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An Aussie comes calling

Dorothy had given birth to George, a healthy baby, in the confines of the trusted family doctor's private surgery. She then took him back to join her parents and siblings in their large West-Yorkshire house, as the seventh child of her own mother. This was a strategy configured to ward off the stigma of a baby born out of wedlock, in those extended Victorian times. Everything went well, until a new arrival appears at the door.

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After Dorothy arrived home, with her baby disguised as a package in a cardboard box, life in the big house never really returned to the norm of an adult domain. The new baby was adored by all, and then when nine months later the wife of her brother - living in an attached section of the same building - gave birth to identical male twins, the transition to child-centred household was complete.

As the three boys grew through the baby stage to become mischievous toddlers, their exploits in and around the big house, with its expansive grounds, seemed to hold no bounds. To all those outside the inner circle, George was the son of *mam*, the family

matriarch, but the baby in fact knew Dorothy as his rightful mother, whenever she was in the house and not out teaching French and music at the local high school.

Dottie – as she was often called by family members – was a lover of music and the arts and had travelled to Scotland during the summer holidays to attend the Edinburgh Festival. She stayed with her mother's family, leaving three-year-old George at home. Then during one of the fringe events she was introduced to John: a young Australian. He was tall, with blonde hair swept back - not unlike the Hollywood star Clark Gable - and looked at ease with himself in a tweed sportscoat. He towered over her by more than a foot. Dressed in a white blouse and billowing skirt, Dorothy craned her neck upwards to follow his eyes as he spoke.

There was an immediate rapport, consolidated by two more meetings at events, which they attended together, with John organizing and paying for the tickets. He was a writer and loved the arts, while she was becoming more than proficient on piano, as accompaniment to her own magical soprano voice. At the end of their third meeting, she scribbled down her home address in Yorkshire; he saying that he had some urgent business in London, but would visit within a few days, once that was finished. She hoped beyond hope that he would keep his word, but having only met for a short while, wondered secretly if she would ever see him again.

It was exactly six weeks later, when John from Australia (via Edinburgh) chose to re-appear, a little later than promised, but at least there he was, standing on the steps outside the front door of Dorothy's house. This rather imposing somewhat worn mansion, was notable in the area for its size, and the fact it had been built in the 19th Century by one of the richest mill owners in the West Riding, during the industrial revolution, when the textile industry was at its peak. When our man came calling it looked particularly impressive, due to the thick covering of ivy, there in all its glory through the Spring and Summer months, but now fading to Autumn, smothering the front and side walls of the house in a green and auburn blanket.

"John who?" was the first question from Dorothy's youngest sister, then just thirteen years old. The man's accent was unusually nasal and the words difficult to decipher, compared to the strong vowels of Yorkshire that the young girl was used to.

"Higg-ins-worth," the man repeated, attempting to slow his delivery down, while punctuating the syllables: a task that for most Australians is almost impossible. At the time he was struck by just how much the young girl resembled her older sister. Though she was fair-haired and Dorothy dark, they both had that same natural beauty, which was easy to spot, but difficult to describe.

"Yes, Mr Higgsworth, my sister Dorothy does live here, but I think she's at work just now. Let me go and find out." This said, the girl turned from the doorway then retraced her steps, her shoes click-clacking along the wooden-floored corridor to the kitchen, where she hoped to find her mother. John Higginsworth in the meantime, was left in the sunshine, surveying the thick growth of ivy all around the arched doorway, and admiring the ornate gold painted knocker, which adorned the front door.

Later that afternoon, Dorothy arrived back from school, to find that the man she had met in her dreams several times since returning from Edinburgh - but by reality of day had almost given up on ever seeing again - was there in the flesh, sitting in the front room. She had been counting the days, and by then was reaching the stage where indeed it all seemed like a dream: that the man had been fooling around when he took her address and promised to visit. It even brought back nightmarish memories of the way she had been deceived during the affair with the father of her young son, George.

She entered via the back door and through the kitchen, her young sister forewarning her that there was a visitor in the front room: *"An incredibly tall, handsome man, whom I had a lot of trouble understanding."* she said, looking quizzically at her older sibling. So Dorothy adjusted her frock and patted her hair, then walked bare-footed and noiselessly along the front corridor to find her visitor sipping a cup of tea, in what the family called the *drawing room*, as he waited for her return. Toddler George was sitting on his knee,

playing with a new toy car. The Antipodean guest had remembered the details told to him about the boy, when he had met Dorothy in Edinburgh, and had gone out of his way to make sure he came with the right toy for the youngster: the boy he had been told was Dorothy's younger brother.

Dorothy entered the room silently, somewhat startled to see *her* man engaged in animated conversation with her mother. They were each inwardly ecstatic to meet once again, after their brief but undoubtedly impassioned earlier meetings north of the border: meetings which then seemed to both, just like yesterday. The Australian pushed back his blonde hair and began to explain the reason for the delay in coming to see her: that his mother, after a lengthy illness had died quite suddenly, thus requiring him to return to Australia for her funeral; then adding somewhat apologetically that he had flown back to England as soon as he could, with the specific intention of keeping the promise he made in Edinburgh, by coming to see her at home in Yorkshire.

It was a brief courtship, with day trips to the Yorkshire coast, then across to Blackpool on the other side. There was a train ride to London, with a day at the National Gallery and evening concert in the West End. That was the evening when John proposed to Dorothy, the person who in the space of a couple of months had become the lady of *his* dreams: an English rose, something in the fashion of what he had known his own mother to be in earlier times. Indeed, they were both smitten with each other, and she agreed without question, though with a caveat that she held a secret close to her heart which, when the time was right, would be disclosed. He could detect a certain nervousness around this secret she talked about in whispers, and was left wondering what on Earth could be so important to his future bride … and possibly for their prospects together.

But he wasn't left wondering for very long. During the next evening after the proposal, when they were sitting alone in the drawing room, Dorothy plucked up courage to tell John the truth about George. She was almost out of her mind with worry that on hearing this, the man would decide to up and leave. And for a moment he *was* quite shaken by the news: perplexed is probably the more accurate term. His snow-white angel had

suddenly become a lady with a past; and with a young toddler as a son to boot. In his mind's eye, he pictured himself returning to Australia with a ready-made family in tow: a wife and her illegitimate son. What would be the reaction from family and friends who lived in his small town? How would they cope with the news? What would be their attitude towards him? Towards Dorothy? And towards her son, George?

His father had died just four years earlier, when John had been a young lieutenant in the occupation of post-war Japan, and now he was in mourning for his mother, who had passed away less than two months ago. He had gone back to Australia very briefly for the funeral and had returned to England almost immediately after that, with the specific intention of finding the lady he had met during the English summer. He realized that to return home with a new bride - a woman as beautiful and as virtuous as his much-loved mother who had just passed away – would be welcomed by all; but to reappear on the Australian scene with wife, *plus* son from a previous relationship, may be frowned on, and perhaps even directly opposed. Sad though it was, he knew all-too-well that some extremely conservative values still prevailed in his antipodean country of birth.

But once again, it was *mam* who came to the rescue. Dorothy, always very close to her mother, told her of the dilemma that her new beau was faced with; the choice he was struggling to make. Basically, that he was unsure of returning to Australia with a son in tow, because there could be a very negative reaction from family and friends.

George's grandmother responded in characteristic fashion. From mam's eyes, her first-born child - now twenty-eight years old - was still the pristine angel she had always been, and nothing should be allowed to affect her future happiness and well-being.

"Dorothy, please listen carefully to me." This was said with some emphasis place on the '*me'.* "*You will leave George here with your dad and I; then you will travel to Australia, to set up house and home with the man who has proposed to you and who will become your new husband. He is a good man. We will arrange the wedding as soon as possible. That is my decision."* There was no further discussion to be had on the topic.

And so it was that a few weeks later a family photo – a celebratory memento of the just completed wedding – was taken in front of the door with the golden knocker, where John had stood a few weeks before, when he came to enquire of Dorothy's whereabouts. Now, George stood as the focal point of a large group, holding hands with the twin boys on either side. His mother and future stepfather stood immediately behind, with grandmother and grandfather on either side, and the extended family of uncles and aunts forming a semi-circle around them, all dressed in their Sunday best costumes of postwar and early fifties vintage, standing on the steps of the monolithic mansion in Yorkshire. His mother would return from Australia, with her second son, a couple of years later, but this family gathering was in effect when George became an orphan; divorced from his real mother and never to know his real father.

When Dorothy did return, George was an established piece of the family furniture … playing with the twins, loved and cared for by aunties and uncles, and with his mother's father as his *dad* and mother's mother as his *mam* – for all and sundry to witness. George recalls family outings, often with the twins on board, to Blackpool in the West and Scarborough to the East, with donkeys on the beach, a particularly steep and winding road for the family's own taxi-car to climb, and a *pop* bottle exploding under the front passenger's seat. Funny the things that stick in the memory of a young child, to come back for re-evaluation in later years.

Before his mother appeared back on the scene, George also remembers furtive and repeated conversations in the middle of the night, with everyone clustered on the stairway *landing*, around a black handphone. Usually, he was woken up and taken out to the landing, to be included in the conversation with *Auntie Dorothy*, who was calling from Australia. Later, much later in life, he realized that these had been regular and quite anxious calls to discuss his ailing grandmother, who had been diagnosed with cancer, and to plan for the favourite daughter's homecoming, so that she could oversee her beloved mother's care, and – what everyone hoped would be - recuperation.

As a part of all this, his grandfather, on advice from the doctor, who had ushered George into the world some five years before, had decided to sell up and move to an area of the country which could provide a cleaner environment. At the time he was told, in no uncertain terms by *Dr Ogilvie*, to take steps to get out of the industrial grime of Yorkshire, which might then (as the doctor said), *"Give your Mary at least some chance of a few more years."*

It was a toss-up between an island off the west coast of Scotland and a steep-valleyed farm near the south coast of Cornwall: opposite ends of the Kingdom (or Queendom, as it had then just become). Surprisingly, considering the family's Scottish heritage, they chose Cornwall, which then set in motion an operation of almost military precision, to transfer all their goods and chattels, accumulated over countless decades, three hundred miles, to the South West of England.

George remembers a tall red truck, christened the *furniture van*, doing lengthy and numerous trips on the highways and often not-too-speedy byways of England, for these were the days several years before those first diggers set out to construct the M1, Britain's first motorway. But apart from the comings and goings of the big red van, driven by his much older and road-weary *brothers* (in reality his uncles), George best remembers the final journey, in which he himself was included, along with his mother, his grandfather, and his ailing grandmother. They travelled in an ex-army desert vehicle (for some reason known as the *Shooting Break*) - brought back from the occupation in The Middle East, after the war - which pulled a small caravan. Again, it's strange the things that re-occur in a youngster's mind, such as a broken trailer hitch and an overnight stop near a roadhouse in Somerset while it was being fixed, where he was chastised for pointing (and shouting) at a lady walking with the aid of crutches.

Once in Cornwall, the tall red van, the caravan and the *shooting break* stood for years on the banks of a small river, at the base of a steep valley, and slowly sank into the mud. The goods that had been packed into the van for its final journey, mostly remained in that same state (there was nowhere else to put them) and slowly deteriorated, along

with their encasement. The caravan was used as a farmhouse for a few years, because the old and dilapidated, two-story stone house, was by then a roofless ruin and totally uninhabitable. Later, the caravan too, slowly disintegrated and disappeared into the surrounding foliage, while the *shooting break* never really moved much after that final journey; with its large bulbous sand tyres it was too wide for the tiny Cornish lanes.

As things turned out, *mam* died a few months after the family put down their roots in Cornwall. George's last memory of the lady he thought was his mother, was of her lying in state, in the front room of their rented council house. Why he was shown this at all, he was never quite sure: '*Maybe some sort of Yorkshire or Scottish ritual,'* he mused. Whatever the motivation, that vivid memory stayed with him for the rest of his life.

These were traumatic times for the whole family. The lock-stock-and-barrel re-location from Yorkshire, along with the re-appearance of Dorothy, followed closely by the death of the much loved and revered family matriarch, meant that George began school one year later than normal. After living for almost six years as the favourite home-based son of the extended family in Yorkshire, it was quite a switch to start off again in a totally new Cornish environment, and a particular ordeal to begin his schooling at the local village primary school, where he knew nobody, and the accents were all foreign.

George recalls, from that time:

"Whose are these?" bellowed the headmaster. It was the first class after lunch and this tall, thin man was holding up my pants, for the whole class to see. I knew they were my pants because they were stained with brown shit. I squirmed on my chair, behind my desk, soiling my school shorts a bit further … but said nothing.

This vivid and memorable shitty-pants sequence comes from the first few days of my belated and fractious start to schooling. Another was giving Peter, my minder, the slip and running across green fields, to home and a somewhat astonished mother, at the time packing her suitcase, to leave me and return to Australia. The boy Peter, I was to

meet again about ten years later, in the Middle East. He was 18 and a new recruit in the Royal Navy; I was 16 and on the way to Australia!

Those shitty-pants marked the end of my care-free toddler years in Yorkshire, where I had lived as part of a three-some with 'the twins', and the beginning of a life in very different surroundings, with the distinct need to make new friends. Even at that early age I think I was a bit of an introvert and so the transformation was not easy. To have my mother re-appear on the scene from Australia did not at that time seem so unusual. There had been lots of mention beforehand that she was on the way, though everyone was careful to keep that word 'mummy' away from my ears. She was coming back as my older sister, to look after 'mam' who wasn't so well, was all I was told at the time.

I have vivid memories of the torturous journey down to Cornwall and the trailer hitch between car and caravan breaking, which caused some degree of consternation among the family group, who were quite prone to argument when the fancy took them. Anyway, it meant we had to hold up somewhere not far from Bristol. This, you must remember, was the early fifties, so no motorways and in the main, just single-lane highways. I also have a distinct memory of an incident in a roadside café, where I embarrassed everyone by exclaiming loudly towards a disabled lady who was having trouble walking. I can only assume that during my sheltered upbringing I had never encountered such a thing.

When we first arrived in Cornwall, it was not to live on the farm which had been bought; instead, we all crammed into a rented, two-up, two-down council house, in a nearby village. Not long after the arrival date, I remember being ushered into the front room, as it was called, to view my grandmother (whom I thought of then as my mother) laid out in state on the bed, head back, eyes shut, mouth wide open. I have never understood why I was subjected to that; I would certainly hesitate to put a five-year-old through such an experience. Subsequently, and perhaps as a result of some of these traumatic events, I recall being afraid of the dark, and not being able to sleep with the door closed (which in fact is the same, even today).

My mother had arrived from Australia with a new baby boy in tow, called John; after his father of course, but unfailingly referred to by his mother as 'Peepy', sometimes shortened to 'Peep', or 'Peeps'. Apparently, the nickname was bestowed by Dorothy due to the way he peeped over the bed clothes as a newborn. Later in life it used to infuriate the lad when his mother continued to use this nickname, through to university and beyond. I still recall him turning to his adoring mum as a forty-something secondary school teacher, saying: "Mum, I'm 42 years old for Christ sake! I wish you would stop calling me that name." She tried hard, though more often than he cared to remember, things like: "Oh Peeps, you really shouldn't do that," would still sneak back into her conversation. But I think perhaps underneath all the bluster, John held a secret fondness for this term, which reflected his mother's deep love, for her first child born within the bounds of marriage.

For some reason I always remember 'Peepy' wearing a yellow jumper and splashing food all over the place, while sitting in his highchair in that rented council house in Cornwall. We would team up again years later, when he set about teaching me how to smoke marijuana … and during the same period, came to coin the term 'bruncle': the label for our newfound brotherhood.

Now, with the advantage of hindsight, I can begin to understand that the moment when John senior, turned down the option of taking me – three-year-old George - along with his new bride, back to Australia, was a defining moment: a moment that would remain with him until he died. Of course, it affected Dorothy in a profound way too, but for John, I think it was a massive regret. It was a decision that I am sure he would have reversed, if he had been able to re-live his time on Earth.

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