lovereading.co.uk

Blue-Eyed Son

Nicky Campbell

Published by Pan

Extract is copyright of the Author

November 1990

I was committing adultery in Room 634 of the Holiday Inn in Birmingham when my wife rang to say they'd found my mother. It was ten thirty on Saturday morning.

I scrambled, receiver and all, to the other side of the large double bed. As far away as I could possibly get from Sarah. As discreet as I could be without appearing duplicitous.

'Hi. I've only just woken up.' I just wanted this intrusion to end.

Sarah looked angry. She was hating this. Why hadn't I remembered to unplug the thing last night?

Linda sounded urgent – excited.

'Your man has just phoned. He has found her and wants you to call him.' I'd been expecting his call but I still couldn't believe what I was hearing.

'OK. I'll ring him right now.'

'How was the programme?'

'Fine. Listen, I'll speak later.' At least I had an excuse for being perfunctory.

I started dialling the private detective's number immediately and then stopped, put down the phone and turned to Sarah.

'That was Linda.'

'I gathered,' she said, looking away, resigned. She knew I was searching for my birth mother and she understood it was important to me. Taking a deep breath she turned to me with a question that triggered a panic deep inside me. 'Did your natural mum have a long relationship with your natural dad?'

'No, it was just a casual thing as far as I know. He was most likely some fly by night – told her he loved her and cleared off. Probably married for all I know.' She looked right through me. She was thinking exactly what I was thinking: like father like son?

I attempted to placate her so I could get on with the call. She gave me some space, but withheld the benefit of the doubt. I grabbed a notebook, reached for the phone again and lay diagonally across the bed ready to call the gumshoe. Bolton's Bogart was a private detective called Steve.

I'd met him only eight days before. The show I co-presented every Friday night was called *Central Weekend Live* and was in its heyday, a must-watch debate show on Midlands ITV. From Monday to Thursday I presented a late-night programme on Radio One and every once in a lucrative while I went to Glasgow to record the glittery big-money game show *Wheel of Fortune*.

I adored presenting *Central Weekend*. Every Friday night was an exotic adventure in Birmingham. It was always lively, frequently raucous and almost invariably confrontational. The night before I'd hosted a debate on penis extensions. The previous week the subject had been rather more private dicks – the ethics of private investigators, starring, as ever, some compelling human exhibits. It wasn't what the producer called 'blood on the floor' but it was fascinating stuff.

The hospitality room at Central's Broad Street Studios had a buzzing atmosphere during and after each show and when the closing credits had rolled we chatted and drank with the guests and rest of the team. It was a three-item programme so the green room was always milling with wonderfully diverse and picaresque characters. All human life was there: burglars and bishops, vampire hunters and balloon-breasted models; purple-faced fox hunters and po-faced psychics. It was like a magic mushroom mardi gras. They all had real opinions though. There was no masquerade about that.

Steve the gumshoe was classic casting. 'Central casting' you might say. He looked every millimetre the ex cop: broad shouldered, thick-skinned and no nonsense, apart from a bit of a seventies-style handlebar effort inching down the sides of his mouth. We got talking and I told him I was looking for my mother.

'I want to find out more about her and maybe get in touch.'

The 'maybe' was pure self-protection. The thought of actually going through with it still filled me with trepidation.

'Be delighted to help.'

I knew she used to be a nurse from Dublin who worked in some big hospitals there and I knew her name but that was it. He said it wouldn't be a problem but it might take a couple of days. A couple of days? I was staggered. He was blasé.

'We are all numbers. We are all on computer.'

'But isn't all that stuff confidential? Data protected or whatever?'

'There is no such thing as confidential, Nick. In my game it's all about favours.' His booze-fuelled braggadocio notwithstanding I felt I'd crossed a threshold. There was no turning back now. I

took the step. I was exhilarated and terrified. Scared of rejection. Worried that the fantasy I had cradled for so long might be easier to deal with than the truth I would confront. Excited that I was on the verge of an extraordinary life-changing revelation. Anxious that I would break Mum and Dad's hearts. This was the undiscovered country.

A midweek call to Steve had produced no more than a vague reassurance that all was in hand. It sounded like a delay tactic. The Saturday-morning call from the woman I married produced a feeling I had never known before. Adolescent shivers of excitement, a deep spiritual yearning and the most intensely burning curiosity all bundled up together. Deal with it! Where would it lead? I rang Steve to find out what he'd discovered.

'Oh, hello, Nick. Yeah, listen, I've got a number. She has been away for some time, possibly travelling abroad or something, and hasn't been at the address in question for a while but is back there now. She appears to be single but was married. She went for a time by the name of Stella Newton rather than Lackey, her maiden name.'

I was frantically scribbling all this down. He gave me her address and I took the number down. With the international prefix and Dublin code it seemed to go on for ever.

'Thanks a million, Steve. Listen, send me the bill.'

'Let me know how you get on. Good luck, mate.'

Later, Sarah and I parted. When I got home I was shattered. *Central Weekend Live* beats the hell out of you. So do lies.

We phoned Stella that night. Linda felt my adoption was at the heart of all our problems. What she rightly saw as my own restless sense of incompleteness was tearing us apart. Things were

bad between us in a hopeless tangle of cause and effect. For Linda, finding Stella was the great panacea. She probably had a point. I was certainly driven by a lurking and now consuming curiosity, which her promptings had drawn to the surface. Someday I had to know and now that day was tantalizingly close, the knowing became imperative.

But there was another reason. I was thirty. I was entering a new phase of life and it was clear that we would never have children. Linda had two teenage boys from her previous marriage and having a baby just wasn't an option. The realization I would never be a father led me to my mother.

It was another tired and fractious Saturday night but for once we had a common focus. 'Go on, phone her. Phone her tonight. Do it now. Phone her,' she kept insisting. 'I'll speak first if you want.'

'I am not sure I can speak at all.'

Ever a force of nature, Linda grabbed the initiative.

'Let's do it now.' She was on a mission, pumping with adrenalin. She's a strong and striking woman and right then she was so strong for me.

She stood in the hall and dialled the number. I was sitting on the stairs, rigid with fear, my head buried in my hands, my body folding into a foetal position. I really didn't think I could go through with it. I was petrified and exhausted. What the hell would I say? What the hell do you say? This woman gave birth to me. I needed an epidural.

I had held this fantasy in my head for years. I had a mental picture of a beautiful but driven career woman – a free spirit who found herself in this impossible situation and made an

extraordinary sacrifice. She gave her baby away. Her baby was about to catch up with her. We were about to speak to her. I was about to clothe this idealized wraith in humanity. At twenty-nine I was about to make the first connection with my own flesh and blood, someone to whom I was genetically connected. That word – genetic – it had an almost sacred meaning for me. (It still does.) A genetic link; a magical bond. An inexpressible essence of belonging and being.

From my seat on the stairs I could hear the ring at the other end. It stopped. A woman's voice. Soft, Irish, hesitant and wary. 'Hello.'

ONE

A Proper Mummy and Daddy

My birth mother Stella made sure I was adopted into a good middle-class family and it was clearly stipulated in the adoption papers that I be raised in her own faith – Protestant. My parents, neither of whom gave a damnation about religion beyond the nominal, had heard about her predicament through their GP and close friend Ronnie Cameron who'd been ministering to Stella's needs while she stayed in Edinburgh, far from the prying eyes and wagging tongues of Dublin. Letters were exchanged, formalities completed, flowers sent and my parents' joy was complete. Fiona had a little brother. I was deposited in a smart nursing-home ready for collection. New-born babies available for adoption are rare these days but back then they were relatively plentiful and it was in general an easier business. Private adoptions were commonplace.

Before that first phone contact with Stella we'd told Mum, or rather my wife Linda had told Mum, that we were considering the whole tracing thing. As a result Mum furnished me with a full account of the story one weekend, when we were staying at my parents' house – my childhood home in Edinburgh. Mum left it beautifully typed in an envelope beside our bed. It was addressed

to 'Our darling son Nicholas'. When I opened it and read it, I felt raw. It was almost as if this was the day they'd long dreaded. As if they knew that one day they would lose their precious son and that now the day had come. As if my being there was only ever transient. But if the bonds were loosening and the ties were fraying where was I? They were my family. Mum and Dad and Fiona were my anchor. Why did I do this? Because I had to. How could I do this? Because now I couldn't stop. As I headed towards the unknown, there was no turning back.

Mum's letter made me want to retreat to a past of warm certainties and security, to be a little boy again playing on the stairs outside the bedroom with Mum and Dad there with me in the house. Dad smoking his pipe, Fiona with a friend in her room and Mum declaiming into the phone downstairs. I immediately wanted to go back to the land of toy soldiers and table football. Mum's moving account laid it all out for me. They went down the adoption road after she suffered her fourth miscarriage, this time at four and a half months. As prospective adopters everyone was rigorously checked out – even four-year-old Fiona, their natural child, was interviewed. 'Natural child' – that invidious comparative term – was I their unnatural child?

In late 1960 and early '61, Mum had been thoroughly depressed and increasingly pessimistic about the whole tortuous process. The Director of the Guild of Service – the adoption society to whom would-be adopters applied – had visited the house to assess their suitability. Mum rankles at the memory. It hurt for obvious reasons.

'She came to the house and she was *eight* months' pregnant,'

recalls Mum. 'I thought how tactless to interview somebody who has just had a miscarriage at four months and lost a child and she comes along – bulging – I hated her.'

One morning Dad, claiming he had an upset stomach after a 'late night', went to see Dr Cameron. Dad told Ronnie that they didn't hold out much hope they would be accepted. They were desperate for another child to make their family complete. Ronnie perked up when he remembered an unmarried woman in his practice who was having a baby and had been released from her job to come to Edinburgh for the birth. She was very nice; an intelligent professional woman; a fine-looking woman with 'black hair and blue eyes' who was a couple of inches taller than Mum but the same age – thirty-seven. Her credentials were excellent. She wasn't some flighty teenager who didn't know what she was doing and might suddenly renege on the deal. There were still three months of her pregnancy to go but after she'd received a glowing impression of the Campbell family from the good and trusted doctor she agreed to let Mum and Dad have whatever arrived – boy, girl or twins.

My birth mother was the matron of a hospital in Dublin. The hierarchy in the hospital had thought a great deal of her abilities as it was the second time they had released her and kept her job open. Some time before she had come over to Scotland to have another child, a little girl who was also adopted – Stella had chosen Deirdre's name.

Mum explained that they never met my birth mother. They sent her flowers at the birth and Stella replied to Dr Cameron with a short note of thanks.

Dear Dr Cameron,

Please convey a sincere 'thank you' to Nicholas's parents from me for their very lovely gift of flowers.

I do appreciate this kind thought. It has given me much pleasure along with their good wishes and consideration for me which have been such a help.

My prayers and best wishes for the future.

Nicholas's Mother

That was the extent of their contact.

Mum recorded:

> The Children's Officer had to be informed. She got more information that she did not share. With hindsight there was so much more one would like to have known but was reluctant to ask. Answers were vague, maybe to prevent identification or for other reasons.

Stella's daughter Deirdre had been born in the Eastern General Hospital in Edinburgh on 8 October 1959. After falling pregnant again and returning to Edinburgh only fifteen months later she couldn't face the shame of going back to the same hospital with the same nurses, but she did return to her old digs in Portobello – Edinburgh by the sea – and decided to have me there. She felt comfortable and welcome at those digs. Mrs Blackie ran a relaxed boarding-house, ably assisted by her daughters, and Stella was made to feel like one of the family. To this day the laughter is remembered as much as the tears.

After Deirdre, Stella's pregnancy with me was the second storm

in two inclement years and this time she'd agreed to put my adoptive parents' choice of name on the birth certificate. She didn't particularly like 'Nicholas' but she concurred. It was actually a matter of some debate with my new mummy and daddy as well. 'Nicholas' narrowly beat 'Peregrine' in the play-off. I fear it went to penalties. Dad put his foot down. Thank goodness for that. 'Welcome to the programme. My name is Perry Campbell.' It would never have worked – and neither would I – much. Not in radio anyway – maybe something big in soft furnishings. Or 'a young man in Antiques' – to use Noel Coward's mischievous euphemism. I am convinced that somewhere within the nature–nurture debate we do have to factor in the key variable of a crap name. Character is formed by such things, isn't it? Whether by compliance or defiance. The great Johnny Cash told us that: 'My name is Sue. How do you do?'

Mum says I was smiling when she and Dad first came to see me in the Willowbrae nursing-home. The nurses said it was wind. After I had spent four weeks in Willowbrae, my new mummy was allowed to take me to my new home. There was such excitement in the family on that day. My adoptive sister Fiona recalls how she was prepared for my coming. She was five but it's a memory as strong as yesterday. 'I remember coming down the stairs and being told I wasn't going to school today. We were going to pick up my baby brother. I was ecstatic.' For some time she had been pretending she had a baby brother and telling anyone who would listen all about him. Now it was true. It got better. Later that day she went to her regular ballet class and excitement upon excitement: Mum took her new baby brother along in his pram.

I have known I'm adopted for as long as I can remember.

Mum told me how I was specially chosen. It's quite a conceit. Of course I wasn't the chosen one; I was just a very naughty boy. Fiona subscribes to the theory that it's the secret of my success and the reason for my failings. In fact, I think she's the originator of that theory.

Dad was a map publisher; Mum a psychiatric social worker. This is what Mum told me from my earliest years – in her own words. God bless her, she wrote it down for posterity. Posterity has come around.

> Once upon a time there was a mummy and a daddy who had a little girl called Fiona and all of them wanted a brother or sister for the little girl but Mummy couldn't grow any more babies and that made them sad.
>
> One day they talked to the doctor about it and he said he knew someone who had a baby and wanted it adopted. The lady was very nice, he said, and would like to have kept the baby herself but was very wise and very courageous and wanted the baby to have a proper mummy and daddy and a good settled home which she was unable to provide so she put the baby into a special baby home and that is where your mummy and daddy first saw you at a few days old.
>
> 'Come along,' said the nurse as we walked past a row of cots. Mummy kept stopping and looking and in one cot a dear little baby actually seemed to smile at her. 'Look, nurse,' said Mummy. 'Isn't that one cute? I wish I could have more than one baby so I could take that one home too.' 'But Mrs Campbell,' said the nurse, 'that is Nicholas, your very own adopted baby!!'

> So of course Mummy and Daddy were delighted and wrapped you up and took you home and an excited Fiona helped to look after you when you were a little baby. Now you will soon be big enough to look after her! And Mummy and Daddy love you both very, very, much.

For three years following my birth Stella had sent Dr Cameron a Christmas card enquiring after my progress and then, nothing.