



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.

.....

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. As he shuffled back to his desk, he heard the faint sound of carol singers in the distance, coming from the street outside. “*Must be from the Rose and Crown,*” he thought to himself.

Seated behind his desk, he pressed the intercom button, leaning forward to speak.

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

It’s 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, as 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. How do you feel? Is everything OK with young Jimmy? He said this with a nod towards 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 and you are like an angel to them. You have decided that despite the circumstances, you want your child to live and grow in a loving environment. 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 next to the mahogany desk, he placed his hand over hers and continued:

“You should have no worries; 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?” She searched his eyes as she said this.

“What you will do from now on young lady, 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 in my second bedroom, across the corridor. The new lady will look after you. She’s a good soul who has I think, four children already herself. 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 baby out of wedlock: a sin even in this day-and-age. A sin 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 thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit: freezing point. Outside, as night closed in, the yellow glow from a light hanging above the surgery door, radiated across the cobbled street. Dr Ogilvie raised his coat collar to ward off the biting wind, and started off down the street towards the carol singing and his usual pint of ale by the log fire in the *Rose and Crown*.

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 baby, 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 birth 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 glass-paned door, looking much the same as when she had entered, some five months before. More importantly, no one in the neighbourhood was any the wiser that she was pregnant and had given birth!

The plan that had been hatched included 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 malicious gossip - they might 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, but in truth perhaps many saw and understood, though thankfully they turned away, declining to pass judgement.

It was decreed that George should be added as the youngest child of an older generation, rather than take up his rightful position as the eldest of the next. This forced 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 house, also gave birth to twin boys, just nine months later. Whether or not this was inspired by the extramarital birth we will also never know, but the result was that George grew up with two tousle-haired toddlers as their uncle – and correspondingly, they as his nephews - not as their first cousin, which should have been their true relationship. Small matters perhaps, when compared to life or death, but those momentous decisions made at that time, on behalf of George, would return to haunt his soul, 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 predominantly white, working-class surrounds. The extended family lived in a two-story monolith of a house; or in truth, four-story because of basement and attic, set on large grounds, with many out-buildings for young George and his two *nephews* to explore. And they did just that. As the terrible twos extending forward to the three and fours, George's dark brown, comparatively orderly hair, combed to the side, contrasting with the twins' blonde, curl-fest explosions. Each day they ran here, there, and everywhere, through the house and grounds, together.

It was an exciting place for kids to grow up. 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 polished coffee tables and glass-fronted crockery display cupboards. 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 to the East and Western, North of England seaboard. In the

post-war years – 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 chickens for egg production. The place was a hive of industry, even 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 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 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 house, the three peddle-merchants had spent days filling old food cans with sand, then peddling off to distribute 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 threesome and loved by all.

So *mam* took George under her wing. His wooden cot was at the end of the double bed she shared with *dad*, who was in truth Georges’ grandfather. Every morning she would call the trio in for cocoa and biscuits. and the threesome, perched on kitchen stools – wearing red or blue berets, to match the colour of their cars - would sip their hot drinks, while contemplating the next, upcoming 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 – who after giving birth had settled back into her teaching role at a local high school - met a globe-trotting Australian at the Edinburgh Festival. Tall, blonde and handsome, it was as they say, love at first sight. 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 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.

It was only after George himself had emigrated to Australia and was seeking employment - paradoxically with a British company more than twenty years later - that he came to discover the true facts related to his birth and early life in the West Riding of Yorkshire, during the bleak winters and food rationing times of the post-war years. But by the time the truth was exposed more than two decades later, his life had changed out of all recognition.

George tracks back to those days surrounding his birth:

I had pieced the information together from a variety of sources, following revelations - some twenty-six years after the event - that my life was not as clear-cut as once I had thought. 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 now 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 the earth-shattering news from the blue yonder, that I knew the truth, 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 devoured and filed 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, then 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 came later to be known to my own children by the rightful and much-loved name, Aunty Mary). I have visions in my mind of the peddle cars, the diminishing sand pile by the front door, an expansive vegetable garden, and being called in to perch on kitchen stools to guzzle down our daily dose of warm milk cocoa, watched over by mam, the matriarch of the clan.

The winter of 1946-7, when I came to Earth, was in fact one of the coldest on record. So as I was carried home from the doctor's surgery, illuminated at intervals by the streetlight glow, I sometimes imagine the scene: heels clacking on cobbled stone, long wavy 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 that she would reach the safety of home before any prying eyes spotted her on the street.

Thus perhaps it was something of an omen for me, when sixteen years later another bitterly cold winter descended on Britain. This was the infamous winter of 62-63, with burst pipes and treacherous roads, which happened just before I left England, to unite with the family of my erstwhile mother in Australia.

.....