



## Torrid times before the birth

Tracking back through those early days in Yorkshire, to a day six months before George was born, we come upon a tumultuous event taking place in the dining room of a large, stone-built residence (bought a few years earlier to house the extended family). On this balmy summer Sunday a number of people are seated around a rectangular, highly polished dining table, with *dad*, the fifty-year-old head of the household positioned ominously at one end, occupying an imposing high-backed chair: the dominant patriarch on his ornate throne!

They are taking tea from flower-patterned porcelain cups, accompanied by a dark, cherry-laced fruit cake and tasty cheddar, on matching side-plates – a traditional and delicious snack in this part of the world – carried from person to person on embossed silver platters by two teenage girls, ostensibly the older *sisters* of the baby-to-be. *Dad* is addressing a thirty-something gent to his left, whose pushed-back, *Brylcreamed* hair, lays dark and shiny on a larger-than-normal head, which in turn sports an equally prominent nose. The look on the younger man's face transmits a strange fusion of arrogance and fear. To top off an effect which seemed to beg playing-up, rather than playing-down his alleged errant behavior a few short months before, the comparatively younger man is wearing a rather glaring, mustard-and-green, tartan jacket - fashionable in Scotland perhaps – with a matching cravat in the same shade of *British Racing Green* emblazoned with mustard-coloured spots.

*“Now listen here young man,”* the older one bellows in a thick Yorkshire dialect, while glowering at his adversary, *“You come here with your crippled wife.”* He gestures with disdain to a pale-skinned, somewhat gaunt-looking lady in a wheelchair, sitting next to the younger man. *“And this boy of yours.”* (a nine or ten-year-old boy could be seen at the far end of the room, playing on the floor). *“And then you have the cheek to tell me it was all an unfortunate accident; that you were suffering the after-effects of flying over Germany, or some such rubbish. Well let me tell you young lad, I think it’s a whole lot of balderdash; I was also an airman in the war: The First World War. I was a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps, you know, and I flew by the seat of my pants; but I never got any lady into trouble, as you have done with our young Dorothy here! You should be ashamed of yourself! I tell you frankly, downright ashamed!”* His finale to this little tirade is accompanied by a loud thump on the table, causing the white porcelain cups to rattle in their saucers and the younger man to recoil sharply, looking decidedly fearful – rather than arrogant - as if thinking he would be the next item to be pummeled.

Dad’s fuming red face extended upwards towards his receding, grey hairline. His first-born daughter - his angel of mercy - had been hoodwinked and sullied by a de-mobbed Royal Air Force pilot. The anger of the older man was heightened due to the fact he had little time for the modern-day pilots of *Spitfires* and *Hurricanes*; the *Tiger Moth* bi-plane that he had flown as an 18-year-old, three decades before, was in his opinion the real test of piloting skills! Putting all this together, the older man was inclined to seek some sort of sweet revenge, both on behalf of his daughter and – perhaps subconsciously - in support of his comrades, those real pilots who dived with the *Red Baron* during the *Great War* (as he knew it). Today was the day to even the score in no uncertain terms. His stoic Yorkshire character told him that the young man sitting next to him– this spitfire pilot dressed like a rattlesnake - needed to be taught a lesson; a sharp lesson that he would never forget, for as long as he lived!

Dorothy sat looking rather sheepish, alongside her father and opposite the man whom she had made love to some three months before, now staring down at her slightly larger-than-usual belly, contemplating her sorry position. She could never have thought in her wildest dreams that the man she had known briefly as a single, and thus un-

betrothed airman – a persuasive man who had said he was seriously disturbed by a bloody war and in desperate need of some rest and loving care – was now here in this room, fighting off assault waves from her own enraged father. Her unforgiving dalliance had become her wildest nightmare. And though this father-to-be of her own baby now seemed a little arrogant, even insolent, she well remembered that time, not long before, when she had fallen for his charismatic, outgoing nature, and believing his story had given up her carefully protected virginity.

Now, she sat and observed the man's disabled wife, who in turn remained grim-faced and silent, staring blankly at a framed painting of a seaside scene on the opposite wall, its golden frame encircled by embossed, gold-coloured wallpaper, typical of the period. The painting featured a rainbow breaking through cloud, above the choppy waves; but it was quite obvious there was no rainbow on this lady's horizon. Her face was a vision of despair: her life also turned upside down by the man she had trusted implicitly since their marriage ten years before. In different ways both women had been betrayed by the same man, in his lust for a new conquest. The wife, glancing unseen at the husband sitting next to her, began to realise more-or-less instinctively that Dorothy was not the first woman he had slept with, beyond their marriage vows ... and perhaps more importantly, would not be the last. Her thinking was consumed by what was to happen once this day was over. In so little time a shared life, a shared family, which once she had been sure of, could count on, was now decimated and cast to the winds. The future looked bleak ... and certainly appeared to hold no rainbows of recovery, no miracles to come forth that might stall the impending gloom!

*The fruit cake was being superseded by creamed cupcakes as dad continued to berate the tartan-clad figure to his left. "Let me tell you," he continued. "it's high time for explanations young man. You can't go around doing this sort of thing. It's not done here in Yorkshire and I don't think it's very well accepted North of the border either, where you hail from. There are consequences, as we can now well-see my lad!"* He nods pointedly towards his daughter's growing tummy, causing Dorothy to cast her eyes downwards, trying to control her internal despair.

*“You’re supposed to be an upright, responsible citizen: an example to others around you.” He continued; his revenge not yet satiated. “Your air-force training should have damn-well told you that fact of life!” Yet here you are, plundering the life of an innocent lass; someone old enough to be your daughter! How do you explain it? Tell me, how do you explain such a thing?* Then another thump on the table, accompanied by more rattling of teacups, which once again causes the younger man to cringe and look away rather mournfully, towards his disabled wife (though in truth, he knew deep down that any forthcoming support from his wife would now be out of the question; dead and buried by his own unbridled actions).

*“I’m sorry sir. It wasn’t meant to be like this; I’d just arrived back from the occupation, when we happened by chance to meet.”* This was all the poor besieged guy could offer up, in a voice that seemed like a whimper against the older man’s bellowing. He had been reduced to child-like pleading, in response to the onslaught he faced.

The younger man’s last feeble sentence was like a red rag to a bull for the patriarch; like a cue offered up by *Costello* the dimwitted foil, to *Abbott* the bullying straight man: the popular comic duo of those times. *“Sorry! Sorry? That’s all you can muster after three months of thinking about it? You’re dead right it wasn’t meant to be like this! Our Dorothy is a fine upstanding Yorkshire lass. Now look what you’ve done to her! You look like a talking parrot from the jungles of Brazil in your ridiculous get up; God knows what our Dorothy here ever saw in you.”* The wife transfixed, on hearing this, thought much the same; she had made a grave mistake in marrying the man, and today’s resounding upheaval was the most ultimate, most irreversible consequence imaginable.

And so it went on: the young man berated and cowering under the strain, the lady in her wheelchair staring at the painting as she mused on the man she had once trusted, and the young boy playing in blissful ignorance on the floor. Nothing really could be changed or amended; the deed was done, and everyone involved would live from that day on, with the after effects, including the small foetus that was slowly developing inside the womb of Dorothy: the boy called George, to be.

At the finish the head of the family had his final say. *“Well, despite what you did in your hour of madness, we have decided that Dorothy will have the child, and mam and I will look after it, as if it was our very own.”* He gestured to *mam*, as she was known by everyone young and old, who had been silent, but listening attentively throughout, from the far end of the table. *“So, you can now take yourself and your little family back to sunny Scotland my lad, where you came from, and carry on with your merry little life; though I guess it may not be too merry from now on, judging by the look on the face of the lady you call your wife!”* He was still red-raw angry, but managed to appear a little pleased with himself at this thinly disguised, if somewhat malicious joke, which had the immediate effect of putting an end to any further discussion.

Soon after that, the younger man, reduced now to a shadow of his former self, pushed his sullen-faced wife out through the front door, negotiating the steps beyond, while the young boy trotted behind holding the hand of the youngest sister and clasping a small toy he had been given by *mam*; a gesture perhaps – however inadequate – to ward off the perils that were to come.

The lightly veiled forecast from the patriarch did in fact come to pass, when a year later the wheelchair-bound lady - now recovered from her illness and able to walk - left her husband, with her 10-year-old son in tow. Not long after that, her husband decamped to marriage with a long-term employee, from the pub he and his former wife had managed on the East coast of Scotland. Forever after that, the young boy who had come with his parents to the seismic meeting at the grand old house in Yorkshire, remembered his mother’s unrelenting referral to his father’s new wife as: *“that fucking barmaid!”*

For the yet-to-be-born baby, that was the last his mother and her family saw or heard of the couple from Scotland, though the young boy playing at the end of the room, would come back to feature in the life of baby George, more than fifty years on from that historic day. In time to come they would meet, and the boy – by then retired - would recount the details of that day, tinged with a sense of humour, thus enabling George to piece together a previously unknown part of his life: the jigsaw from his past.

So a plan was devised, and the mother-to-be duly hid away in the family doctor's premises. He was the doctor and family friend, who had delivered all six of the children, starting of course with Dorothy herself, twenty-five years before. She acted, first of all, as receptionist, and when her condition was beginning to show, became (the unseen) housemaid. On returning to the family fold with the newborn babe, *mam* took over the reins: a tiny Scottish lady, exceptionally beautiful in her youth, with an enduring, radiant quality that her daughter had inherited.

But looks can deceive. Beneath that external quality of lasting beauty there lurked in *mam* a steely inner self. She was respected, almost revered by all, including her husband, of some thirty years. He was, in theory, the leader of the household, but in practice it was *mam* who pulled the strings to which the whole family jumped. In reality, it was the matriarch who controlled the family's destiny ...even long after she was gone.

*"Such a beautiful wee bairn."* *mam* said with loving tenderness as she lifted the baby from the box, giving him a pronounced peck on the nose. The young child, just a few days old, peeked out from his tightly wrapped blanket, embroidered with blue *Forget-me-Nots*, smiling back at her as if he knew he was in safe hands. And indeed he was ... for a few short years at least.

*"As we agreed Dorothy,"* she said firmly, whilst continuing to gaze lovingly at the baby she was holding, *"I shall be his mother from now on, and no one, not one soul outside this place, will be the wiser. Your brothers and sisters have all been sworn to secrecy."* Then turning to look directly at her daughter: *"Di ya ken what I'm saying young lady?"*

*Mam* then placed the young baby George lovingly into the cot, installed earlier that day, at the foot of her bed. She pulled the soft blanket up to cover the back of his head and ears, then bending down to kiss him on the cheek, continued:

*"You will carry on next week with your teaching, as if nothing has happened. After taking last term off, you have now missed the first few weeks of this new school year, but it's been a bitterly cold winter and I told them you had gone down with a severe flu, which*

*they accepted. You're a talented young language teacher Dorothy and they want you back. You will focus on your career and leave young George to me."*

*"When you come home and you are inside this house, George of course is yours. But outside and for the rest of the world to see, he is mine. It's best like this, if you value your future and don't want you yourself, or your wee bairn, to be victimised; tormented by wagging tongues and righteous gossip for the rest of your lives."*

Dorothy looked on, with those vivid memories from the notorious meeting before George was born in the back of her mind, while now - as something of a follow-up - listening to the assertive declarations from her own mother, subsequent to the birth. She really had no choice in the matter. Her parents were so admired by all around them - family and friends - to go against their bidding would have been utterly unthinkable, in that time and place ... even if it was the fate of her bastard child at stake!

***George gained an insight to these decisive moments decades afterwards, some from his half-brother – the boy playing on the floor, near the end of the table:***

*"I first met my half-brother Craig in 2003. He was by then a recently retired I.T. guru; obviously quite wealthy and owning a large suburban pile in the inner London suburb of Wandsworth. He was in his mid-sixties, while I was still slogging away at a grossly underpaid (but oddly satisfying) work roll, in my fifties. To a remarkable degree we looked like and felt attuned to each other. I had found him rather late in the piece: initially realizing he existed, after a lengthy day searching through births, deaths and marriage records in Edinburgh, then later, much later, meeting face-to-face, after an unlikely quirk of fate, involving similar travel circumstances, almost fifty years apart.*

*He was understandably hazy about the infamous meeting in Yorkshire. Who wouldn't be, after more than five decades? However, he did recall the drive down from Aberdeen - in his father's pride and joy, a recently acquired Austin 12 four-door saloon – to then be served with cream cakes at a somewhat turbulent gathering, while he played on the floor and an older man became decidedly aggressive towards his father. He*

*remembered his mum and dad speaking hardly a word on the return journey, and all arriving home – a coastal pub not far from Aberdeen - in the dead of night.*

*Craig was a lovely guy, eager to fill in the gaps for me wherever possible. Sadly, he succumbed to Hodgkin's Lymphoma just five years after I met him, but at least we knew each other for a short while. He was of course the one and only connection to my real father, who had passed away twenty years before. His recall of my father was quite sparse; a year or two after the day of the tumultuous meeting in Yorkshire, his parents had separated and he had come South of the border, with his mother as a single parent, to live in Manchester.*

*A number of the Craig's recollections were in some ways unexpected. For example, he disclosed that after returning from the occupation forces in Germany, in the late 40s, 'our' father's first job involved selling Electrolux vacuum cleaners. This came with a roving, door-to-door commission. It was, I hasten to add (and looking back from an exalted 21<sup>st</sup> Century standpoint) hardly the sort of occupation I had pictured my father being involved in. Craig indicated that he felt our father, as well as a roving job commission, may have also had a roving eye for the ladies, and suspected that I was probably not the only 'bastard' alive to tell the tale. We both laughed about that.*

*I can only assume the meeting that day in Yorkshire became the watershed for my father in terms of life with his then wife and their legitimate son. If, as Craig had assumed, there were indeed other illegitimate children littering the highways and byways of Scotland, then he was soundly found out on that day, when he came with his wife to meet my family to be.*

*At times I feel aggrieved that I missed meeting my father by less than one year. He could, I am sure, have told me so much more. I hold onto the thought that he may have been able to put the record straight with a different point of view, seen from his perspective. For as the saying goes, there's always two sides to an argument.*

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