

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 life, with 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 still Victorian times. Everything went well until a new arrival appears.

After Dorothy arrived home with her baby in a box, life in the big house never really returned to normal. The new baby boy was adored by all, and then, when nine months later, the wife of her brother - living in an attached section of the same house - gave birth to two more boys, the transition to child-centred household, was complete. As they 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.

Dottie – as she was sometimes known 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. During one of the fringe events she met a young, blonde Australian, wearing a tweed sportscoat, who towered over her by more than a foot. She was dressed in a white blouse and billowing skirt and craned her neck upwards, to follow his eyes as he spoke. There was immediate rapport: he was a writer and loved the arts; she a teacher of French and budding pianist, with a wonderful soprano voice. On parting, she scribbled down her home address in Yorkshire; he saying that he had some 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.

But it was exactly one month 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. The rather imposing place was notable in the area for its size and the fact that it had been built and owned in the 19th Century - during the *industrial revolution*, when the textile industry was at its peak - by one of the richest millowners in the West Riding. When our man came calling it looked even more impressive, due to the thick covering of ivy, which occurred over summer, smothering the front and side walls of the house in a dark green blanket.

"John who?" was the first question from Dorothy's youngest sister, then 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 a bit and punctuate the syllables, which for most Australians was almost impossible.

"Yes, Mr Higgworth. 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 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, looking up at the lush 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 the man she had met in her dreams several times, since returning from Edinburgh. She had been counting the days, and now a whole month later, began to think it was all indeed a dream, and that he had just been fooling around when he took her address and promised to visit.

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 man, whom I had trouble understanding." she said, looking quizzically at her older sibling. So Dorothy adjusted

her frock and patted her hair, then walked noiselessly along the front corridor to find the 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 traveller had remembered the details from the short time they had been together in Edinburgh and had gone out of his way to make sure he came with the right toy for the young boy: Dorothy's younger brother.

They were of course both inwardly ecstatic to meet once again, after their brief, but undoubtedly impassioned first meeting one month before, in Scotland. He then explained the reason for his delay in coming to see her: that his mother had died suddenly and that he had returned to Australia for her funeral. He added 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 in Yorkshire.

It was a brief courtship, before the Australian 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, she would divulge. He could see she was quite nervous about this and was left wondering what on Earth this secret, so important to his future bride, could be.

During the next evening after the proposal, when they were sitting alone in the drawing room, Dorothy plucked up the 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. The first thoughts that ran through his head were of returning to Australia with a ready-made family in tow. What would be the reaction from different family members, friends and colleagues who lived in the same town?

His father had died a few years before, when John had been a young lieutenant in the occupation of post-war Japan, and he was still mourning his mother who had passed away, by unhappy coincidence, soon after he met Dorothy in Edinburgh. He had gone back to Australia, very briefly for the funeral and had flown back to England as soon as he could after that, with the specific intention of finding the lady he had met in Edinburgh, 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* her son from a previous relationship, would be frowned upon, and perhaps even directly opposed. Sad though it was, he knew all-too-well that ultra-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 of twenty-eight years 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." She said this with some emphasis place on the 'me'. *"You will leave George here with dad and I and then 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 – for family and friends to witness - with his mother's father as his *dad* and mother's mother as his *mam*. 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 passenger's seat. Funny the things that stick in the memory of a young child!

Before his mother appeared back on the scene, he also recalls a number of furtive 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 *aunty* 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 (everyone hoped) 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, when he was chastised for pointing out (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 the steep valley, and slowly sank into the mud. The goods that had been packed into the van for its final journey, mostly remained inside the van (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. Then 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 on a bed, head back, eyes closed and mouth open. 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 relocation 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 shitty-pants sequence is a vivid memory from the first few days of my belated and fractious start to schooling. Another was slipping my minder – eight-year-old Peter (whom I was to team up with a decade later, in Aden, after he had joined the Royal Navy) - and running across green fields and home to a somewhat astonished mother, at the time packing her suitcase, to leave me and return to Australia.

My first village school, in the depths of Cornwall, was a small affair with three classes and about seventy kids. The teacher in the lower, composite class of five-to-seven year olds - a local lass, fresh from college - taught me in her first year (and as it transpired, my daughter to be, forty year later, just before she retired!). The headmaster, Mr.

Bishop, took the senior class. I used to marvel at the way those bulbous blue veins stood out like snakes on the back of his hands. But it all turned out well in the end. I progressed to the top class, passed the notorious 11+ exam and moved on to the local grammar in the nearby town: one of only two students to do so that year.

At grammar school, I was to suffer the same sort of excruciating embarrassment that I recalled from the soiled pants episode at the village school. The class teacher had called me to the front of the class and grabbed me to look behind my ears. "*Filthy boy,*" he said, loud enough to create a spectacle for the whole class to hear. "*Wash behind your ears tomorrow boy, or you will sit outside all day.*" The next day, with freshly scrubbed ears, I listened in awe as Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, circled the Earth!

The *ears* incident heralded the start of the rot during those grammar school days. It was perhaps a forewarning - or veiled prediction - that my life to come wasn't going to be all plain sailing and that indeed, there would be a few serious bumps and potholes along the way. I guess it's the same for most people - life is not always easy - but in my case, over the years since my thwarted abortion, there have been many other near-death exploits and incidents; enough indeed, to make the journey worth retelling."
