



A new life ...or death by abortion?

A baby conceived out of wedlock, in the late 1940s and within the conservative surrounds of Yorkshire, could elicit a vitriol that any prospective mother would wish, with all her heart, to avoid. Unlike Britain, just released from war, the attitudes of British society were still constrained in a time warp.

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The doctor quietly closed the door after his last patient, slowly releasing the handle so there was hardly a sound. He was an older man, balding and bespectacled, small in stature and dressed in well-worn pinstripes, with waistcoat, striped tie and gold watch-chain to match. Shuffling back to the black leather chair behind his mahogany desk - and despite his failing hearing - he was able to discern the sound of carols in the distance. It was almost Christmas.

“Must be from the Rose and Crown,” he thought to himself.

Settled at the desk – his control centre, as it were, for more than 30 years – he pressed the intercom button, leaning forward to speak.

“You can come in Dorothy; It’s high time for you and I to discuss a few things.”

It is often said that beauty lies in the discerning eye of the onlooker, but the young lady who opened the door and stepped into the room was one of a very small number who would appeal to almost everyone. The fact she was such a diminutive figure, perhaps only five feet tall, did not seem to matter; her face radiated a beauty which overcame any such inconsequential deficiencies. The radiance could have been because she was in the latter stages of pregnancy; but in truth it was more enduring than that.

“Yes, Doctor Ogilvie, you wanted to see me?” she enquired politely in a soft voice, moving forward towards the desk.

“Come and sit young lady.” He patted the patient’s chair beside the desk.

“It’s been a long day and now in the middle of a Yorkshire winter we have semi-darkness at four o’clock.” Then with a sideways glance and faint smile: *“I feel like I need a few wee days in the Bahamas.”*

The young lady took his cue to relax and offered a delicate return smile, as she adjusted the folds of her pleated skirt.

The doctor continued on in his Scottish brogue. *“Anyway, how do you feel? Is everything OK with young Jimmy here?”* He said this with a nod in the direction of his assistant’s belly.

“You’re the one to tell me doctor. But yes, everything seems fine. I’m just scared of what others might say when I leave here, God willing, with my baby.”

“That’s precisely why I wanted us to talk,” the doctor replied, while nodding in recognition. *“You know, your dad and mam are like family to me. Remember, I was the one who brought you into this world just a few years ago. And also remember, they’ve always thought of you as their first-born angel. You know that, don’t you? First born of six, if my memory serves me correctly. There was one not so long ago that was a whopper; I think he tipped the scales at over thirteen pounds!”*

“But let’s not beat around the Mulberry bush, young lassie. Now your turn has come, and you have decided, as you have told me, that despite the circumstances, you want

to give birth, and for your child to be brought up in loving family surroundings. I admire you for that, it was not an easy decision, but so help me God, it will be done."

As he looked earnestly at the young woman sitting there, biting her bottom lip and gazing back anxiously, he placed his hand over hers and continued:

"You really shouldn't worry yourself too much young lass, especially at this late stage; the plan we have put in place will quell all those hangover attitudes from Queen Victoria that still exist around these parts. In fact, the cackling tongues won't even have anything to crow about. The way we've planned it, they will not even know you've had a baby. They might guess, but they won't be able to prove."

"But I can only hide behind your reception desk for so long doctor. What can I do?"

Dorothy searched his eyes as she said this.

"What you will do from now on young lady," the doctor said, with some emphasis on the 'you', "Is not hide behind the reception desk. I have organized someone to take over from you. Instead you will stay for the next six weeks or so in my second bedroom, across the corridor. The new lady will look after you. She's a good soul who already has four children of her own. She will not talk. You should not venture outside this place, or our secret will be scattered to the four corners, and you will be forever chastised as having a wee bairn out of wedlock: a sin even in this day-and-age which rates second, around these parts, only to first-degree murder!"

A short while later, as the doctor left his home and surgery, the small temperature gauge set on the wall just inside the glass-paned door indicated 32 degrees Fahrenheit: freezing point. Outside, as night closed in, the yellow glow from a lantern hanging above the surgery door, radiated patterns across the cobbled street. Dr Ogilvie raised his coat collar to ward off the biting wind, then started off down the street towards the carol singing and his usual pint of brown ale by the log fire in the *Rose and Crown*.

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It was a calculated prediction and the doctor wasn't far out; he was also right with the *Jimmy* bit too, for just forty-nine days, or seven weeks after their conversation, Dorothy

gave birth to a very healthy, seven-pound baby boy. The child, christened George, in deference to the ruling monarch, came to Earth in the middle of one of England's coldest winters. Then, three days after touching down on the bed in the doctor's surgery, he was wrapped snugly in warm blankets and carried in a cardboard box, by his mother, back to the family home. She exited through that same glass-paned door, stepping gingerly into the street, looking much as she had on first entering the place, some five and a half months before.

The plan that had been devised between the good doctor and Dorothy's parents functioned as well as it could have been expected to; no one in the neighbourhood was able to prove that the angel-faced eldest daughter of the people who lived in the big house on the hill – one of just a handful of youngsters in the area to gain a university degree - had given birth to an illegitimate child! Some would have dearly loved to upset the applecart, but for their part, there wasn't one who was able to corroborate the facts.

But this thought through plan for a concealed birth extended further, to include continuation of the subterfuge at home. George was carried back in the box and immediately welcomed by his grandmother as her long overdue seventh child. If people had stopped for a minute to question the plot - and admittedly there was some unfounded, rather malicious gossip - they would have concluded that it was extremely unusual in those days, for a woman to give birth in her late forties, and, ten years after her previous child. Just how much was known, or presumed, by those outside the family circle, can never now be tested or proven. Perhaps some did see and did comprehend, then thankfully turned away, declining to pass judgement.

It had been decreed before his birth, that George would be included as the youngest child of an older generation, rather than take up his rightful position as the eldest of the next. This enforced misplacement was magnified even further by the fact that his real mother's sister-in-law, who lived in an adjoining section of the big family house, gave birth to twin boys, just nine months later. Whether or not this was inspired by the extramarital birth, we will never know, but the result was that George grew up with two tousle-haired toddlers, in theory their uncle – and correspondingly they as his nephews - not as their first cousin, which should have been the true relationship. Small matters

perhaps, when compared to life or death, but those momentous decisions made at that time, on behalf of George, were set to rebound with alarm, decades later.

His life in the West Riding of Yorkshire at that time was comfortable enough. Not far from Bradford and Leeds - cities which in the future would become home for many Asian immigrants – George grew up in working-class surroundings that were almost 100% white, supported in the main, during those post-war years, by declining coal, steel and textile industries. The two-storied monolith of a house, sub- divided into two parts to cater for the extended family, was in fact a four-story manor, due to the additional basement and attic, which covered a sizeable floor-space in their own right. This 19th pile, built by a rich mill owner - appearing like a country lodge in the midst of urban surroundings - was set on large grounds, with many out-buildings for young George and his two *nephews* to explore and enjoy ...which they did to the full. As the terrible twos extended forward to the slightly more manageable threes and fours, George could usually be spotted at the centre of the melee, his dark brown, comparatively orderly hair, contrasting with the twins' blonde explosions of curl. Each day the threesome ran here, there, and everywhere, through the house and around the grounds together.

It was an exciting locale for kids to grow up in. The household was what might be termed multi-functional, with several home-based small businesses, and some of George's *brothers and sisters* (as they were known) going out to work: one a bank clerk, another a dairy maid. Originally the family had been *cabinet makers* (a term used for five-star carpenters) producing highly polished coffee tables and glass-fronted display cupboards. Then, before and during the Second World War, their business focus changed to local ambulances, long distance haulage trucks (which plied the Leeds to Glasgow route), and tourist buses (or *charabancs* as they were often jocularly referred to by Yorkshire folk in those days) to the north-east and north-west seaboard. Just prior to George's arrival – this all changed once again, when the spacious grounds and surrounding buildings became the base for a twenty-four-hour taxi service, specializing in weddings and social events, along with an assortment of other home-grown enterprises: one, a large market garden, plus pigs for meat and battery hens for egg production. The place was a hive of industry and endeavour, often well into the night.

Each of the three *young terrors* - as they were known by the whole family - were given a peddle car for their third Christmas: George's a light blue colour, the other two in pillar-box red. Around the same time, there were renovations under way and a truck-load of sand had been dumped near the steps that led to the front door of the house, but because the general access was through the back door, no-one noticed the sand-pile gradually disappearing ... until it was too late. Unknown to all the older people in the household, the three peddle-merchants had spent days filling old food cans with sand, then peddling off to distribute their newfound spoils in the vegetable garden, or whatever other destination they deemed appropriate. After the event, there was a bit of a scolding for the boys, but nobody could remain cross with them for too long, they were an adorable trio and loved by all.

So *mam*, the family matriarch, took George under her wing. His wooden cot was at the end of the double bed she shared with *dad*, who was of course in truth Georges' grandfather. Each day her habit was to call the boys for a mid-morning snack and thus a ritual developed where they would come running in to sit for a few relatively subdued moments – wearing red or blue berets that matched the colour of their cars – to sip warm cocoa and munch on homemade biscuits, while contemplating and planning the next round of mischief.

But without much warning and within a few short months, life for George changed dramatically during his fourth year, when his mother, after settling back into her teaching role at a local high school, met a globe-trotting Australian - a journalist by trade - at the Edinburgh Festival. Tall, blonde and handsome, it was as they say, love at first glance. They were soon married, and a reception was held at the large family residence. Memories of that day are recorded by an old sepia print which shows George, standing centre-front of the family gathering, the blonde twins, with their curl-fests shaved off to celebrate the occasion, on either side. Two weeks after the big event his mother left for Australia and George remained: an orphan within a loving family, cared for by his grandparents and his mother's younger siblings.

The young rosy-cheeked boy knew nothing of the truth related to his birth and upbringing, or the fact that without ceremony - apart from the wedding ritual that is - his

boyhood being had been bequeathed to his mother's parents. But the events that transpired during those Indian-summer months of 1950, would come to haunt the minds of the young mother and her newfound husband for years to come, in fact right through to their dying days, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

George recounts what he knows of those days before and after his birth:

After my mother shipped out to Australia, her next sister in line, Mary, became as close to me as she was to her own two children, born a decade later (and perhaps on reflection even closer, because of the circumstances of my birth, and being left behind when my mother eloped with her Aussie beau). Looking back, I feel a little guilty that I used this closeness - and her gentleness - to prize information from her lips, about my early years. At that time I was in my thirties and she her fifties, when I appeared from over the blue horizon to present the earth-shattering news that I knew the truth, and was hell-bent on knowing the detail that supported the fallacies put forward in its place. My (by then) very direct Australian-style approach caused her to fold like a pack of cards. She provided a raft of information - about my Scottish father, my heavily veiled birth, and those early days in Yorkshire with the twins - which I filed away for later use.

But even from the age of three or four, I was able to remember much of the detail from my toddler days at the grey-green house in The West Riding, not far from Huddersfield: grey due to the naked stone exposed through the winter chill, changing to green because of the lush dark clothing of ivy in summer. Specific scenes remained, imprinted on my brain, perhaps embellished with the help of a few tattered photos and snippets from 'sister' Mary (who later came to be known to my own children by the rightful and much-loved name, Auntie Mary). I can still conjure visions in my mind of peddle cars and a diminishing sand pile by the front door, the three of us peddling manically round an expansive vegetable garden and being called in to perch on kitchen stools as we guzzled down our daily dose of warm milk cocoa, watched over by mam (my caring mum as I knew her then, and the twin's favourite grandma).

I also have very vivid memories of my favourite pig being laid out to rest on a large table, in the spacious basement of the Yorkshire establishment. Looking back, I realise the reason the incident became such a vivid memory, was that the pig – which I had

been tormenting just a few days before – was now displayed before me as several dozen, reddish-white slabs of meat. This extremely large ‘Large White’ sow, which I had nick-named ‘Snorter’, was a feature of the land around the house and had been there, as far as I knew, forever: a family pet of sorts, for myself and the twins. Now, here she was, cut up and salted and spread out in a vast array of meaty parts for all to see (including me). ‘Spread out to ‘cure’’, I was told, which didn’t do much to quell the flow of tears. Snorter was perhaps the first love (and the first loss) of my life. As I was to discover, many more would follow.

The winter of 1946-7, when I came to Earth, was one of the coldest on record. I sometimes imagine the scene as I was carried home from the doctor’s surgery, my cube-like carriage illuminated at intervals by the streetlight glow; heels clacking on cobbled stone, long auburn curls bouncing on shoulders, my young mum’s breath casting misty clouds into the surrounding air as she glanced furtively from side to side, praying to reach the safety of home before any prying eyes spotted her on the street in the evening’s early dark.

Thus perhaps it was something of an omen, when just sixteen years later another bitterly cold winter descended on Britain: the infamous winter of 1962-63, with burst pipes and treacherous roads. Both ‘47 and ‘63 have gone down in British folklore as unforgettable times, for in a less threatening way those two harsh winters mirrored the years of the Second World War: strength in the face of adversity. But both also hold special memories for me as an individual: the winter of 1947 marking the year I left my mother’s womb; then the Spring of 1963 (following an equally freezing winter) the time of absconding from family and abandoning the cold of Mother England to return to the warmth of my mother’s care (though at that time I had no idea of the second truth).

These were critical parts of my past, now written with indelible ink!

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