
Opening Extract from...

Problem Child

A Memoir

Written by Caradoc King

Published by Simon & Schuster

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London · New York · Sydney · Toronto

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2011
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Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia
Sydney

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-85720-197-3

Typeset by M Rules
Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

To my children: Charlie, Flora and India.

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Prologue

I am in Southwold, an old-fashioned seaside town on the Suffolk coast. I first stayed here as a five-year-old with my paternal grandparents who owned a house called the Old Mill on the common. For a couple of years I visited until my grandfather died and Little Granny moved to a smaller house. Although I had four sisters, my visits to Southwold were always on my own, a bit scary for a small boy staying with a strict elderly couple, but the visits are still happily remembered – solitary tricycle rides across the common from the town to the water tower, ice cream on the pier, climbing the old bear pole on the golf course watched anxiously by Granny below, prodding the famous whale washed up and dying slowly on the beach.

The visit I clearly remember was in spring 1953, when I was six. It was just after the Great Flood, which on the last night of January overwhelmed the east coast, drowning two hundred people and leaving a swathe of dead livestock and smashed houses, among them Strood House, my family home on the

Essex marshes. That night was the most exciting of my life, and as a temporary refugee in Southwold I remember walking with Little Granny in our wellington boots along the mud-silted road to the harbour gazing in wonder at the roofs of the seaside houses decapitated by the wind, with attic and bedroom contents spilled across the gardens.

I didn't return to Southwold until 1988, with my then wife and our two children. We stayed a night at the Swan Hotel for an eightieth birthday lunch for my Aunt Mavis, my father's oldest sister. My father didn't come to the lunch because he hadn't had any contact with Mavis (or me) for twenty-five years. But it was a happy family reunion. Manfred, Mavis's partner of thirty years and regarded in the family as a bit of a bounder, to everyone's surprise proposed marriage to her during his after-lunch speech; and, for the first time for half my life, I re-met my sister Priscilla, as delightful and affectionate as I had remembered, a meeting which started the process of reclaiming my childhood.

Since that birthday visit I have come back every year to Southwold, staying at the Swan, now with my partner Ingrid and our daughter India. But this time I'm on my own, renting a holiday cottage for a fortnight to start this book.

The book has been marinating for several years and two things have prompted me to write it. The first is coincidence. A new client of mine, a novelist living in Bloomsbury, mentioned my name to one of her neighbours, a painter called Patricia. The neighbour asked her to ask me whether I was the Caradoc King who lived at Peldon House in Essex in the mid-1950s. I said I was if she meant Strood House, Peldon, and, when we met, Patricia told me a surprising story.

When she was a schoolgirl, Patricia had been a friend of my oldest sister, Jane, and had stayed at Strood House a couple of times when I was a small boy. This was itself surprising because

my mother, Jill, was a family recluse who disliked visitors, even her children's friends, and had once substituted teatime sandwich spread with hot chilli paste to scare away some particularly unwelcome child.

Then Patricia said that she remembered Jill telling her quietly before she introduced me '… and this is Caradoc, who's adopted but don't tell him because he doesn't know.'

Her words were a shock. I hadn't been told I was adopted until I was fifteen, a year before my parents threw me out of the family. I had thought that until then none of my siblings knew I was adopted, that this was my parents' closely held secret and that the explanation for my abrupt disappearance was that I was a problem child, adopted from a bad family, a cuckoo in the nest. How could my mother have told an eleven-year-old stranger a secret she had kept from me until I was in my teens?

It was of course naive to believe that my older sisters thought I was their natural brother, born mysteriously without pregnancy and already fifteen months old. Much later I was told that both Jane and Janet had always known but it was never mentioned. But this late discovery deeply upset my memory and perception of childhood.

The other catalysts of the story are family photographs, and one in particular.

When in middle age I met my natural mother, already an old woman crippled by a stroke, my half-sister gave me copies of a batch of family photographs. One of them was of me as a baby, in the garden of the family home.

Four years later, after a reunion with my adoptive siblings at a family funeral, my sister Priscilla gave me three King family photograph albums covering my childhood. Looking through the albums, I discovered that the same picture appeared in both my natural mother's collection and in my adopted mother's

album – one a memento of an abandoned baby and the other welcoming that baby as a new member of the family. Why one mother gave up her year-old child for adoption and the other sixteen years later banished that adopted child is a puzzle this book tries to solve.

ONE

Small Problems

I

I start with my first memory. I am on my back in a pram in the front garden of Strood House. It is a bright, cold spring morning. My hands are in mittens. They are tied to each side of the pram so I cannot move them or roll onto my side. The mittens are not for warmth but to prevent me from sucking my thumb which, underneath the mittens, is smeared with 'bitter aloes', a disgusting thumb-sucking deterrent applied daily by my mother.

My family started ten years earlier on the 5th of May 1939 when Catherine Cecilia Beavan (hereinafter known in the family as Jill, her brother Sidney's nickname) and Eric John Ferguson King (hereinafter called Da) both from Enfield, Middlesex, got married in secret.

There was no particular reason for the secrecy because both of them came from neighbouring middle-class families, but Jill, according to her older sister Molly, had always been a contrary and difficult child and, after a fierce row with her father over his refusal to pay for her to go to the Royal College of Music, deliberately married Eric without asking her parents.

The Beavans were the older Enfield family. Jill's father, Thomas Beavan, had been brought up there and apprenticed by Weld & Son, a local family firm of solicitors. He married the senior partner's daughter Barbara and on his father-in-law's retirement inherited the partnership and changed its name to Weld & Beavan. Grandpa Beavan lived in a beautiful Queen Anne house called the Hermitage and had a chauffeur named Yates to drive him several times a week to the firm's central London office in Soho. The Beavans had three children: Sidney, educated like his father at Blundell's in Devon and then joining the family firm, and his younger sisters Molly and Jill, who were sent to non-academic but bracing boarding schools in Sussex to prepare them for marriage rather than professional careers.

Grandpa King was Yorkshire born and bred, married a farmer's daughter from the Scottish Lowlands, known to us as Little Granny because she was so small, and moved south. He became a director of the Far Eastern trading company Jardine Matheson and was prosperous enough to buy another grand Enfield house called Holmwood and a substantial holiday home, the Old Mill House, on the Southwold Common. There were four children in the family – Eric, his older brother Graham and two younger sisters, Mavis and Jessie. The boys went to the Leys School in Cambridge and the girls to Saint Felix, Southwold.

According to Molly, the Kings and the Beavans were acquaintances rather than friends though their children met regularly at grander Enfield parties. There was no just cause or impediment to the marriage of Jill and Eric and no doubt, if asked, both families would have given their blessing. But for whatever reason the marriage, rather than uniting the two families, caused deep and lasting estrangement. The rift between Jill and her father only healed (just about) after the death of her mother in 1953. Eric's siblings lost all contact with their brother after the marriage and

there was no contact between the cousins from opposite sides of the families until more than a decade later when my cousin Tim, Jessie's second son, and I were sent to the same Suffolk prep school.

Jill and Da, soon after their wedding.

Jill was the one who was blamed. The King family thought her a difficult and unfriendly woman who deliberately isolated Eric from the rest of them. Their dislike was at first restrained because she was Eric's wife but would later become open and vehement.

Despite this rift Jill and Eric were ideally suited and deeply in love. They didn't need wider family and social contacts. They were self-sufficient within their own family. As with most enduring couples their differences complemented each other, complying with allotted roles in the tacit conspiracy of their marriage. Eric was gentle and considerate, Jill could be angry and mean; Eric was weak and Jill dominating; Jill was shy, antisocial and fearful of outsiders; Eric was outgoing, friendly and protective. They were a single unit, combined to keep the world at bay.

The early years of their marriage were extremely happy. During the war they lived at Horse Cross, a simple cottage in rural Hertfordshire, and the albums are full of roly-poly half-naked children, pony rides and rural jollity. At demob time Eric was lucky to get a job as town dentist in the small town of Chagford in Devon; when I visited in the early 1990s, his name was still remembered. Here Caroline was born and I first entered the picture.

I don't know what the Kings knew about me when they adopted me. It should have been nothing, in accordance with the strict secrecy which applied to adoption at the time. But according to Janet it was a private adoption arranged by the Chagford doctor, who may have known more. Jill's story was that I was the illegitimate child in a broken marriage and that my father was a professional footballer.

Nor do I know why Jill and Da adopted me. They already had three girls, one still in nappies. By the date of my adoption, 13 May 1948, Jill was already pregnant with Priscilla, born in January 1949. One possible clue is that Jill, having been strongly advised to

have no more babies after repeated miscarriages, particularly wanted a son. Priscilla told me recently that she was a twin to a small boy born stillborn, a loss that must have upset Jill deeply and possibly affected how she treated her adopted son.

There is also a mystery about how the Kings found me, apart from some vague geographical clues. My adoption certificate was issued in Poole, Dorset which is a hundred miles from Chagford where the Kings lived in early 1947. But the certificate also shows that I was adopted from a Barnardo's Home and, although it doesn't indicate which home and Barnardo's records don't go back that far, I am certain that it was from Farm Hill, Coggeshall, just twenty miles from Strood House, Peldon, Essex where the Kings moved in late 1947.

I recently visited Farm Hill. The place was immediately familiar – a collection of mock-Tudor buildings built in the 1930s set in a spacious garden, no longer a Barnardo's but an opulent family home, with two Mercedes parked in the drive. I knew at once I had been there several times, when still in nappies in a nursery with lots of other cots and then as a toddler playing on the lawn. The matron, a kind lady dressed in blue and white called Miss Simcox, knew my mother and, I found out later, offered to take me back for an occasional week to give Jill respite from her large family and clamouring new baby.

Strood House is next to the causeway over the marshes leading to Mersea Island. Built in the mid-eighteenth century by a local smuggler, it had an upstairs spyhole window in which to burn a candle if the Excise men were nearby. When we lived there the house was stuccoed Essex pink and behind the pleasing symmetrical facade there were five bedrooms, two attic rooms, a large ground-floor room at the back we called the nursery, a music room and living room at the front, separated by a hall, and

Strood House, c. 1950.

a galley kitchen. The only bathroom and separate lavatory, known as the potty room, were off the lobby by the back door, conveniently close to the nursery when it was bath-time but a miserably long dark walk from the bedrooms which meant we had to use chamber pots.

The house was sparsely furnished. Apart from matting on the landing and stairs the only carpet was in our parents' bedroom and the spare room. Other rooms had painted boards or lino and in the nursery there was a polished red concrete floor. The walls were whitewashed. The music room, so named because it housed Jill's Erard grand piano, was only used by the children on Sunday at teatime. In winter a driftwood fire was often lit and in front of the blaze was a threadbare hearthrug. The furniture in the other rooms was functional. In the living room were my mother's Heal's bureau and two upright armchairs with wooden arms in which Jill and Da sat listening to the wireless or reading

after the children had gone to bed. A protective plastic cloth was kept over the mahogany living-room table. Except in the music room, where there was a standard lamp, the lighting was from overhead bulbs. Our beds were metal-framed school beds with hard horsehair mattresses.

My bedroom looked out onto marshland. Mersea Island, to the left, was linked to the mainland by the half-mile Strood causeway. Straight ahead was a marsh track marked by wooden poles leading to Ray Island, a small deserted stretch of grass, brambles and windswept trees, and a regular spot for our family picnics and sailors from West Mersea.

Behind the house were two fields surrounded by a sea wall and more marshland. At the end of our garden was the 'Cow's Field', in which we exercised the dogs, and played in two wrecked Second World War landing craft and a pair of concrete pillboxes on the sea wall. The Cow's Field and the wheatfield next to it were tenanted by a local farmer, Mr Alan Maskell, whose ramshackle farm buildings were in the far corner of the fields.

Our close neighbours were an elderly couple called the Hardings, who lived in the large house next door. Occasionally we children were invited over the garden wall for lemonade and to collect overthrown tennis balls but, apart from an invitation for all of us to watch the 1952 Coronation on their television set, I don't recall any social contact between the Hardings and our parents. Our other real neighbours were the Maskells, Alan and Judy, who lived in a bungalow across the road from the farm and were a much more friendly couple. They had no children and Alan would let us play in his straw barns, ride on his trailer, and sit on his lap to help steer the tractor.

One other person lived nearby, an eccentric man known as Old Jack Williams. He lived on his own in a Second World War

pontoon, converted into a makeshift houseboat and moored amidst piles of rusting bikes, fishing gear and oil cans, on the edge of the marshes near Maskells farm. He sold freshly caught herring out of his bike basket around Peldon village and spent most of his earnings in the public bar of the Peldon Rose. Old Jack was very grumpy and when we walked past on the sea wall he would shout at us to clear off.

The Strood House garden was large and wonderful for children. There was a big scrappy lawn next to the house and a barn, home to Dimple and her kittens, born during the flood and named after Noah's children, Shem, Ham and Japheth. The barn also housed Da's workshop, my sisters' hamsters and guinea pigs and my two rabbits, both of whom died in the 1955 myxomatosis pandemic, and there was a loft store for animal food. On the other side of the house was the garage, and a bike shed with Elsan lavatory, a good place for sulky escapes from too much family life. The dogs, first Hamley and Bumble, and then Dyvodd and her children Madam and Eve, were Welsh collies trained to bark at strangers, and kept chained to their kennels by the garage.

Behind the house was a weeping willow, overhanging a ditch verdant with weeds, fertilised by a link to the family cesspit. Beside the ditch ran a grassy track where my sisters had their shops and dens, leading to the Wilderness which was used for bonfires, and the stile into the Cow's Field. A long wall and wooden door separated the lower garden from the upper garden, known as Martha's Vineyard and my parents' smallholding. It had a small orchard and vast vegetable beds, weeded by the children at weekends and regularly tilled by my father with his rotovator. The Nile, a small enclosed brown and reedy stream, bordered Martha's Vineyard with a wooden bridge across it to Howard's Piece, a small field for the ducks, hens and geese who helped to keep us self-sufficient.

Self-sufficiency, thrift and independence were essential to my parents and common in the early 1950s when rural family life was tough and simple. Televisions were scarce and in our family not permitted. We seldom owned a car. Newspapers weren't delivered; *Punch* and, for the older girls, the *Elizabethan* magazine, were sent by post. The cinema was half an hour's bus ride away and a very rare treat. Our most direct link to the outside world was a handsome mahogany wireless which promised on its elaborate tuning dial access to radio stations as far away as Berlin, Moscow and Hilversum, although the only English ones were the BBC Home Service for plays and discussions, the Third Programme for classical music and the Light Programme for entertainment, which my parents didn't approve of.

Domestic life was hard then for a mother of five children, a long daily routine of washing, cooking, cleaning, bathing and bedding, though with the benefits of home delivery. Jill hated going to the shop so the West Mersea baker delivered special large family-sized wholemeal loaves, the International Stores delivered weekly groceries and, after the end of meat rationing in 1954, Dewhurst the Butcher made occasional deliveries. Fresh herrings and mackerel appeared regularly, sometimes direct from Old Jack's bike basket or from a Mersea fishmonger in his rusty Ford van.

Despite the austerity of those years there were also liberating inventions. The Electrolux vacuum cleaner came first, then the Kenwood mixer. The Hotpoint washer and rotary iron arrived next, easing Jill's burden of the Monday and Thursday family wash, although the drying was still done in the garden, with double-pegged sheets billowing like galleon sails, except on rainy days when wet clothes were hung on pulleys in the living room. Then came a Belling electric cooker which Jill used only in high summer, preferring to cook and keep a kettle always boiling on

the coke-fired stove in the living room. Later a radiogram appeared, bought from money Jill inherited from her mother, and LPs of Tom Lehrer, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Holst's *Planets* and Britten's new *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*.

Books were the family's lifeline, armchair links for Da and Jill to the outside world, and for the children escape routes from boredom to imaginary worlds of adventure and romance. The landing outside my parents' bedroom was wall to wall with books, shelves of colour-coded Penguins, orange for general fiction, green for mysteries, blue for Pelican general non-fiction and the specialist brown for archaeology and yellow for anthropology or perhaps the other way round. There were classic reference books – *Gray's Anatomy*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Shell Guides to Britain – mainstays of post-war self-education. There were also *Punch* omnibuses handsomely bound in brown cloth, the first going back as far as 1927, inherited from Da's father, and expanding annually thereafter. In the nursery were shelves of children's classics, *Black Beauty* and *What Katy Did* and *What Katy Did Next*, and books our parents had enjoyed and passed down – those by Harrison Ainsworth, and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Later I would discover my mother's book club choices from The Reprint Society – Daphne du Maurier, A. J. Cronin, Nicholas Monsarrat, Irwin Shaw – glorious middlebrow classics which helped me bridge the gap between childhood and adolescence. I read fluently by the age of five and in 1952 could master not only *The Tale of Sly Tod* and *The Velveteen Rabbit* but also *Royalty in Essex*, an illustrated history book given out to all Essex children to commemorate the Coronation. A love of reading was the most valuable thing my parents gave me.

My next distinct memory is about my tricycle and the first time I was severely punished. It is like a slow bad dream. I am sitting

in a high chair confined by a notched bamboo cane inserted through the holes in each arm of the chair. The cane is called the dog stick, normally kept on the window ledge beside the back door. Its main purpose is to discipline the dogs but it is also used on us children. 'Fetch the dog stick' was a dreaded instruction, issued by Jill. She also normally administered the punishment; but this was an exceptional occasion and I am waiting for Da to come home from work and beat me. My crime involves the tricycle.

I loved my tricycle. It is old, with chipped blue paint and spoked wheels, which I have just taken over from Caroline who has gone on to her first bike, inherited from Jane and Janet. I also have a red two-wheeler trailer which hooks onto the back, a fourth birthday present from Jill and Da. Priscilla now has the small black trike and she follows me everywhere, standing up on her pedals to get enough speed over the grass tracks. I load sand and grass cuttings into the trailer and collect and deliver them to special places in the garden. Priscilla helps with the shovelling. It's an elaborate game we both love.

That morning we found the main gate half open, so I suggest to Priscilla that we go out onto the road because it is much smoother to ride on. Priscilla is too scared so I go on my own, pedalling furiously away from the house until I am halfway across the causeway where the high tide is lapping up from the Pyefleet channel onto the path by the road. I feel exhilarated by this sudden bid for freedom, but scared of the consequences. When a man in a passing car stops to ask if I'm all right and where do I live I nod and point back to Strood House. As soon as he has driven away I start pedalling furiously back, fearful of being found out.

Too late. I see Jill come through the gate. She shouts furiously and runs towards me. Now I am locked in the high chair, waiting for Da.

That afternoon was the longest and scariest of my life. Da didn't get home until bedtime so the waiting went on for ever and I became ever more fearful. After her initial outburst Jill became cold and silent. I too was locked into my own silent obstinacy, refusing to say sorry and admit I had done wrong. The other children passed through the nursery with doleful looks. I was allowed down once for a pee. I missed my tea.

Poor Da. Although Jill's official executioner, punishment was against his nature. When he finally came through the front door to be confronted by this bleak tableau I am sure he shrank from his responsibilities and longed just to have his solitary supper which Jill kept warm in the oven. But he had to use the dog stick and afterwards I sat painfully in the bath with a wide-eyed Priscilla until Jill, punishment now complete, forgave me at last and wrapped and towelled me with such unusual gentleness that I burst into tears and was carried to bed.

That tricycle confrontation started a pattern in my relationship with Jill. The shift from cold anger to tenderness. Her fury and my obstinate refusal to give in.

Parents treated their children differently then. Like Mr Banks in the *Mary Poppins* song, Jill and Da believed in 'discipline and order'. At Strood House life was very strict. We got up at six and went to bed very early – six o'clock when I was six and even in my teens no later than eight. We had to work hard – making beds, tidying rooms, cleaning out the hens, housework, gardening, washing up, sawing logs and polishing shoes. We had to behave ourselves. Answering back, cheek, lying, spite, laziness, tantrums were serious offences with punishments ranging from curfew, banishment to room, extra chores, stony silence, cancellation of pocket money, the dog stick and, perhaps worst of all, Jill's towering temper and withering tongue.

But the photograph albums show that life was also fun. We had

a healthy, simple childhood, mostly spent outside, playing in the sand-pit, walking the dogs in the Cow's Field, crabbing, picking mushrooms and blackberries, collecting driftwood with Jill and Da at the weekend, helping at the farm. We swam a lot, either in the Pyefleet, or in the marsh creeks beyond the sea wall, which were filled and drained daily by the tide. There were bus trips to West Mersea for sandy sandwiches and a Wall's ice cream on the beach and bike rides to East Mersea with the young ones strapped into the basket-work seats on Jill and Da's carriers, where we fried sausages in billycans and played in the wartime gun fort. There were mud-larking walks to Ray Island, piggy-backed when I was very small, then hands held by older sisters, and finally stumping and squelching along with the rest of them.

Winter was exciting too, even though the east coast winds were freezing and too long in the garden meant chaps and chilblains and constant snotty noses. There seemed to be more snow and ice then and we would toboggan on trays down the sea walls, slide on the frozen pools in the Cow's Field, and have proper sledge rides along the Strood with the older children playing at being reindeers. Inside, in the nursery, there were cards and board games, my Triang lorries and crane, school and hospital games with Caroline's dolls and a secret cupboard under the stairs in which I once locked Priscilla before going upstairs for my afternoon rest.

This was the happy side of my childhood – but between Jill and me there was a serious problem.

Guy Fawkes Night, six weeks before my fifth birthday, led to the next confrontation. Da loved Guy Fawkes and helping him to build the bonfire was a big event. He chose two assistants, who that year were Caroline and myself, a special honour because the year before I had been scared by the fireworks and watched from inside the house with Priscilla. This year, with Jill's

help, Caroline had stuffed and sewn the Guy Fawkes effigy and, while Da laid out his fireworks with bottles for the rockets and Catherine wheels nailed to the tree, she told me about the terrible Gunpowder Plot.

At six o'clock after tea we went out with lanterns into the garden. Da sprinkled paraffin over the piled wood and threw on a lighted paper spill which set the bonfire ablaze instantly. The night was cold and clear. Rockets shooting into a star-filled sky and then breaking open to make more stars and coloured balls of fire was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. Later when the fire had died down we came out again and Da put potatoes wrapped in silver paper into the hot embers.

Everything was fine until the next day when I was caught trying to relight the bonfire with rolled-up paper and a box of matches. I had already been severely cautioned for playing with matches and once smacked on the hand with a ruler for audaciously lighting a candle on the landing. This time the punishment was much worse.

Both of them administered it. I was given a stern lecture by Jill and then led by Da into the nursery. Jill took my hand and lightly and quickly pressed it onto the scorching hot metal over the chimney of the stove. The pain was intense and I screamed. Jill rushed me to the kitchen to put my hand under running cold water. The other children watched looking shocked. The punishment was over. All was forgiven and forgotten, except for the blisters on the palm of my hand.