The Scientist Who Wasn’t There

Joanne Briggs

I

My dad's name was back in the news again in the summer of 2020. A small black-and-white photograph next to the article had captured him in youthful middle-age, and as I looked at it, I realised that I was already several years older than he had ever been. He had died, somehow, nearly thirty-five years before, when I was twenty-four. And apart from a few books, evidence of him that I could point to was scant. When I was much younger, I had borne his living absence as my own failing, a deviation from the accepted order that I frequently felt obliged to explain. None of my childhood friends had ever seen him, so even then he was mysterious to the point of appearing invented. Like many children with a parent who isn't there, I filled the space, and I spun what little I knew into a story which reflected well on both of us, a story which also came in handy to cover other people's embarrassment, when otherwise they might think my predicament tragic:

"Oh, it's not sad at all", I would say. "My dad is in fact a very famous scientist. He's an expert in everything, including outer space, deadly poisons, rare diseases, and human fertility. He lives in other countries so I don't see him very much, but he might come soon because he has to go to a World Health Organisation committee in Geneva, or speak at an international conference, or help someone invent a new kind of contraceptive pill."

In the end and in one way or another, parents will reveal themselves to be rather less than they pretended: as merely human, imperfect, and

mortal. Foremost among the superlatives my dad attracted in life and in death would probably be the way in which he did just that.

II

I last saw my dad on a station platform in the autumn of 1986, before he got on a train to London. He had arrived in the country with very little notice, which was unusual as he tended to combine visits to see his children with planned business meetings. The restaurant where he had chosen to meet had once been a place to be seen, and it still had the baronial hall decor and silver-service gentility that had been popular when he had taken me there last, in the early 1970s. The street door led into a dark foyer, hidden from the customers beyond by a heavy velvet curtain, but when allowed through this time I found the dining room to be almost empty. Weak sun fell in through the thickly leaded windows onto uninhabited white-cloth tables, and flickering electric bulbs in cast iron sconces on the walls produced no more light than real candles. My dad was in a far corner, sitting back in a carver chair. He was always incongruous in the flesh because to me he was at the same time both familiar and strange, like someone conjured into life from history or fiction. That day, perhaps a Tudor king waiting for his portrait to be painted. As I sat down, I asked him what he was doing here. He began stroking his face and neck with a large handkerchief and said after a long pause that there had been a “misunderstanding”.

My dad owned several complete wardrobes of clothes, tailored to fit his fluctuating size, and that day he was wearing what must have been one of his largest pale blue seersucker suits. His tropical executive style of dress tended to give him away as a character from somewhere else, from

a place where the sun is fiercely hot and bright, and suggested a protected life in perpetual transit between airport lounges, conference centres and air-conditioned hotels. His shoes were always highly polished, almost certainly by somebody else. His ankles a little swollen in brightly coloured socks.

He put his handkerchief away in his trouser pocket and looked around as if he thought we might be overheard.

"It's only a misunderstanding but unfortunately it's all gone too far, so I've had no choice but to get the lawyers involved."

He ordered for both of us without looking at the menu, and I asked him what kind of misunderstanding it was.

"Oh, there's really nothing to it", he said. "It's just a pack of lies. But I believe it will all be under control by tomorrow."

He had suddenly left his job as Dean of Sciences at an Australian university the year before, and moved to a large, remote house in the south of Spain, in the Sierra Blanca mountains.

"Academic life is full of professional jealousies," he said. "Who should have had this, who was passed over for that, who's had more publications and preferments, who's giving a symposium. It's what keeps them all going, grinding away, looking over each other's shoulders. Then they bring it all to my door, to sort it all out for them. But it's all just poison."

Covered plates arrived and the cloches were removed.

"So", he said.

He ran a blunt knife down the seam of a dover sole and pulled apart the flesh into equal halves.

“What have you been up to?”

For a couple of years, I had been studying a subject he had little time for. I could have told him I had passed my exams in it, but then I would have had to explain again what it was.

“Oh, nothing”, I said.

“Nothing?”

His fork moved rapidly from plate to mouth, and he chewed occasionally, not looking up.

“Yes”, I said. “Nothing.”

“What you get for nothing”, he said, “is nothing. You can see that, can’t you?”

He soaked up pools of burnt butter with torn pieces of bread roll.

“I’m not like you”, I said, after a while.

“I just look like you.”

He smiled, and I smiled as well.

“That, I’m afraid, is very plain for all to see,” he said.

Then he laughed, and sighed, calling me by my first name, shortened. A fatherly diminutive.

“I don’t know”, he said. “Though in fact I’m planning to take a leaf out of your book myself.”

A waiter refilled his glass.

“I’d decided to retire anyway, even before all of this. Not stop completely. Just do what I want to. Write. Keep an Emeritus somewhere, probably. But I’ve no desire to lead anymore.”

I ate my fish as he drank and talked, although I wasn’t very hungry.

“I’ve never understood the two of you”, he said.

“You and your brother, both. Why neither of you has ever had my get up and go.”

Soon he changed the subject to more appealing topics, like the microbiology of Jupiter, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in families who eat their ancestors, and undetectable deadly toxins.

Afterwards I went to the platform with him and helped him onto the train. As it was about to leave, he leaned down from the open window and I put my face against his. Then I walked back to work, adding that moment to my small archive. Sample date: today, Friday. Sample Type: warm skin, claret, cologne. It became the final specimen in my collection when nine weeks later I was told that he was dead.

III

I rang my brother, who hadn't seen the recent article.

"So - what is it this time?" he said. "Same old thing?"

Over thirty-five years ago, on 28th September 1986, the Sunday Times ran a full-page close-up of our dad's face with "EXPOSED" written across it, next to a lengthy feature entitled *'The Bogus Work of Professor Briggs*'. I had met him for lunch two days before. Later I realised he had been tipped off about what was coming, so he had flown in from Spain to issue legal proceedings, trying to stop the article from going to press. Though he never admitted it, he was never able to refute the accusation that he faked the results of studies supposed to show that oral contraceptives are safe. The process was so well-known in the field it even had his name: The Briggs Lipid Test. After the Sunday Times splash, the story went everywhere.

"It's another serious allegation", I said. "So that isn't new, but it's different this time. It's not the fake research this time. It's something that happened a long time ago, about twenty years before that, I think. When we were small."

My brother was not quite two years old when I was born. Circumstances shaped us from childhood in an unspoken understanding that everybody around us was ridiculous and unreliable, particularly our parents. If, as I suspected, he knew that some of what had happened when we were younger had been less than funny, he had never let me know it.

He gave a snorting laugh.

“Brilliant. Let me guess. It turns out now he was some sort of serial killer.”

IV

Our mother was a reluctant and angry single parent, grieving the unexpected loss of her marriage. Like William Blake on Peckham Rye, she was unusual in being able to see angels in the ordinary world; they were more common in sympathetic spaces like old buildings, churches or romantic landscapes, and it was by no means all of the time, nor was it distressing to her, or an influence on her behaviour in any obvious way. She saw a lot of angels during a period of unexplained illness that began suddenly when I was a baby, an acute hypercalcaemia that almost killed her, and once she recovered, the experience of being near death was at the root of an idiosyncratic spirituality that was in many ways like a formal religion. It included the reincarnation of an invisible friend from her childhood as a Jordanian medical student who looked after her in hospital, and an encounter with the entirety of humankind speaking in unison from a single body. In common with many other creeds, my mother's system of belief was founded on both predestination narratives and origin myths: about how and where my parents had met, the films they had seen, the great ships on which they travelled, the more memorable events of their early married life together in Canada, America and New Zealand, her miraculous survival, and tales of my father's academic brilliance, his scientific genius, and, in later life, of his pathological cruelty. Sometimes she would sing a jazz-age ballad about travelling West, "*Home in Pasadena*", remembering happy times together

in California in the early 1960's, as if the loving husband and the man who had left her were two completely different people.

I want to be a home-sweet-homer, there I'll settle down,
beneath the palms in someone's arms, in Pasadena town.

My mother was a talented painter and sculptor, but she had to find practical work to keep the three of us once my dad was gone. She went back to cutting patterns and making clothes and was more skilful with line and colour than you would have guessed from her meagre pay. She occasionally mentioned vivid memories of being able to fly as a child, when she would rise up from the furniture and flutter, moth-like, against the ceiling, but was unable to remember when it had happened last. In early adulthood she discovered another gift which might have taken its place: she could remove warts through a transaction involving copper coins, and over the years I met many people who swore she had completely cured them.

When lack of money forced the sale of the large house where we had lived with both of our parents, my mother went out and trapped a large toad in a bucket on the wet ground by the brook, releasing her that night under the gate and into the yard of an empty cottage she wanted to buy. As a fierce concierge and as doula to the conveyancing process, the toad looked after the property on my mother's behalf until contracts could be exchanged, while eating her fill of garden pests in the overgrown rockery. I don't know what became of the toad after we moved in: my brother and I didn't spend much time outside, as there was little out there to do.

It was easy for me to believe that my mother's eccentricity, her irrationality even, had driven my father away, and that she was to blame for that. I rarely considered the alternative, that he was the more culpable, probably because he was not the one who was there. We were told that he had in fact been taken away from us by a woman, who was also a scientist. A little older, childless, and, I imagined, someone intellectually his equal but with the added gift of feminine tricks and deceptions. From my small and at times precarious vantage point, I observed at a distance what I understood to be his continuing rise to prominence, as if watching a distant meteor. He seemed to me to be rare, enigmatic, powerful, and very far away. Occasionally I found myself projecting his image into empty spaces in the house that I thought might suit him; a benign and silent ghost of himself, who might stand by the window looking out, or sit in the chair in the study, reading.

V

News about this second, earlier allegation continued on in a similar vein for several more days, taking up less and less space on the page. Then while I was browsing online for background information, I found a direct accusation made in the early 1980s by a former colleague that I hadn't been aware of before. This university colleague believed my dad was not just a perpetrator of fraud, he was actually a fraud himself.

I rang my brother again.

"What do we know about dad's qualifications?", I asked him. "I mean his paper qualifications, his degrees?"

"He took his first degree at Liverpool, of course, sometime in the late 50s, in chemistry. And we know of course that he got a PhD in America, from Cornell, and then a Doctor of Science from New Zealand."

"But how do we know that?" I said.

"Well, partly because he told us he did, or mum probably did. Or both. But mainly because I've got copies of them here in my office. I'm looking at them now, they're next to mine on the shelf. I'm not sure where they came from. Maybe with the box of his stuff that came after Nana died."

My brother has worked on his own for over twenty years, unable to tolerate the noise and unwelcome social interactions that were the by-products of life in a university mathematics department. He nurtures a homemade system of odds-processing software which earns him a very

comfortable living, mainly from horse-racing, and sometimes he leaves the house to go to a betting shop, to see if he can improve on technology using more old-fashioned techniques. Every so often he will have a steak breakfast at a windowless local casino and then play blackjack, provided that the cards are dealt the traditional way, from a shoe with multiple packs. He counts cards because he is unable not to, and it seems to be as much a part of the game as deciding how far to go without attracting attention. He counts things, and sometimes it makes him money. When people ask what my brother's job is, I usually say "professional gambler", which conjures up an image wholly at odds with reality: it makes him sound slick and persuasive with an easy, superficial charm, like a flashily dressed con-artist from a story by Damon Runyan or Graham Greene.

When I got to his house my brother was wearing army surplus shorts, Crocs and socks, with the exposed hem of a buttoned shirt dividing casual dress below from workwear above. He was already walking away down the hall as I came in, continuing our earlier conversation as he went. I followed him to his study.

"Here they are", he said.

There were two traditional-style higher degree submissions laid out on his desk, both standard A4 hardback volumes bound in cloth, of different thicknesses. The thicker one was blue, dated 1959, the other maroon red, dated 1961, and each was also stamped with dad's name on the spine in gold letters. The blue one also had gold script on its front cover: '*Studies of the Biochemistry of Biotin and its Analogues. Cornell*

University PH.D'. A couple of dad's earliest published books were next to them, the only ones we owned: '*A Handbook of Philosophy*', published in Canada when he was twenty-four, and '*Current Aspects of Exobiology'*, a set of papers from 1966 about possible life-forms elsewhere in the Universe. He had written dozens of other books over the years, of course, which were in specialist collections all over the world.

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VIII

After I saw my brother, I visited the Cornell University electronic library catalogue. It seemed likely that another copy of dad's doctorate would still be in the university's archives, as PhDs tend to be kept forever. Within a few minutes I'd found something in the index by Michael H. Briggs, with the same title, '*Studies on the Biochemistry of Biotin and its Analogues*', and with the same date, September 1959. I emailed the librarian and asked them to send me some images of it.

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X

Screen shots arrived from Cornell library which showed that what they had was similar, but not the same as the book on my brother's desk. On our title page it said: '*A thesis presented to the Graduate School of Cornell University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, September*

1959'. But the library copy was just a Master of Science dissertation, and not a doctorate at all.

He had been at Cornell for only one academic year. And the object we had was a fake. It was a carefully constructed theatrical prop, or perhaps the small, believable detail that lends credibility to a much bigger confidence trick.

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