

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 parents 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 - ten years on from emigration to the antipodes – now standing at the dining room table in my newly rented home and 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; when postal delivery - the hand-held variety - was still very much in vogue. The day had been quite cold; cold that is for Australia. Arriving home from work I eyed the assortment of letters with curiosity. One with a UK stamp looked official. A few months earlier I had secured a job with Shell, a part-British company, but their HR section had insisted on birth details as true proof of existence, to enable my otherwise impeccable relationship with them to continue ...passport would not

suffice. As I withdrew the two papers from the envelope, I realised suddenly it was the response from London: a reply to the request that would rubber stamp my new job in the company.

I stared at the scrap of paper in my hand. It was not a copy of the complete birth certificate, but what was termed an *extract*: a crude typewritten form to which handwritten information, in blue ink, had been added on the dotted lines, providing critical information drawn from the original. The accompanying letter, which I scanned first, had 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.

I looked at the extract. My quite distinctive Christian names were there: no mistaking that Gaelic-sounding triplet, coming direct from the heart of Scotland. The peculiar thing was that the names written next to mother were exactly the same as the trio held by my elder sister, 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 day in Adelaide, Australia, when I was just twenty-six-and-a-bit years old, I came to realise I qualified as a bastard!

It took perhaps two or three minutes to reach the abrupt conclusion that the preceding twenty-six years had been a bit of a sham and that I had been soundly deceived by a whole lot of people that - up until that point in time - I would have trusted with my life and 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 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? My God, 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 early, post-second world war days.

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 bitterness that, at times, spilled over into rage. Since then, those inner 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 I felt that life was too short for recriminations; in the end we were all the same people, it was simply just the labels that had been changed.

Essentially, it was not their fault. They were caught by the lingering forces of a Victorian era and a compulsion to follow the family matriarch's – their *mam's* - wishes, so that her eldest and fairest - the most gifted sibling - would be protected. For she 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: revered by her mother and father, two sisters and three brothers. Despite all that, she was in truth, my mother.

Several years after receiving my birth 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 (my initial arrival in Port Melbourne being almost two decades prior to this momentous occasion, when I finally decided to tackle her). The result was total disappointment. No open arms to bring us back to reality, as I had perhaps secretly hoped; not even any open admittance of wrongdoings or lies, that had caused me to be deceived for so many years. In the end, just a begrudging admittance 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 apart in no uncertain terms!

After that, we returned to the same lives, with an inbuilt understanding that there would be no mention of the true account of my birth and upbringing, and in particular, not a word to her younger son and daughter, the results of a long and devout marriage to her Australian husband, whom I had also become quite close to. She was a woman now into her fifties, who had kept the lid on the reality box firmly closed 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 true, but at surface level it almost appeared that way.

So, I kept my word ... for some time at least. But then one day, right at 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, after a late night on the town. Leaning casually on his bedroom doorframe - perhaps in part to prop up my hangover - I told him that although he had known me as an uncle, the truth was that I had always been his brother. I revealed in a few brief sentences that in short, his mother was also my mother! Unceremoniously, he muttered a few consoling words, rolled over and went back to sleep.

"OK," I thought, "*So much for that earth-shattering news. Best I get on with my life.*"

But soon 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 that 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 presume 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!

Probably true, but I had also come to understand that she was in many ways a victim of the time: constrained at the birth and through my early years, by her parents (and in particular the esteemed matriarch of the family), as well as over-riding cultural factors. Then later, pressured by marriage and emigration to Australia, plus the fact that her new husband – my brother's father – preferred it to happen that way.

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. Bugger 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 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 at a later date, emails and texts - as *bruncle* and *brephew*, with no hidden malice or jealousy. It is much the same with his sister (my half-sister of course), 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.

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

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, post-Victorian generation – the men dressed in dark suits and sporting short-back-and-sides; the 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.

Looking back on it all, from the vantage point of hindsight, my mother and her Australian husband are both long gone, while only one of my mother's five siblings remains alive, now into her eighties; thus the era of the architects who were party to the illusion which accomplished the deception, is almost over. Of course, those in the next generation - my generation – who were privy to the fantasy are still (almost all) very much alive and here, but they 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 come forward to divulge the truth, perhaps ten or twenty years before I happened to find out by chance, through that rather indelicate *birth certificate extract*. But that did not happen and I for one, cannot turn back the clock.

But even if I could work my share of *HG Wells* miracles, I am not sure I would want to. For although my upbringing was surrounded by pretence, I did have a very loving family - admittedly all trapped by that same pretence: a hangover from the Victorian era - and since then I have moved on to be reasonably successful in life, with my own family around me, a job I enjoyed, and able (at most times) to be able to pay the mortgage. In the end I can only rationalise my own place in the world, by noting that we are all born into our individual and discrete situations, some perhaps more unusual than others, but nonconformity and diversity make up what is known as the human race ... and long may that continue.