



My brother, no less!

It had been almost two decades since my unsuccessful attempt to find a father whom I had never met, only to discover his earthly life had ended, just one year before I arrived at the place of his departure. Dismayed and discouraged, I gave up the chase, though it was replaced to some extent, by a new search for my deceased father's first-born son, a few years older than me and in reality my half-brother. Did he still exist?

I had been working for a few weeks in India, and the return flight, on Gulf Air, left Mumbai at the ungodly hour of 5.30 a.m. After three hours in transit at Bahrain International, I boarded a second aircraft for the seven-hour journey to London. During this night flight I couldn't sleep (quite normal in my case) and as if to compensate, I recall being interested - as a died-in-the-wool geographer - in the route that we took across Europe back to London, noticing that the plane tracked over Istanbul, Belgrade

and Frankfurt, before descending through dense cloud into Heathrow. I remember watching the nightly glow of these cities as they drifted past under our wings.

The UK was experiencing an unusually warm summer, and my first day back at home was no exception. It promised to be another balmy Sunday as I sat down to late morning breakfast on the terrace at the back of our house, when I was handed the previous day's *Independent* newspaper by my partner, opened and folded to a section of the *Weekend Traveller*, titled ...*That Summer*.

"I was reading this section yesterday," she remarked quite nonchalantly, *"And came across an article which I thought may be of interest."* And then: *"Does it mean anything to you?"*

The final few words were said with that look in the eye, which most people, after living together for some time, come to recognise instinctively as a suggestion that more than a cursory glance was required. I should add that my partner of twenty years, was well aware - and very supportive - of my search to find a long-lost father, and when that failed, the subsequent hunt for his son.

I first noticed the bold heading which spread across the top of the page: *Strangers on a Train*. Nothing remarkable there. Then a map caught my eye, showing Europe with a line - obviously a travel route - drawn across it. Strangely, the track on the map was almost identical to the one I had followed on the Gulf aircraft video screen throughout the previous night. A coincidence perhaps, but still nothing especially significant. On further reading, it turned out the article traced the author's journey overland, from Cyprus back to Britain, after being de-mobbed from the British army in the late 1950s. That was remarkable indeed, but it was only when my eyes strayed across the page to a somewhat faded copy of the author's identity card, that I suddenly saw the significance of the question I had been asked: *'Did it mean anything to me?'*

My immediate response was: *'Yes! That's him! That's Craig my brother!'* I am not sure if I punched the air, but it would have been the appropriate thing to do at that juncture, because I knew from the moment I saw the identity card, that the article had been

written by my half-brother - the son of the father I had never known, who had died 20 years before – the son whom I had searched for in voting registries and telephone books, but long since lost any hope of finding. I was totally convinced because of the information provided on the copy of the unique card. His full name was there, which in Scottish tradition incorporated his mother's surname as his second Christian name; his birth date as well - about nine years or so before mine - and the fact he had attended Aberdeen University. As far as I was concerned that was it: Game, Set and Match!

But just as I had dawdled for years until it was too late to find my father, this time I mused for a few days as to how I would handle this latest revelation.

At that time, I lived and worked in the West of England, Cheltenham to be exact, County Gloucestershire. My Australian partner and I had two school-aged children, and being the August vacation, we had planned a short stay in London for the four of us: a kid's holiday in the capital: *Changing of the Guard, Trafalgar Square, British Museum*, and all that. I also had a small amount of work to do during our visit, and on the Friday morning, after a visit to a Brixton-based NGO, I was sitting on my own with a cup of coffee, in a back-street café. The *Strangers on a Train* article was weighing heavy on my mind, so I had decided to contact *The Independent* as the first step in tracing the author. I needed to be on my own to do this, knowing instinctively it was an important moment in my life.

After a couple of attempts, where I found myself talking to machines, I finally got through to a female voice who seemed a little unsure of how to handle my unusual request. She went away to seek advice, and a minute or two later I was speaking by phone to a much more confident and very pleasant voice, that seemed quite happy to take my email address and pass it on to the author of the *That Summer* piece.

"You could give me your mobile number too" She offered.

"Yes, that's a good idea," I recall was my reply. "if I could remember it." A few weeks before I had somewhat reluctantly, acquired my first mobile phone. *"A necessary evil,"* I declared to my older daughter, who stared back at me with a pent up degree of disdain, whilst rolling her eyes to the heavens, as if to say: *"How come I'm blessed with the most*

low-tech father in the universe!” Thus. at the time of this call to *The Independent*, it was - as my daughter strongly inferred - way beyond me to either remember my own number or search for and find any reference to it on my new device.

But salvation was at hand: *“That’s OK,”* came the reply. *“I have it on the screen”*.

“Do you know the author of the article?” I asked, trying to be as casual as possible.

“Yes, in fact I know him quite well,” she responded. *“I can make contact and ask him to call you back later in the day, if that’s convenient.”*

And so a couple of hours later, I was in the centre of London when this once-in-a-lifetime call came through. I suppose it didn’t hit me at first that I was talking to my half-brother for the first time in my life; his voice had a quizzical tone and I was in the hot seat, too busy trying to come up with a valid reason for the call. I did not want to talk in detail over the phone, or to give too much away, so I asked if his father’s name was George, and if he had died in 1983. He replied yes to both, and I think he and I then knew instinctively, that this was no ordinary phone call.

We agreed to meet a few hours later that same day at *Starbucks* coffee shop, on Clapham High Street. Amazingly, it transpired that he was living in Wandsworth, just ten minute’s drive from the flat I was renting, in Clapham. Starbucks was chosen because that was the only place I could think of that would be easy to find. We gave brief descriptions of our appearance and clothing, although I knew (and I think he knew too), that we would recognise each other regardless.

And so it was, when he walked in there was no hesitation. Bespectacled as I am and of similar height and build, I was slightly envious of his comparatively lush growth of hair (even though he was nine years my senior). He rounded the door and came straight towards me, looking embarrassingly fit. After a firm handshake, we then quickly agreed to move across the road, to the nearest pub: *The Alex*.

“Starbucks is really not my sort of place,” I told him.

“Me neither” replied my brother. *“In fact, it’s the first time I’ve been in one.”*

The pub was a cosy little affair, with well-worn wooden-floor and wood-panelled walls adorned by antique photographs. We stayed there at a small table not far from the entrance, chatting for the best part of two hours over a few pints of bitter. Interestingly, we both preferred the same brew, from the many on tap. In the main, the conversation was built around my questions and his recollective answers. I felt, I think we both instinctively sensed, that we had known each other for years; It was just some sort of ghastly glitch that had prevented us from meeting face-to-face, for more than half a century. Quite a remarkable feeling: to look at and talk with someone you have only just met - your own brother in fact - as if you have known him for a lifetime!

The story of his early years in Scotland, with a father that he saw little of, and then divorce and re-location with embittered mother to Manchester, was incredibly moving for me. This was, in a manner of speaking, the story of the missing half of my existence: those missing pieces of my life's jigsaw were beginning to see the light of day!

For my brother, it must have come as something of a shock to have me land almost literally, on his doorstep. He told me he had vague memories of travelling with his parents, from Scotland down to Yorkshire in the late 1940s, to attend the meeting at my family's house, just before I was born. He also talked a lot about his early life, and the person who in fact from that day on, could be labelled as *our* father - divulging that as a travelling *Electrolux* salesman, his dad was certainly no angel, and seeming to suspect that he himself was not in fact his father's only child. He mused that the woman his father had then gone on to marry - the person I had searched for in Aberdeen the year after our father died - started off as a barmaid in my father's pub, and was henceforth referred to by his mother, as *'that fucking barmaid!'*

We joked about some of these things and then he invited me back to his house in Wandsworth. Thus it was later in the evening when I came to meet the lady I had spoken to on the telephone, earlier in the day. The *'Yes, I know him quite well'* voice from *The Independent*, turned out to be my brother's partner in life, who held a senior editorial position at the newspaper. We joked about that through dinner, and I became more than slightly drunk - as later we reminisced over whisky, around the fireplace - a bit

embarrassed that I struggled to negotiate the staircase on my early morning route to bed. But what the hell, it's not every day in life's long venture, that you meet your brother for the first time in 56 years!

Amazing now, as I look back. What had seemed such an insoluble puzzle, came together so easily in the end. I still find it hard to believe the coincidence of the maps and our almost identical tracks across Europe, him on the ground and me thirty kilometres above, only separated in time by forty-plus years. And then living so close to each other was quite remarkable; we could have been separated by oceans - and in fact were for many years - but here we were, when the right time came, just a few streets apart in South London town.

My newfound brother Craig is not my father of course, but to me he represents a very valuable strand of my life's web. He has a son and daughter and a young grandchild. I have a son and two daughters. They too are all excited by suddenly having a new set of first cousins to think about and relate to.

For the first few years after meeting, there were lots of pluses and no minuses on the score sheet. On my occasional visits to London, I would stay with my brother and his relatively new family in Wandsworth. His partner (from *The Independent*) was much younger than him, with two youngsters in their early teens, so my brother, now retired, had taken up the role of house husband ... with golfing, in between school runs and cooking dinners. My own children visited and got to know his new family, but there were very few interactions with my brother's now grown up kids.

Looking back on it all, from a decade or so of moving on past those times, I regret very much not having done more to cement the bond between my brother and myself; his family and my family. Because as usually happens in life, the minuses did eventually turn up, in the guise of my brother falling sick with *Hodgkin's Lymphoma* (a cancer of the lymphatic system) and then - after what in hindsight, now seems a very short space of time, which included chemotherapy treatment and a very hopeful convalescence - my

brother Craig passed away, five years almost to the day after I first met him at Starbucks, on Clapham High Street.

My brother's death was particularly jarring, because it had taken so many long years of waiting to get to meet each other - supported by a whole raft of deception and subterfuge directed at me for almost half of that time - then a lack of action on my part to remedy the situation. Craig on the other hand, had experienced a difficult childhood, living in Manchester with a bitter mother and estranged from his father, but he knew nothing of my existence, other than perhaps rumour. So the onus, as they say, was on me; and I in effect squandered the opportunity. I wasted almost three decades, which reduced my time of knowing my brother to just five short years. And even within that period I did far too little to consolidate the bond. I was too busy travelling and working in India and Africa. If I was Craig, I would give *me* a serious kick up the ass and a resounding bollocking, for not doing more while I had the chance!

After my own experiences on both sides of the divide – for I still have a half-brother and sister on one side and *did have* a half-brother on the other - one thing I am convinced of, above all others, is the pull and the importance of blood relations. I was elated when I discovered these new and close relations on either side of my parentage, and I regret losing one of them, as much as anything else in my life. Nurture of course can play its part, but in the end, nature is what we truly relate to. Blood it seems, remains thicker than all other inferior substitutes!

It's now almost two decades since my brother died, in 2003: a couple of years after 9/11. Since then, we have circumnavigated a war in Iraq, the so-called Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS and the disaster of Syria. After that came some saving grace with Barack Obama, the Brexit years in UK, the catastrophe of Donald Trump, and what we have come to know as the global pandemic of Covid-19. We now live with smart phones and social media, and I sometimes wonder what Craig would have made of it all, and whether in retrospect, he would feel lucky to have exited the scene when he did. Though isn't all this just background noise, amplified by an ever-present and insatiable media. Within this cacophony, don't we all still get on with our lives, as best we can?

A short time after meeting my brother Craig, I wrote the following poem:

My Brother, No Less!

*In the end it came so easily,
Connecting the threads after 56 years.
Just dropped from the sky,
As I had done on that very same day,
Home from India.*

*The article read 'Stranger on a Train',
As we had been: strangers in the same land.
Half-brothers, no less,
Separated by the Victorian ethics
Of a bygone era.*

*It was an intriguing piece of journalism
That re-worked the memories of post-war times,
In a line of travel;
Spearing out from Cyprus, through Istanbul,
And back to England.*

*But it wasn't the story that caught my eye,
It was the name and detailed identity card,
And amazingly too,
A map that retraced my airborne journey
Back from India.*

*So there it was: my brother's name,
Known to me for some twenty-odd years.
Handed out on a plate
Or national newspaper, to be more precise.
But brother, no less!*

*A few phone calls later and I
Was speaking to this female voice that said
"Yes, I know him quite well".
Turned out to be a somewhat frivolous line
For her partner in life.*

*And then he called, and we met
In a pub across from The Common,
Over beer and cigarettes.
Filling the gaps in those fifty-six years:
One long gap in truth.*

*Something that seemed so far out of reach
Was all of a sudden so real and so alive.
Feels almost surreal at times,
Just showing how life can leap forward
To inhabit the unknown.*

London, 30.08.2003

Now re-reading this poem, I look back to the instant bond that was created between us, and how much I valued that. During those years in between I have come across numerous references to other individuals, who because of rigid and nonsensical Victorian attitudes, experienced similar deceit and comparable separation to me. They included Michael Caine and Jack Nicholson, to name just two from the hall of fame. So imagine just how many there are from the hoi polloi – individuals like me, from the teeming masses – a countless number, I would venture to guess.

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