

Stranger on the Shore

JOHN SYMONS



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Contents

PART ONE

1	Dad	3
2	Chromosome 4 gene IT15	7
3	Florence Louisa and William	9
4	'On Chorea'	15
5	'One and All'	19
	<i>Bone Pasty</i>	24
	<i>Beatus Vir: Blessed is the man ...</i>	25
6	India	26
7	'Floruit'	33
8	Commissioned	40
9	Matchmaking	44
10	Home Leave	51
11	Mum	56
12	Courtship and Marriage	61

PART TWO

13	'One hundred and five, North Tower'	67
14	Home Thoughts from Abroad	68
15	Making a Home	79
16	'Huntington's explains it all'	89
17	Number 10	95
18	At Risk	102

PART THREE

19	Interlude	113
20	The Two of Them, Together	115
21	No Way Out	122
	<i>Stranger on the Shore</i>	127
22	'I love you, my darling'	128
	<i>They shall look on Him Whom they pierced</i>	134
23	'Dearly loved husband, father and brother'	135
	Epilogue	141
	 <i>Appendix: Huntington's Chorea</i>	 143
	<i>Family Tree</i>	144
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	145

1

Dad

THE WOODEN scrubbing brush, with its sharp, spiky bristles, moves to and fro on the kitchen table. A little crescent wave of shallow water flows in front of it. And gripping the brush firmly and wielding it vigorously, in those days, were Dad's hands. There is a rubbing, grating sound, so intense is his effort.

You might catch a glimpse of a pale blue and red tattoo on Dad's inner arm, in the gap above the button of his shirtsleeve. Dad nearly always wore his sleeves rolled down. The table was of pine, before pine became fashionable; before fashion existed where we lived. Dad used to scrub it every week. He bent low over it – for he was a little over six feet tall – working with a block of hard green or yellow soap in his left hand, and all his elbow grease.

The table stood in the kitchen by the window, opposite the Rayburn that was Dad's pride and joy. Ralf and I used to play under it, imagining that it was a spaceship. We made a little control panel from a block of wood to which we nailed a few revolving wheels from one of the carriages of our clockwork train set. We sat there, partly hidden by the tablecloth, sometimes with our dog Patch, as we cruised around the Universe, or at least our solar system, in this makeshift cabin. We were good brothers, two and a half years between us, and I the elder, and we took it in turns to play the Captain, called Toby. All of this happened in the days before *Journey Into Space* created a sensation on the BBC Light Programme; but by then there had already been a space serial broadcast from Scotland, *The Lost Planet* by Angus MacVicar, on Children's Hour on the West of England Home Service. We listened intently to that serial as we ate our tea-time bread and jam, sitting at the kitchen table. For me, space travellers spoke in educated Scottish accents. It seemed

inevitable, in due course, that Neil Armstrong, the first man on the Moon, should come from a Scottish family.

With a tie around his waist in place of a belt to make fast his corduroy trousers, fawn and well worn, and wearing a shirt without its collar, Dad came to grips with the stains made by our pencils or crayons, or the splashes from our plates.

It was Dad who inspired our game just as much as did *The Lost Planet*. One week in three Dad worked a nightshift, and he loved to observe the positions of the stars and planets as they changed through the seasons. He read a good deal about astronomy, and on the last day of each month he used to order *The Times* as well as his copy of *The Daily Telegraph* because it carried a long article about the night sky in the coming month. He used to talk to me about space and time, creation, and the wonders of life and the Universe.

Dad was always ashamed of the tattoos on his arms and chest. It was a 'silly thing', he thought, done by him in his earliest Army days. After he came back to England from India in 1947, after twenty-five years there, Dad never swam. Mum told us (and Ralf and I believed her) that that was because the sea was too cold for him here – and perhaps it was – but now I can understand that it was also because of that sad sense of shame.

It was sad partly because Dad's first words were remembered in his family as, 'I could *SWUM!*' He was only three years old at the time that he said this to his mother and father, who like their forebears for generations, probably centuries, worked a precarious living from the waters around West Cornwall. His mother had told him not to go into the water until he could swim, a typical piece of Cornish drollery. In his youth, his sister told me, Dad became such a powerful swimmer that he could swim to St Michael's Mount and back from Newlyn Harbour, about six miles, and in the Army he was a superb athlete. But in my childhood, on holiday at the seaside, Dad held our towels on the shore and waited at the water's edge while we swam.

In fact, I loved the pale colours and the fading shapes of the tattoos. Dad was happy to let them be seen briefly sometimes in the summer when, with his sleeves rolled up, he swept the garden paths.

As his hands wield the scrubbing brush, easing out all the grease and dirt of the past week, sometimes both hands together, sometimes just the right, you can see that they are browned by the sun of all his years in India: strong and hard hands, yet also gentle and sensitive. They

have undertaken all manner of work of the heaviest sort in Cornwall, in Ireland and in the East. They have gripped a pewter beer tankard as he sat outside his tent in the heat of the jungle. But they have also carefully turned the pages of the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Bible at worship in St Peter's Church at Saugor, in the Central Provinces of India, and they have received the elements of the Holy Communion. They held his mother in an embrace during the last hours of her life and comforted her. They received his first son with delight from Mum when she presented me to him outside his bungalow in India in February 1946 (Plate 9). I can see the joy and humour in his face in the photographs of that event. He had waited forty-four years for children of his own. You can see the same character in his face that you sense in his hands.

A young boy does not set out to take in the nature of his father's hands, but for me the impression of that memory is strong.

There is only one photograph of Dad with his mother and his six sisters (Plate 4). All seven children are gathered around Florence Louisa, perhaps on the day of her husband William's funeral in November 1914. There is no photograph of all eight of the family together with William, who had been a fisherman and a member of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. His death followed some early action at sea in the First World War. But there at the focal point, the golden section, of this single photograph of his family rests Dad's right hand – gently, firmly – on Florence Louisa's left shoulder, comforting and reassuring her. He was not yet thirteen years old.

And there it is again, resting lightly on my right shoulder in another photograph, taken in 1951 or 1952 when I was six years old. My cousin John, who, unknowingly, will play a decisive role in this story, took the snap. The four of us – Dad, Mum, Ralf and I – are standing in front of a line of trees. We had been gathering mushrooms. Dad's left hand, cupped to hold some of them, is on my left shoulder, and his trilby hat is partly visible, lying on the lush grass to our right. Beyond the trees, in the valley of the River Plym, our village of Plympton is already rapidly expanding. Within twenty years it will be little more than a dormitory suburb of Plymouth, although locals will still quote the verse that holds that, in the Middle Ages,

*Plympton was a borough town
When Plymouth was a fuzzy down.*

The avenue of trees leads from a folly near Plymbridge Road, known as 'Triumphal Arch', all the way across the valley to Saltram House, home of the Parkers, the Earls of Morley, who moved there from Boringdon Hall. The arch was built to celebrate Great Britain's part in rescuing Europe from Napoleon and ensuring her own freedom at Trafalgar in 1805 and, ten years later, at Waterloo.

But in my cousin John's photograph there is a contrast with the steadiness of Dad's touch on my shoulders (Plate 11). It is the look on his face. What does it show? Worry? Uncertainty? Confusion? Whatever it is, there seems for the moment to be no shadow of it in Mum's expression, or in Ralf's, preoccupied with the giant mushroom in his hands. But perhaps I also look confused or quizzical. What is happening? Time will tell.

2

Chromosome 4 gene IT15

IT ALL BEGAN with Chromosome 4.

It always begins with Chromosome 4 gene IT15, a few specks of matter.

Sometimes, perhaps in sixty cases in a million, a fault is there. No one knows why. It just happens. The coding of the gene is extended a little, and that unnecessary extension is the cause of it all.

If the fault is there in the gene, then it leads to Huntington's chorea, Huntington's disease, usually in middle age.

It is what they used to call St Vitus' dance. *Chorea* means dance.

That's what happened in Dad's family. No one suspected it would happen.

If a person has the Huntington's gene, each sperm or egg contains two copies of Chromosome 4, gene IT15, one inherited from each parent; one normal and one faulty.

So, if such a person marries a person without Huntington's, and they then have a child, the child inherits a normal Chromosome 4 gene IT15 from the healthy parent but *either* a normal *or* a faulty gene from the parent with Huntington's.

In this way, a child of someone with the disease has a 50-50 chance of inheriting it. It is as simple as that: a 50-50 chance, the toss of a coin. It never skips a generation.

Either way, the child's fate is sealed.

Inherit the faulty gene, and you develop Huntington's. Or inherit the healthy gene, and you see your afflicted parent disappear, fragment before your eyes, and die of the disease; and then, unless you take a

genetic test to see if the coin landed heads or tails in your own case, you live with that question unresolved for the rest of your life.

This is the story of how this disease affected Dad and his six sisters, the lives of everyone in his family. Huntington's is a disease of families as well as those who die of it.

It is the story of how they responded. It is as true as I can make it. Huntington's is still at work.