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## Unearthing the truth

In 1984 I returned to Britain. It was more than ten years after receiving the extract of my birth certificate, telling me that I was the son of the person whom I thought was my eldest sister, and that my father was *unknown*. At the time, the news hit me like a bombshell; the family I thought I knew was suddenly re-formed into a new shape and I was thrown to the fringe. But slowly, the feeling of rejection (and being deceived) subsided and I became more rational, even seeing some aspects in a positive light.

I was in the UK for several months and made it my business to find out a few more details, related to my family lineage. I had heard a well-known and respected luminary talking about heritage and informing his audience that we all have eight great grandparents and most of us do not know the name of one of them. Well, I had news for that guy; I didn't even know the name of my father.

At the time there were two sources of information to be plundered; one was a favourite and most loving *aunt* (in reality, a re-formed sister), the other was the Edinburgh registry officer, the place that holds records for citizens of Scotland. I thus advanced the search on these two fronts, beginning with my aunt and moving to the registry. After some gently pressure on the aunt, she gave up a number of vital clues: firstly, my real father's name, but also that he was Scottish and already married (when I was conceived), with a son from that marriage, who was around nine or ten years old at the time of my birth.

So in the late autumn of '84, I travelled by train to Scotland and spent one day searching through records in the grand, circular vault of the Scottish Office of Birth, Deaths and Marriages. The facts that I had manage to prize from my aunt (and which from her view had been reluctantly divulged), were substantiated, along with new information that I discovered whilst leafing through the files, showing that my father had divorced and re-married a few years after my birth. Was I the cause? ... Most likely.

But then I turned over a page and saw an entry that I can remember rocked me to the core: my father had died in 1983, the previous year and just a few months before I set off to find him, at the respectable age of seventy-five years.

It was strange how this shocked me so much. In those few months in England I had come as close to my father as I ever would, but in reality, he was as distant from me as anyone could be. Yet I was moved to tears when I realised that by not moving quickly enough - by not getting off my ass and making the journey back from Australia, to try and put the pieces of my personal jigsaw together - I had thrown away the chance to meet the man who was responsible for my being.

The next day, I travelled North to Aberdeen, to try and trace the elderly widow of my recently deceased father: his second wife, who had previously been employed to work in my father's pub (and the lady whom, I much later found out, his first wife always referred to as *that fucking barmaid!*). On a cold, blustery day, I assumed like many other autumnal days on the East Coast of Scotland, I bussed out to a wind-blown seventy's-built estate, not far from the sea, on the outskirts of the city.

In retrospect, it probably all looked a bit ominous, because everything around seemed to pale into shades of grey: the streets, the houses, the blanket cloud cover above, even the bus was grey! It reminded me of the song *A Whiter Shade of Pale*, only everything on that day in Aberdeen looking like a *A Greyer Shade of Grey*. The bus driver, I remember, an elderly guy (dressed thankfully in blue), was particularly friendly, parking in a cul-de-sac at the end of his route and - as it turned out - still waiting for me when I returned from my shorter-than-expected mission.

Unfortunately for me, the trail stopped there. Nobody answered the door of the single story, ubiquitous pebbledash apartment, at the address I had noted from my search the previous day. I remember being totally deflated. Yesterday, the news that my father no longer existed; then today in a grey, cold, windblown suburb - the sort of place I would need to be paid a lot of money to agree to live in – I found a locked door and no flow-on connections from my father. No wife, no son, nothing! Not even a neighbour to speak to.

*"Christ almighty, to hell with it! What's the fucking point?"* I said to myself, angrily, as I wandered back towards the bus, ripping up the piece of paper with the address and throwing it into the two square metres of manicured lawn, outside the front window of my once-removed, step-mother's apartment. Though what I thought were silent blasphemies and invectives, may in actual fact not have been incredibly silent, because still irate, as I stepped back aboard the bus, my friendly chauffeur said back to me.

*"What was that you said lad? Are you OK laddie?"* In his best *Billy Connolly* imitation. He started the bus, wheeled around the cul-de-sac circle and we returned, just the two of us for quite a while, conversing almost like father and son - me upset and him giving me his pearls of wisdom – almost all the way back to the centre of the city. After that, I retreated to my lower bunk bed in the local Scottish Youth Hostel, protected by the castle ramparts and cannons up above ... to think of what might have been.

One other memory has always remained in my mind from that short trip to Scotland. While still based in Aberdeen, I took a local bus ride up the Dee River, past Balmoral, to the town of Braemar. It was a good day to try to unwind and get my thoughts back in

order: a blue-sky, wonderfully calm day - in complete contrast to the day before – that made the magnificent surroundings even more magnificent. I sat not far from the front entrance and exit door of the bus and remember people clambering up and down the steps, chatting with the driver as they got on and off, as if he was one of their extended (or perhaps even close) family. Invariably they carried large shopping bags, plus walking sticks for the elderly, and spoke in a broad Scottish dialect: so broad, in fact, that I could hardly understand what was being said, which made me wonder for a while if their conversation was actually based on the English language, or some other tongue I had never encountered before. I enjoyed this experience immensely; it was as if I was in Greece, or Sardinia, or some other distant, yet exciting land.

After familiarising myself with the small town of Braemar for two or three hours - which included a *haggis* dish, washed down with a pint of Scottish ale for lunch, followed by photos of *haggis* on display in the local butcher's window - it was time to catch the next-to-last bus for the day back to Aberdeen. On the return journey I recall meeting a rock climber, probably a few years younger than me, who was sitting across the aisle, and as day turned to night, we began to strike up a conversation. I desperately needed someone to talk to, and he happened to be the nearest and most likely victim. But from the start the guy was so understanding and as our discussion progressed, he began to give me snippets of measured, but heartfelt pieces of advice. There was an instant rapport between us. It almost seemed as if the bus driver from the previous day and now my new rock-climbing friend, were meant to happen; to guide me across some of the most choppy waters in my life ... back to dryland and a semblance of normalcy.

It transpired that the rock climber had just finished reading the book *From Heaven Lake* by *Vikram Seth* and took time to explain the story to me: of the author, Seth, living in China and travelling overland, through Nepal, back to India. Seemingly disconnected to my plight at that time, I came to find the tale so full of obstacles and how to overcome them, that in actual fact it had an incredible resonance to my own situation. He gave me the book, suggesting he thought it would be a good thing for me to read, at this juncture in my life. And he was dead right! It was indeed the perfect piece of writing for me and

came just at the right time.. We exchanged addresses and telephone numbers - this was just before the dawn of email - but unfortunately I never saw him again. It was almost as if it was meant to be that way, as if tthis fellow (I can't even recall his name) had been sent, to deliver the book, on a one-off mission to help me deal with my difficulties. And just like the swimmer, a decade or so before, who had saved me from drowning off an Australian beach, then after checking my pulse, disappeared into the distance, I will be forever grateful to my man (*'from heaven lake'*), just simply for being there in the right place at the right time, to put me back on track..

After that, the whole sad tale receded in terms of its importance and influence on my thinking. I went back to Australia and got on with the real and more tangible aspects of living. Sometime later, on a subsequent visit back to the *Motherland* - or more aptly, *Fatherland* in my case - I met a more distant aunt and uncle, who were able to scratch their rather rusty brain cells and come up with some new and interesting facts, surrounding my dubious heritage.

They recalled that just before I was due to enter the world, my father, who had a Pinnochio-style nose, and his first wife, who for some inexplicable reason was in a wheelchair, were summoned from Scotland, for a family conference in Yorkshire, to decide what was to be done about me. They turned up with their young son in tow, who was given into the care of my thirteen and seventeen-year-old, *sisters-to-be*, for the duration of the meeting. (The older *sister* subsequently became my favourite aunt, who many years later was to become the first to weaken, providing me with much sought after information related to my background).

It was by all accounts a rather stormy pow-wow (described in more detail in an earlier chapter: *Torrid Times before the Birth*). My grandfather was in his early fifties and about twelve years older than my real father, whom I have since come to know was a bit of a *lad* in his day, who could try his hand at most things and thought he could talk people around to his way of thinking (as perhaps he did with my mother, which I should be ever grateful for, otherwise I, myself, may never have blossomed into existence). He spent

time as an *Electrolux* salesman amongst other jobs, before becoming a publican, which does tend to say something about his possible character. Well on this day he would have had his work cut out, as the say, to convince his older adversary about anything. This quite unique and patriarchal grandfather figure – known universally as *dad* - was born just before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with clear Victorian ethics and a stoic Yorkshire way of thinking to boot. He could be fierce at times, as I later discovered, when I challenged him with wild behaviour from the rock-and-roll era of the early sixties.

The results of all this was that it was agreed I should be handed over to grandmother and grandfather, as their child. The family doctor was conscripted, and it was arranged that I would be born, unknown to anyone outside the immediate family, in the confines of the good doctor's home cum surgery. That was the contrived plan, which was enacted to perfection when I, George, was carried back to the family in a cardboard box and promptly anointed as the seventh child of the matriarchal *mam*. These were incredible measures taken to circumvent the thinking that prevailed in an era where everything on show had to be seen to be done in a right and proper manner, particularly when it came to abiding with church and family values.

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Back in Australia, after a somewhat fruitless, but nevertheless enlightening, visit to Scotland, I plucked up the courage to clear the slate and talk with the person who had become something of a stepfather to me, since arriving *down under*, twenty years before. He admitted - thus confirming the story I had manage to glean from my favourite aunt and other family members, in conjunction with the Scottish Registry office - that yes, his wife, the person who had duped me, for twenty-six years, into thinking she was my elder sister , was in fact my mother.

So the case was closed: shut firmly like the trapdoor on a submarine. Any further search of the background surrounding my father was rather pointless, unless the main purpose was to complete the half-empty knowledge of my own medical genealogy. Now, that I knew for certain my real father was no more, the only part of the overall picture that still

intrigued me was the young nine-year-old boy, who had come to the meeting in Yorkshire, with his parents, not long before I was born.

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