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In Tasmania: Adventures at the End of the World

Nicholas Shakespeare

I

IN OUR THIRD YEAR ON DOLPHIN SANDS, A FRIEND TELEPHONED from England. "Did you know you had a double in Tasmania?"

He had contacted directory enquiries and been put through to N. Shakespeare in Burnie on the north coast, who told him: "You got the wrong fella." In Argentina I had once met a Reynaldo Shakespeare, a photographer, but in four decades of wandering, I had never come across another Shakespeare with my initial. So I called him.

A young-sounding man answered. He was not put out to hear from me and the idea of meeting up appealed. "I'm pretty poor on the family side," he warned. "Not a family tree man."

A double is an invitation and a dare. I arranged to be in Burnie the following Sunday.

I found my namesake getting off a glittering black motorbike in the drive of a house behind the Old Surrey Road industrial estate. "I'm in trouble," he grinned through his visor. He had gone to Smithton "for a hoon", as he called his ride, and enjoyed himself so much - "no distraction, just concentrating on the road and what the machine's doing" - that he had lost track of time.

"I've only had him a week," he said.

"What is he?" I asked, feeling a stab of envy. I had never ridden on a motorbike, not even as a passenger.

"Suzuki 750 GSXF," he said, with great fondness, enunciating each syllable. His parents had been dead set against him buying it. His father had worked as an apprentice turner and lost four of his friends on motorbikes. Motorbikies were known widely in Tasmania as "temporary Australians".

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"It does look fast," I said.

"Nah, good cheap little cruisy bike."

He took off his helmet and we shook hands. I looked into a decent, laid-back face, early thirties, framed by a thick black beard, brown eyes. I had no idea what he saw, but he knew well enough where I lived: he had installed the alarm for a house just down the road from us and had discussed with his wife buying a property there.

I asked, "What does the N stand for?"

"Nevin."

Nevin Shakespeare ran his own one-man electrical business. Blocking the steep drive was a red van with the Chandos portrait stamped on the doors and the logo "Shakespeare Electricals". Among his clients was the founder of the Delta Force, a New Yorker in his seventies who lived in Tasmania for his safety. "He killed two of his own men so as not to leave them wounded and once had Qaddafi in his crosshairs when orders came not to shoot." Nevin had rewired his home. But he was cutting back on residential work. "You're always chasing the money."

His wife came out to tell him that he was late and he introduced me to Laurelle, whom he had met at a hockey match - "while trying to get off with my sister," she said. Then their two sons: Garion, ten, and Martyn, six - both curious to see this interloper from England with a name like their Dad's.

"Does it interest you to know where you're from?" Nevin asked Garion.

"Not really."

Nevin had also invited his parents, Gavin and Gloria. Gavin so resembled my own father that when I introduced them to each other a few months later, my father leaned across the table and said: "I don't know what I look like, but you look like what I think I look like."

Gavin had a stronger grip on family history than his son. His grand father James Shakespeare came from Staffordshire in the nineteenth century and was a bricklayer in Sydney. In 1959, he left the Australian mainland to work in the paper mill in Burnie, where Nevin was born.

"I'm darn pleased my parents didn't call me Bill," Nevin said.

"Were you teased?" I wanted to know. In the army, my father was addressed as "the effing swan of Avon", and at prep school I had had to endure everything from Shagspot to Shaggers.

"I was Shakey," Gavin said.

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"I was Shakers, or Bill," Nevin said. "'Good day, Bill. Do you write many songs?' They say a lot of weird things here, a lot of misinformation. 'No,' I tell them, 'he wrote plays.'"

"Speaking of the plays," Gavin said. "I was the bottom of every class in English. It was my worst subject."

"Mine, too, pretty much," Nevin said. "That's been passed on. Comes from the bricklayer's side. Don't have to write anything. Just get the bricks level."

We discussed other family traits. Gavin's wife Gloria said, apropos of Nevin's youngest son: "He's a Shakespeare."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Gloria said: "You never argue with him."

Gavin said: "My father wasn't interested in arguments."

"Nevin avoids arguments," Laurelle said.

"No, don't like confrontation," Nevin said.

"Something that can be settled in two minutes he lets drag on for two months, that's my pet hate."

"I'm with you," I said to Nevin. "I hate arguments."

Then Gavin remembered another Shakespeare trait. "My father wasn't interested in family history."

Nevin had inherited this characteristic as well. "Once they go, you've got no idea. It's just a heap of old photos. It's just history."

Even so, Nevin had been reading about Tasmania's forthcoming bicentenary in the Burnie Advocate and he felt a grub of regret to realise how little he knew about his birthplace. "We were never taught Tasmanian history at Parklands High School. We were told that Truganini was the last and that the Aborigines couldn't light a fire, couldn't swim and all hated each other anyway. We spent more time on English and European history, which at the end of the day means nothing."

"How much do you know about the man they call the Father of Tasmania?"

"Who's that?"

"Did they tell you about the settlement at York Town?"

"What settlement?"

"Do you know York Town?"

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"Of course, I know York Town!" Nevin had driven through it heaps of times. He had camped there and it was also where he had had the motorbike accident that so alarmed his parents. He was overtaking a line of traffic when a car pulled out. "I hit the brakes and high-sided, and went surfing on my hands and knees. The car didn't stop, didn't even know he'd caused an accident. But I ended up in Deloraine Hospital. Luckily, I knew the blokes because I'd serviced the ambulance station."

"Well, York Town is near where the Europeans landed 200 years ago," I told him. "It's the first place they settled on this coast."

He shook his head. "We knew nothing of it. You ask anyone in the street, they wouldn't have much knowledge."

An idea was forming. I said to Nevin, "Take me on your bike, and I'll show you."

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