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MADELEINE

Two weighty events took place in our family in the same city in the same year. My father and his family left England hoping to put their troubles behind them, and my father's sister, Madeleine, the mother of two school-aged children, married bigamously, hoping to put the past, including a husband with a French name, behind her. My father's emigration was unknown to his sister, and her bigamous marriage unknown to him, both events lying dormant for years, waiting, as the siblings' days wore on, to be revealed.

Of the many pictures I held in my mind in that year of weighty events I recall two particular sequences. I believe both sequences might have been influenced by films I had seen. One sequence was of life in Australia as I expected it. I played carefree games, wearing only underpants, in a settlement surrounded by jungle. I saw thatched-roofed huts, giant butterflies in a shimmer of heat, and there was no road, just trampled dust. Nothing worried me.

In the other sequence my aunt who had disappeared was forever on the run. Unlike the sequence of the jungle clearing, which blazed with colour, this sequence was in black and white, with a grainy *film noir* quality. My brave aunt pushed a pram along a wet street with dim lights which cast shadows, looking over her shoulder as she hurried from danger, trying to protect her children. She had no one to defend her, to help her. Someone unseen, relentless, pursued her, tracking her down.

One Boxing Day morning I walked along one side and then the other of a rainswept street in Liverpool, England, knocking on the front doors of tall houses. Most of these houses had long, narrow windows at street level. I asked people, some wearing pyjamas and dressing-gowns and looking as though my knocking had woken them from deep sleeps, and many of them looking as though they had drunk a lot of alcohol the night before—I asked these dishevelled, yawning, bemused rather than angry people, if they knew my cousin.

I was polite and apologetic, aware that my Australian accent was recognizable, and aware that the English often live lives which have small circumstances. I hoped the sense of adventure which I told myself was one of the reasons I persisted in walking from gate to door, and then on to the next gate in that

long street, repeating my actions and my words, might be transmitted to these strangers, that they would want to know the details of my story.

I had learned earlier that grey morning, in another part of Liverpool, a city I can't picture as a whole because my sense of direction is awry whenever I travel in foreign cities, that my cousin lived in the street where I knocked on doors. I had been told he lived in a house with long curtains. The house number was unknown but my informant, my cousin's brother-in-law before divorce or early death (two of my family's woes, I can't remember which) had ended their association, seemed to think I would have no trouble finding my cousin.

I started with the house number my cousin's former brother-in-law had doubtfully suggested, but the people at that address had never heard of my cousin. The slight fizz of excitement which had remained with me for several days was dissipating but I could not stop searching. This search had begun in my mind when I was a boy growing up near London.

When I knocked on those strangers' doors I was with Leonie, the woman I hope to be with for the rest of my days. I had been alone in London trying to work out what had gone wrong with my family. When I tried to trace my missing aunt I had met Leonie who thought my need to follow up every clue to my family's frailty was understandable. From then on we travelled together, working as a team. Our teamwork buoyed my optimism whenever it flagged.

After the war my father was driving his trolley-bus in a busy street when he saw his sister pushing a pram with a small child by her side. My father couldn't stop, he said, his expression that of a victim, but he was certain the woman pushing the pram was his sister, the one who disappeared.

I will never know if the woman my father saw that day was my aunt. I have learned to be dubious about anything any member of my family claims to believe. But I do know how the stories of my aunt's disappearance and my father's sighting of her in that busy street filled me with curiosity. I loved the mystery, loved even the word "disappeared," for this was the word my parents used when I asked about the aunt I couldn't remember, but whose photograph I discovered in the family album.

If I had been driving the trolley-bus and I had seen my missing sister, I dreamed, I would have slammed the brakes, jumped out, weaved around and past startled shoppers, calling my sister's name, and then been reunited with her.

My cousin in the pram, if it was him, was the cousin who, one Boxing Day morning many years later, was believed to be living in a house with long curtains in a street in Liverpool. If the woman pushing the pram was my aunt she couldn't have been missing for long if my father saw her from his trolley-bus because my parents already knew about her children. Because I had worked this out for myself it was one of the few facts I was able to rely on when, as a man I decided to turn a boy's dream into an adult's reality after thinking back to that teasing story of my childhood, the family mystery of the disappearing Madeleine.

Madeleine was not her real name. It was the name she would have chosen in a story about her. In fact, it was the name she used when she disappeared. My mother, who never got along with Madeleine, would sneer at this name.

When Madeleine was four her mother died. She and her sister were separated from their brothers and the girls went to live with their dead mother's parents in Dover where the moonlight gleams on the French coast. Madeleine claimed that her real father was a rich Dover gentleman who lived in seclusion behind grand gates the children and their aunt saw when they went shopping. This rich gentleman had asked Madeleine's mother for the last dance at a gala ball and Madeleine believed that she had somehow been conceived as a result of this. (Her parents were at an army posting in India nine months before her birth). She would have written this story differently from the way I write it, but she would approve of me writing stories.

She clashed with her aunt and left her grandparents' comfortable home to live with her father and stepmother near London. She hated her stepmother and perhaps had forgotten, for a time, the rich gentleman from Dover. So Madeleine clashed with her stepmother, who was a severe woman like my mother, and then she found work in service which she hated. She could be a clasher and a hater, Madeleine.

As in most stories, there are gaps here. I know almost nothing of Madeleine's life between her adolescence and her marriage in her late twenties. During this period she might have attended parties aboard yachts with The Prince of Wales and Wallis Simpson. Or she might have stood outside the windows of expensive shops on her days off, dreaming of romantic scenarios which excluded the common workmen she knew.

Her first husband was a weak Englishman with a French name. He had no initiative, his nerves were bad, and he was work-shy. He must have been good-looking. His name would have helped. Madeleine's—our—ancestors were wealthy Europeans called "Martineau" and "Da Silva" according to her, not Hampshire agricultural labourers called "Martin" and "Silver."

Her husband, the listless but real descendant of a Frenchman, died still married to Madeleine. But she was by then married to another man. Madeleine and her first husband managed a tea-room in Ealing, near the film studios, or Madeleine managed the tea-room until she left him behind, left him to his torpor. She kept his name. "Madeline" went so well with it.

During the war she found a job in Surrey near a camp of Canadian servicemen. She had a child, a daughter, to one of those Canadians. He was killed in North Africa. Madeleine said he was a doctor. I wonder if he was a stretcher-bearer, and if he was really killed. The second child's father was also Canadian. Madeleine would have found her children's fathers' accents charming, or perhaps it was the uniform. When the war ended she disappeared.

Until we told him, it never occurred to my cousin that he lived in a house with long curtains in a long street of houses with long, street-level windows. And it also never occurred to him that when the war ended his father had returned to his Canadian wife. My cousin believed his father was French-Canadian, the same father as his half-sister's. He also believed that his father had been killed in the war. Neither of Madeleine's Canadians was a French-Canadian. We knew details of my cousin's birth that he didn't know. And we knew more about his mother than he knew.

We said nothing to disturb his beliefs. Instead, I delighted him with news of extra relatives, including an Australian branch of the family. This should not have been cause for delight, I know, but some people cherish the idea of discovering unknown relatives.

Several days before that Christmas—that cold and adventurous English Christmas Leonie and I had shared in our damp attic flat in The Cotswolds with just each other's company, drinking whisky, eating a roast dinner, and going over lines on a map which represented a planned journey into unfamiliar territory—a letter arrived from St Catherine's House in London. The letter contained limited, indirect, but vital information about Madeleine.

We had speculated that she might have remarried. We didn't know she had adopted the name "*Madeleine*," but two weeks before we received our letter we found the barest details of someone using that first name with the unusual French surname, in *Marriages*. We replaced the heavy register and hurried forward in time. I knew my cousins' names so we looked for their marriages. We found his but not hers. Then we found what we believed were his children

in *Births*. We thought these were my relatives, but couldn't be certain. This "Madeleine" had married in a district of Liverpool, and some years later a very young man with her French surname, who might have been her son, had also married and probably had children there. We had written down the file numbers and applied for copies of the certificates.

The information which was so important, and which came in the letter several days before the Christmas that stands out in my memory because of our search, and because it was our first Christmas together in England, was the actual addresses of the young couple at the time of their marriage. We thought we might have reduced the formidable gap between the years after the war and our own time, when conducting our search and being far from home made us feel as though we were living our lives to the full.

That Boxing Day night we slept behind those long curtains. My cousin slept at his girlfriend's home and we squeezed into his single bed. Even with the bed against the wall there wasn't much space in the bed-sitter.

Cracked ceramic tiles in mosaic patterns and dirty acid-etched side-panelled windows in the entrance to the building suggested a more elegant past. Beyond the front door was a large, gloomy hallway and a staircase. My cousin's room was behind the first door off this hallway. We presumed that other bed-sitters were behind all the other doors further along the hallway. A weak electric light hung from the high ceiling, and the shadows down the hallway and up the staircase depressed us. There were also rooms upstairs but I don't remember seeing any other tenants during our overnight stay, although I think we would have avoided them. We heard only the bed-sitter sparrows in the guttering, the footsteps of strangers, keys scraping in locks, and the sound of water running through pipes, running in those rooms behind closed doors.

We were touched by my cousin's kindness. He had told us that everything we needed was there; the toilet was in the room behind the next door that opened off the wide, empty hallway. This room also contained a bath. The distance between the door and the toilet seat was the same width as my cousin's bed-sitter, about eight paces. There was no shower, and the bath was dry and dusty, with somebody's washing drying on a clothes horse that stood inside it. I could find no plug, no evidence that the bath was ever used for bathing, so in the morning we made toast and tea, and washed ourselves as best we could.

We had expected to sleep poorly and wake with hangovers but were wrong on both counts. My cousin had taken us on a pub crawl the previous evening with

his girlfriend, who must have left her children with a baby-sitter. These pubs and clubs were crowded and filled with smoke, with just a short walk between each of them.

Everybody seemed to know my cousin and his girlfriend, and we enjoyed the atmosphere, but if my cousin had not been with us we would have been nervous about our safety.

While we were being introduced as "long-lost cousins from Australia," and weren't allowed to pay for many rounds of drinks, we were also nervous about being asked awkward questions. We had been collecting information about Madeleine even before that letter's arrival. We knew things about her past that might split my cousin's world wide open if he knew.

Earlier, on Boxing Day afternoon, we had driven through parts of Liverpool that looked war-torn. We had stared at abandoned blocks of flats with every window broken, shopfronts barricaded with corrugated iron, rubbish, graffiti, and everywhere, signs of decay. We had cracked unenthusiastic jokes to ward off our feeling of desolation. Earlier still, on Boxing Day morning, we had found the address where my cousin's bride had lived at the time of their marriage. This address was now just a heap of rubble with weeds poking through.

My cousin had insisted on surprising his mother. He said we could meet his sister later. Neither he nor his mother got on with his half-sister. Madeleine's hair was white and her eyes a vivid, startling blue. She resembled my father, her brother who perhaps had last seen her when they were not yet middle-aged, and trolley-buses were not yet obsolete. Her expression was one of foreboding.

Her husband, a retired wharf labourer neither Madeleine nor my cousin ever referred to by name, was drinking at his nearby club. Inside the small front room we sat near a plastic Christmas tree with bits of tinsel and other shiny decorations, waiting for cups of tea. My cousin said that he had to leave. He was ill-at-ease in Madeleine's home—but not with her—and said he would meet us later for a drink.

We looked at the loud television and the knick-knacks on the sideboard. These plaster figures recalled the fun-fairs of my past. Ducks hung on the wall, trapped forever as they tried to fly free, I thought, to escape from the game being played by adults on the television. Through the curtains, just a few metres away, I saw Madeleine's neighbours gathered near our car. There we were: the Australian visitors sitting on the edge of the settee, occasionally

whispering, the unsmiling neighbours outside, the sounds of crockery in the kitchen mixing with the shrieks coming from the television, and those ducks frozen forever. A scene like that remains in your mind, somehow sticks there.

Madeleine had a way of speaking about people and events of which we knew nothing as though we had all previously discussed those events. She didn't introduce what she wanted to say, she just spoke as she thought while we struggled to make sense of her rambling.

When she brought the bitter tea she muttered in a grim voice: "Be sure your sins will find you out." A short pause, then: "They think I'm ten years younger. I can get you something to eat."

We tried to assure her of our discretion and she said: "He kicked me when I was pregnant, you know." We tried to change the conversational direction but she ignored this and said: "He's a beast. I lost the baby. Do you want something to eat?"

By the time my cousin called back for us the strain must have showed.

My family embarked for Australia from Liverpool. I don't know why we didn't embark from Tilbury, or from Southampton, ports much closer to where we last lived in England. I remember riding in a taxi—probably my first taxi ride—to a large railway station in London. Neighbours had gathered to see us off, calling "*Bon voyage*." I didn't know what "*Bon*" meant but I guessed the rest. The neighbours looked sad; some cried; I imagine there were relatives. Or perhaps they met us at the station.

From the taxi I stared, thinking that I was seeing everything for the final time. I was glad to be leaving, glad for childish reasons, child that I was. At school I had sensed that I was headed for a beating. Our teacher had a fearful way of hurting and humiliating those who went too far with him, and I knew my turn was soon. I couldn't face the thought of being beaten and maybe crying in front of my classmates. I couldn't face the shame.

At a local shop I had been caught stealing a packet of confectionery cigarettes. The shopkeeper banned me from entering the shop again, but my parents never knew. I was sent every evening to buy my father's newspaper from that shop and I couldn't seem to avoid this errand. Every evening I ran as fast as I could, both ways, to save time. Between these dashes I waited near the shop for the appearance of any friends from school so that I could ask these friends for help, ask them to buy my father's newspaper for me.

I was out of excuses for always returning so late with the newspaper. That was two beatings I was headed for. Life had seemed to be closing in, trapping me. I dreaded being exposed.

I believe that taxi must have taken us to Paddington. I loved the Victorian architecture—still do—the vaulted roof, the spaciousness, the bustling travellers, the echo of announcements, and the aura of excitement long journeys create. Today, I love to buy books and magazines, preparing to be transported to two faraway places at once; my train's destination, and that other place, nearer to reality for me, which is to be found in the pleasure of reading.

My mother, whose heart was not in this, my father's great adventure, who was most likely glad to have been rid of Madeleine, and who, today, is alone; my father who turned his back on England and therefore, indirectly, on the sister he believed would remain missing for all time; my sister who is alone, and as distant with me as Madeleine was with her brothers; my brother whose family life now seems so depressing that he weeps over the telephone; and I, who for many years was lonely, all took the train to Liverpool's Lime Street station, and from the great port that has now almost died, the port where Madeleine's latest husband was working as a wharf labourer, we travelled by slow ship to Melbourne, knowing nothing of future regret, or of future discovery.

In the smoky, burnt-out evening of my early memory's fantasy, my family joins the other emigrants on deck to watch the port of Liverpool recede. Eternal sunshine and egalitarianism is believed to lie twelve thousand miles ahead. Those emigrants are leaving a land of noxious fogs and social inequality. But in my early memory the port shrinks, protected by a clinging mist, until it disappears like a beautiful dream that can never be re-entered, as the ship's whistle sounds a long, final farewell.

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