

Finding my brother

Written by Helen Mulgan, her long lost brother. Helen speaks about the shock of discovering about his life after leaving New Zealand and meeting his family, about whom she had no knowledge prior to 2017.

I clearly remember that morning in the late Spring of 2017 when the telephone rang in my Eastbourne, New Zealand home and an Australian stranger told me he was my nephew, son of my brother, who, he said had died long before. He said he had been seeking me out for 27 years.

I warily answered his questions and listened to his story. Then, in shock, I just sat down and did nothing for half an hour. In the space of three minutes I had found and lost my childhood mate for whom I had grieved most of my adult life. Later I rang my children, Kitty and Roderick.

My brother, my only brother, Maurice, had poor health as a child. He suffered from severe asthma. At 20 he sailed to Australia hoping that an outdoor life in a dry climate would effect a cure. We were sad to see him go, but his health was the first priority. For about six months we were comforted by his frequent letters telling of new experiences and freedom from asthma attacks.

Then, nothing. Nothing for over 60 years.

Why would a cherished son and brother, who had led a blameless life, decide to cut all ties and assume a new identity? We could only speculate.

Perhaps this was not my Maurice? Incredulity gave way to confirmation, with DNA and other evidence - birth date, photographs, handwriting and more. Interestingly, when he had chosen new names for himself, he had used one of his father's first names and a surname associated with his father's UK home and that of a special uncle for his first son.

A few months later my son and I flew to Perth to meet our new family. On our arrival Jim and Ned drove us straight to see Meg in her retirement home. At once I felt an affinity with Meg. I saw what had drawn my brother to her and why they had spontaneously made a commitment to each other.

I feel grateful that they shared happy years and were blessed with two fine sons. In photographs of the little family, I can feel the loving bond between them in the very way they look at each other.

I feel grateful that Maurice had someone to weep over his grave.

I never met Meg again, but we exchanged thoughts and memories in letters, e-mails and in one (novel to me) zoom call. I miss her. I regret the wasted years when we might have known and supported each other - unaware, we each had a son just a few months apart. But, belatedly, I did get to know her. And I am so glad Meg and John/Maurice have left something of their unique selves in their children and grandchildren.

Now, in my declining years, I have time to ponder on the wonder of it all.

Helen Mulgan, 2021

Footnote 1: Now that Ned and Jim, along with their families, have heard the full story, met their extended family, and had time to reflect on the fact that their father's background was very different from what they had believed, they have chosen to refer to their father as Maurice, rather than John.

This choice is both objective and emotional. On a practical level, since Maurice was his original name, it now feels natural to call him this—especially as they knew him for so little of their own lives. Emotionally, it is also important that his legacy in New Zealand is not lost, and that his sister Helen, in particular, can remember her brother by his birth name, not the name he chose later in life when he left the family and never saw them again.

Today, Ned and Jim lovingly refer to their father as Maurice, and feel incredibly fortunate to have connected with such a wonderful extended family.

Footnote 2: The following is taken from an email sent by Helen Mulgan to Hilary Tulloch, during correspondence once the family had been found. This note is from Helen to Hilary:

Thank you for all the photos. My eyes fill with tears as I look at them. I believe he could have been held down in an operation. He was in hospital for tonsil removal and afterwards was traumatised. My mother was distraught but helpless to put things right. We did not have many photos taken when we were children. My parents lost everything they owned in the Great Depression and never recovered. We were too poor to own a camera. I have one when Maurice was about 3 when they could afford a studio portrait. Also a poor snap taken by a visitor of Maurice about 10/11. I think you can see a resemblance.

I wonder if I could get it enhanced. I am not computer savvy and do not know how to send it to you. I may get help. Incidentally my computer password has always been “Maurice” plus a number and I say a little prayer for him as I sign in. In the photos he looks loving. I never saw Maurice after he was 18.

I never knew of any rare blood group in any members of family. When younger, I used to donate blood – but it was never specially sought after; nor of anyone else’s resistance to anaesthetic. Maurice abhorred unions and we suspected he got into trouble for refusing to join a union. My mother and I formed a theory that unionists were out to get him and that he might have been waylaid if he were hitching a ride to Wyndham. Ever since he vanished I have carried in my head a picture of his body being slung in a ditch in the outback. If he feared reprisals, could this be why he arranged to disappear? My father never strove to amass money and was so successful in this regard that we were poverty-stricken throughout my childhood. Yet he was a hard worker, but seemed to be dogged by bad luck.

Our poultry farm collapsed when our flock got the disease – coccidiosis (I forget the spelling). My father was always ready to give to anyone in need. I too give to Save the Children. Roderick is going to scan the few relevant photos I have. I suppose you have a busy life. I do not know if this e-mailing is taking up too much of your time. I can keep things till/if we meet. Oh yes he truly did walk to the beat of his own drum. I can sort of understand his claiming to have fought in the war. He followed war news keenly and had set up a map of Europe on the wall and had pins to place strategic positions. He complained that whenever his mother wanted a pin the Allies had to retreat. He was frustrated that he was not old enough to join up. Maurice’s birthday was 9 March, but 1928.