first to honour good King George, the others in respect for what I had thought to be my Gaelic pedigree. The peculiar thing was, that the names written next to mother, were exactly the same as the trio I recalled for my elder sister (a rather uncommon) twenty-five years my senior. My birthplace - West Riding of Yorkshire - was correct, but against *father* was written one single word: *unknown*. On that cool winter's day in Adelaide, Australia, when I was just twenty-six-and-a-bit years old, I came to realise that rather than pedigree, I was a bit of a crossbreed; in fact, I qualified as a genuine bastard!

It took just a few brief moments to reach the abrupt conclusion that the preceding two and a half decades had been a bit of a sham, and that I had been soundly deceived by a whole lot of people, who up until that point in time, I would have trusted with my last breath of life and worldly possessions. That sort of feeling sets you back a bit: a lump in the throat and a tear in the eye type of moment. It can even make you begin to question – as *Monty Python* once dramatically elaborated on – *The Meaning of Life*.

It took me a further two or three years to get my mind around a whole mishmash of conflicting thoughts. Who of those - in what had suddenly become my more distant

family - knew the truth? But perhaps even more importantly, who did not? Which of my relatives (to use the typically truncated Australian term) had been party to almost three decades of deception, and who were unaware of the true facts? And indeed, how could I have been so stupid? For Christ's sake, the person whom I believed to be my mother would have been almost fifty when I supposedly emerged through her somewhat wrinkled vagina: an event almost bordering on the miraculous for those days, so soon after World War Two.

On top of all that, I began to wonder if I had been banished to the *lucky country* at the tender age of sixteen, to kiss and make up with my long-lost *sister-cum-mother*, who had married and emigrated there three years after I was born? Month after month, question upon question raced around inside my head, but the daddy of them all was just that: who and where the hell was my true father?

A year or two more and my inner rage and turmoil began to subside. The turmoil I have already alluded to, but there was also a bitterness, that at times, spilled over into rage. Since then, those innermost feelings have waxed and waned, at times swelling to almost total self-appointed divorce of that generation of experts in illusion and deception; but then ebbing back to forgiveness, as both I and they grew older. At those moments of calmer reflection, I would take on board the notion that life was too short for recrimination; in the end we were all the same people, it was simply just the labels and generational order that had been changed.

Essentially, it was not their fault. They were caught by the lingering forces of a Victorian era, and an obligation laid down by my grandparents, that the whole family would follow their creed. This creed was driven by *mam* (my grandmother) to ensure protection for her first born, the most gifted and adored of six siblings (which became seven, once I was added to the list). That first-born (my mother) was the first to graduate from university; the first to speak fluent French; the first to become a high school teacher and an accomplished musician on both piano and flute, with a soprano voice that sailed to the heavens. And she was, in a diminutive sense, extraordinarily beautiful, adored by mother and father, revered by two sisters and three brothers. Despite all that, she remained in truth, my mother.

After what now in hindsight, seems like an eternity from receiving those birth certificate details through the mail, I summonsed the courage to confront this same lady, who had invited me to travel half-way around the world to live with her nuclear family of four, in Australia. In fact, my initial arrival on the Port Melbourne dockside was more than two decades prior to that momentous occasion, when I finally decided to approach her, armed with the knowledge gleaned on that winter's day in Adelaide.

The result was disappointing to say the least. No open arms to bring us back to reality, as I had perhaps secretly hoped; not even any open acknowledgement of the wrongdoings or lies, which had caused me to be deceived for so many years. In the end, just begrudging and belated admission that what I had said to her was indeed the truth. Up until that point in time, I guess some small part of me was hoping it was all a ghastly mistake on the part of the *Registrar for Births, Deaths and Marriages*, in London. My mother's reluctant acknowledgement of the true facts blew that thought out of the water in no uncertain terms!

After that, we returned to the same fabricated playing field, with an inbuilt understanding that no mention would be made regarding the true account of my birth and upbringing. In particular, not a word was to be said to her younger son and daughter, the results of a long and devout marriage to her husband, the stepfather in waiting, whom I had come increasingly to admire and respect through my years in Australia. My mother was a woman now into her fifties, who had kept the lid shut tight on the reality box for more than a quarter of a century. She had gone down that track too far and for too long, and now was afraid to either disclose or confront the true situation. To say she believed the myth that had been created, was maybe not completely true, but at surface level it almost appeared that way.

So I kept my word ... for some time at least. But then one day, towards the end of a short stay at my *new* brother's place in Melbourne, it all spilled out. The whole thing had been on my mind throughout the stay, and the opportunity came - or so I must have felt - during a brief farewell in his clothes-strewn bedroom on the final morning, following a late night on the town. Leaning casually on his bedroom doorframe - perhaps in part to prop up my hangover - I blurted out the truth, telling him that although he had known me as an uncle, in reality I had always been his brother. In

short, with two or three sentences, I laid out the astounding news that *his* mother was also *my* mother! Unceremoniously, he muttered a few choice syllables, rolled over, and went straight back to sleep.

“OK,” I thought, “So much for that earth-shattering announcement. Best then I get on with my own life.”

But not long after I had dropped the bombshell, I received a long, heart-rending letter, scrawled-out over four or five pages, in at times hardly legible handwriting. I guessed he had put pen to paper after quite a few drinks, but non-the-less it was a letter the like of which I had never received before. It began:

Dear Brother,

This is basically about a topic that means most to us. Not long after you left, I went to stay with the parents. There was a film on. It was about a girl who had a baby illegitimately, which was brought up by her mother. Very coincidentally I noticed how much mum concentrated during the film; but at the same time, I wondered just how much her own situation was a reality to her.

She may have been soft, warm, very loving, intelligent, to me; she wasn't for very long, to you. The fact that she prolonged the deception to the point where she half believes it, is even worse! Or is it?

The bulk of the letter was full of angst and torment, culminating (I presumed after one or two more drinks) with the sentence:

Fuck! Why doesn't my mother think you were conceived in an act of love. What was her state? I bet she enjoyed making you. That should be enough!

He was probably dead right. But I had also come to understand that our mother was a victim, not just once, but thrice. First, by being coaxed to forego her virginity for her assailant's false love; then secondly by having to bear a plethora of constraints and controls from her parents, before, during and after giving birth, and through my early years; then finally, when faced with marriage and emigration to Australia, more pressure from her parents to leave me behind, which to add fuel to the fire, was supported by her new husband – my brother's father – who preferred, for his peace of mind, for it to happen that way. This veritable pressure cooker was topped off by the fact that it all happened within the surrounds of a prying society; a society which

sought to stifle and stubb out anything they felt was untoward, when it came to the ethics of extramarital affairs and resultant offspring.

The letter finished much in the same vein as it had begun:

And now I think I should end in the way such a situation necessitates. Bigger the 'half' bit. You are my immediate family now.

All my love,

Your brother

Since that time, perhaps the most positive reward to come out of the altered relationships has been that my brother and I have grown much closer together, both of us seeming to relish the simple fact that brothers (albeit of the semi-variety) are by definition, much closer to each other than uncle is to nephew. Indeed, our bond became strong enough for us to refer to one another, in occasional letters or later via emails and texts, as *bruncle* and *brephew*, with no hidden malice or jealousy. It is in some ways the same with his sister (my half-sister of course) - to whom my brother passed on the news soon after I had told him - but because we haven't seen as much of each other since those days of enlightenment, our relationship has not been as well articulated as it has been with my brother. And on top of all that, the descriptor '*broniece*', doesn't seem to have quite the same ring to it, as '*bruncle*'!

One of the most interesting aspects of what seemed to me a rather incredible set of circumstances, was that beyond my newly found brother and sister, all other family relationships were also changed. People who previously had been labelled as my brothers and sisters suddenly became uncles and aunts; nephews and nieces morphed into cousins; and though of course I remained the same person, it felt as if by some strange twist of fate, I had been gifted a younger persona.

I was genuinely pleased to be able to suddenly descend from being the youngest of the post-wartime generation - with ethics that still existed from Victorian days, their men dressed in dark suits and sporting short-back-and-sides; their ladies in floral frocks with permed hairstyles - to become the eldest of a larger number of swinging sixties and cool seventies people, with bell bottoms and miniskirts, long hair and hot-pants: the rock and rolling generation! And they in turn were pleased to welcome me

into their ranks, all of them keen to atone for the long-lasting deception played out by the previous generation: their own fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts.

Now, from the vantagepoint of a more liberated 21st Century, with my mother and her Australian husband both long gone, and only one of my mother's five siblings remaining alive - now into her eighties - it's quite apparent that the era of the architects who were party to the illusion which accomplished my deception, is almost over. Literally dead and buried, it pains me to declare. Of course, those in the next cohort – the generation which I have joined – who were privy to the fantasy, are still all pretty much alive and here, but in truth were innocent bystanders and could not be accused of any wrongdoing. In retrospect, I would indeed have been quite pleased if one of them had stepped out of the darkness to divulge the truth, thus saving me from 10 or 20 years of blissful ignorance, until that rather indelicate birth certificate extract arrived in my mailbox. But that did not happen, and I for one cannot turn the clock back, to rewrite those childhood relationships, as I knew them.

Years later, I think around the time I discovered my father had died, I found out that information regarding my true birth-right had been passed down from my mother's siblings to the next generation: from uncles and aunts to my cousins, within at least one branch of the family. It startled me at first, that for a number of years at least, some if not all my younger cousins had been privy to insider information all about me; information that I myself had not been able to know until much more recently. It was similar to the cousins of an adopted person knowing details of the adoption, when the person at the centre of the issue knew nothing.

I remember the incident quite vividly. I was visiting a cousin in Cornwall, around where I grew up. She was a few years younger than me, and by then a wealthy farmer's wife. Over a cup of tea, the conversation went something like this:

“Oh, my God! George, I thought you knew!”

“No, as I just mentioned, not until I received that extract of my birth certificate.”

“My God, that's terrible. I don't know what to say. I've known for years now. Since I was in school. My mum told me to keep it a secret, and that's what I've done.”

“What about your brothers and sisters?” I queried (there were four of them: two in Britain and just for good measure, two in Australia).

“Yes, I think they also knew from their schooldays, but I’m sure they’ve kept it to themselves.”

“And other cousins in the family?” I asked, becoming slightly agitated. *“How many of them know?”*

“Oh, I can’t say really George. I remember Jane once talking about it; Alistair also, I think. But I shouldn’t worry yourself too much about it; such a long time ago, and we love you just the same you know.”

It might indeed have been *such a long time ago* for my cousin, but at the time of that discussion, the topic still remained very much to the forefront of my own thinking.

Reading between the lines, it was beginning to sound like everyone except the current crop of babies in the cradle, knew that cousin George - or uncle George for the later editions - was a bastard. But of course, by that stage of advanced gossip, I could do very little about it. The only answer was to confront like with like: to verify the grapevine and confirm its truth. From that day on, I would be a cousin to my real cousins and an uncle to their offspring. My own true uncles and aunties (my mother’s siblings) could like it or lump it, as the saying goes.

But in fact, it did take a fair degree of courage and endeavour to take this to the older generation. The notion of me being their younger brother was something they had learned to own for three or four decades. It was as if I was telling them to re-write history: that there was in fact something known as *‘The Big Bang’*, and that God didn’t really create the world in seven days. And while most of them came around to the truth and even in some cases apologised, for one aunt in particular – a devoutly religious soul - it was all too close to the bone: she refused to re-write the false story; to expose or even accept the more truthful rendition of history.

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After returning to Australia, I often wondered whether in fact those aunts and uncles had also been duped. Had they in fact been thrown a false narrative by my

grandfather, that George was being sent to Australia to re-unite with his mother, thus honouring a verbal agreement made between his now deceased wife and her daughter, many moons before. This unwritten contract, if there was such a thing, must have hung heavily in the air, as my mother sailed into the blue yonder, aboard *SS Stratheden*, with her husband of just a few weeks. The understanding could have been that the family matriarch (mam) would return me (George) to the rightful ownership of my mother (Dorothy) when I was old enough to travel under my own steam. On different occasions, I questioned each of my mother's siblings about this, but they either did not know, or refused to divulge the truth, in fear of breaking the early pledges they had made to their now deceased parents.

If this was in fact the true account: that I had travelled to *the land down under*, to be reunited with my mother in a mother-son relationship, in some ways it is the story I think I prefer, compared to the version which actually went to the publisher, where I turned up in the continuing role, as my mother's brother. The more truthful version - the narrative which could have been enacted - would have shown an unrequited love from mother to child that spanned the years, despite the circumstances: analogous to an adopted child finding and coming to know his or her true mother, many years after their original separation.

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This account of me first discovering, then attempting to verify the true details of my birth-right, in effect identifies and describes the *bruncle* in the room, or in the background to be more exact – behind the cupboard doors - as I go about those general routines of daily life; those routines that each and every one of us encounter and have to face up to. This *background bruncle* does not de-rail the train, does not upset the applecart, but once the *bruncle* bird had flown the coop it was always there in the ether, impinging on my thoughts, impacting on my actions.

At times I even feel the *background bruncle* came to embolden me, to underpin an independence and assurity that I might not have otherwise possessed. I was a being who had never known his real father, or experienced the ever-present love of a true mother. I had been given worthy substitutes and in many ways that was all fine and

laudable, but deep down, diving well below the surface, I knew there were experiences that most people took for granted, which I could never lay claim to. To compensate for that, I needed to be my own person: an independent soul, who could survive alone, come hell or high water. That is probably what being a *bruncle* – and all that that entails – means at heart, to me.

This revised account, let's say the new narrative, relating to my birth and upbringing - some of which I found quite challenging as I travelled through my third and fourth decades – became known to me first in Australia, later supported by reconnaissance missions to Britain. The initial illumination that arrived in a white envelope regarding birth-right and legacy, had come some 10 years into what I have already described as my *Aussie Enlightenment*, where, thrown in at the deep end of antipodean school, boys-to-men college, and my first work year as a *jackeroo*, I was confronted by the unique Aussie-ness of those unknown, untried and sometimes testing waters. Did I meet those assorted and inimitable challenges with a degree of dignity and forthrightness, which perhaps had something to do with that independent state of being a *bruncle*? I myself think so.

But then, that should be left for others to judge. Thus, with this in mind I recall the three people closest to me, around the time, and through the years after I received notice of my true legacy; these were my toothy boss Tom, my bubbly wife Babs and my best friend Harold. The next few chapters show me sparring with each of these people, across a wide swathe of Australia, and variety of other destinations. They portray a resilient me, outwardly unscathed by any knowledge of my bastardness; keen to get to grips with life. The chapters contain a host of amusing incidents and anecdotes. Hardly the stuff of reflection and regret.

Yet who could know what truth lay beneath the glossy exterior. About 15 years after walking down the Roman Catholic aisle (7 or 8 years after the birth-right news) I quit my marriage to Babs; then around the same time I walked away from a very solid business partnership with Tom, veering towards temporary unemployment, more university studies, and (in time) a new career. At the time I was in my mid-thirties. Early mid-life crisis? ... or was it the impact of that *bruncle* in the background? The question is pending ... remaining to this day, unanswered.