

My Family Geography

I was eight years old when my father left. He went to pick up sheet music from his favourite music shop. I asked to go with him. He didn't answer when I yelled out to him to wait. I waited for him to come back. I'm still waiting.

After a week, my mother binned each photo with his image. Each bill or letter or card carrying his name was tossed away. He didn't just fade gracefully from our lives like the memory of his face did from my mind over time; he was stamped out. His grid reference was obliterated from the map of our family. And when mother and I moved interstate a few months later, our family map was redrawn to exclude all that had gone before.

I was the only boy at my new school who didn't have a father, or at least one that hadn't died heroically in a work-related accident (Michael Granger and Emilio Colavecchio, fathers died in a gas explosion; Lisa Miller, father died in machinery roll-over; Kirk de Groot, father died in logging accident). I was the only boy who didn't know one end of a cricket bat from the other. I was the only boy who didn't know about brown coal open cut mines or timber logging or dairy farming.

I was the kid from South Australia with the weird mum. The poofter music boy. I desperately wanted to tell them my father was away on tour with the London Symphony Orchestra, but I just used to dream it instead. Dreamed of our duets and our compositions and our applause. Wherever he was, he was a success and I prayed that one day I would be up there with him.

High school was no better. Poofter become fucking poof. Weird mum became fucking witch. But by then I had taught myself how to play cricket. I used my precious musical hands to hit that ball against the peeling weatherboards of the back room, drowning out the wailing strings from my mother's bedroom. I climbed the ranks of the local team to make regular 'A' grade appearances. At least for the six warmer months of the year, I was treated well and the hole in my landscape that my father's disappearance had left was temporarily filled in.

Late in high school, along with most of the boys in my grade, my future was mapped out to chart a stint at trade school followed by an apprenticeship at

My Family Geography

one of the power stations. Where once I had dreamed of studying music, I now faced a future of getting my hands dirty. And by this stage, my mother had given up playing her cello to nobody and opened a shop. Not a shop that could usefully service the people of the valley. No. She chose to open a new age therapy shop long before they became run-of-the-mill.

She stocked rune stones, tarot cards, astrology charts, incense sticks and lumps of mineral with weird names. There were books on ley lines and crystal healing and Reiki massage and hypnotherapy. Posters depicted Tibetan sand mandalas or diagrams of reflexology points. Customers had to duck under the wind chimes made of seashells or red gum or shiny silver. She took to making candles and soap at home so that my school clothes would catch the scent of vanilla and blueberry or honey and cinnamon, giving the in-crowd more of a reason for a bit of push and shove. She would make Indian dream catchers, paint dolphin lead-lights and fashion colourful twine into friendship bracelets.

To my embarrassment, the shop was a hit, with the curious, the bereaved, the afflicted and the downright odd coming in droves to browse or buy. Pretty soon, she had to take on an assistant.

I refused point blank to work in the shop. For starters, the overpowering smell made me heave, but I had worked so hard to be accepted by my school peers that actively ignoring what my mother wanted, added another notch on my coolness belt.

“But you’ll get paid, Marty. You could buy all those records you like,” she’d say, twirling purple and red and green embroidered cords together, but never really looking at me.

I’d shrug and tell her I’d sooner get a job in the butchers. “At least I’d smell like I’d done an honest day’s work.”

So, she ended up with Fliss. Fliss gave Indian head massages. She rocked up in an old Kingswood towing a feral-looking trailer. She had dreadlocks in her hair twined with gold and silver strands of thread. She wore no shoes and had tattoos of butterflies around her ankles. She wore so many bangles and chains that she jangled everywhere she moved and you could often smell her homemade patchouli body lotion before you could see her.

My Family Geography

One Sunday, the day after we'd won the cricket final and John Petts had got hold of a keg of Melbourne Bitter for a long and triumphant celebration, I'd woken up to the smell of her everywhere in the house. I saw her sitting at our dining table, her intricately-braided hair framing her delicate features.

"Afternoon." Fliss stretched her lips into a slow smile. At her feet, my mother sat cross-legged. Fliss had her hands in my mother's hair, kneading and grinding her scalp. "You're next," she said, winking at me. "It'll get rid of that hangover. Here, drink that." She nodded to a cup of something suspiciously yellow on the table.

I held it to my nose and coughed at the putrid smell.

Fliss laughed. "It's dandelion tea. With a shot of echinacea."

My mother moaned with pleasure as Fliss' fingers worked harder and I felt myself wobble at that guttural, sensuous noise coming from her throat. I ran to the bathroom and heaved.

Later that year, when I turned sixteen, our family map began to chart new, untested territories.

I woke one morning early and wandered past mother's room to catch sight of Fliss' hair glinting gold in the slant of dusty light thrown across the pillow. My heart bombed into my stomach with an acid fizz of disgust. I took my bike and rode hard for miles. I ended up at the lookout tower and gazed across the wide brown slice of earth that the open cut revealed. I looked at the dredgers and trucks going about their business like worker ants. I tried to imagine what the indigenous people who had inhabited this land for thousands of years would think now of the white man's industrious activity on what was once a green and gum-covered landscape. I thought how their history too had been changed by their geography.

I resolved then to find my father. I needed to fill in those uncharted areas of my life. My stomach fizzed again, but with excitement at the project that spanned before me. I realised how much I had missed him, or at least the idea of him. I didn't have many clear memories of spending time with him but I imagined that we would have played together, composed some pieces, drenched ourselves in music.

My Family Geography

Whilst my father and our yearned-for reconnection became a point of high anticipation in my life, my mother became my focus of anger. I simmered quietly as she went about her life. Her life with Fliss.

It wasn't long before Fliss found my research material.

"What's this, mate?" She thrust my list of Dearham phone numbers into my hand. I'd crossed through seventeen of them.

"Nothing."

"Dearham? Wasn't that your Dad's name?"

"Yeah."

"So," she said pulling the word out of her mouth like gum, "why are you trying to find him?"

She made it sound so tawdry. I hated my mother then for badmouthing my father to her. She'd actually talked about him to Fliss. They'd shared his name on their breath, but she'd never once thought to speak to me about him. I figured I deserved the first word of explanation. I'd spent eight years waiting for some information, even if it was only about the terrible things that he did, to make sense of me, of my life.

"You wouldn't understand about families," I said, ripping the words from deep within myself. "You're just a femo dyke. What would you know about fathers and sons?" I pushed past her just as my mother came into the room.

"What's going on, Marty? What's this all about?"

"He's trying to find his father," Fliss said.

"What?"

"Look, he's got this list of phone numbers."

My mother snatched the list and ripped it up. I could see the wildness in her eyes and saw her jaw-line move as she ground her teeth. "You don't need him, Marty. Forget it."

I sank back onto my bed and listened to them, Fliss and my mother talking, their voices rising and falling in a heated debate.

Fliss yelled. "He has a right to know."

A door slammed.

My Family Geography

Back at the library, I copied all the phone numbers out again. This time I started from the bottom. Nobody knew where John Dearham was. Somebody told me he'd moved to Perth. Somebody else said they thought he'd gone overseas with an orchestra. I rang the music shop.

"Ah, Mr Dearham. Extraordinarily talented violinist and pianist."

"Have you heard from him recently?"

A pause. "Not really. Who is this again?"

"Marty. His son. He left... a few years ago."

"Well, the last time he came in was about two years ago. He bought a piano. A Kawai, top end model. He had been touring, from memory. A European orchestra. But he'd come back. He said he'd got a new place right in the city and the piano would be perfect in his music room."

Fliss looked at me funny when I walked back into the room. Her mouth hung open with an unspoken hint of truce. My mother looked like she'd been crying.

"He's back in Adelaide," I announced. "And I want to see him."

Fliss turned to my mother. "You should help him, Annie."

"Why? So he can see what a loser John Dearham is for himself? No, Marty. I've protected you all these years and all the thanks I get is for you to run off looking for him?"

"Protected me? You just blanked him out. You've never told me why he went. What am I supposed to believe? That he's some paedophile or serial killer? Supposing he's a great musician now, like he always said he would be. Supposing you've stopped me from fulfilling my potential by moving us here to this shithole when I could have been playing with him."

"Believe what you like," she said quietly. "You don't need him in your life."

Fliss cut in. "Annie. Just tell him something, for God sakes."

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

I gaped at her, unable to think for a moment. "You mean you know where he's been all these years?"

My Family Geography

“There’s a stash of letters in my bedside drawer.” Her voice spilled out, burning with acid. “Help yourself. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She got up and left. Fliss hesitated, at least, before following her out.

I read those letters over and over. I read the words, and the sentences and the paragraphs and the whole. I read the full stops and gaps and everything in between. I hoped that the pen on paper would somehow fill the holes inside me. That they would give me a map.

Dear Annie

I enclose half of my first pay cheque for you and Marty. It was so easy to get work. They love me here.

Dear Annie

How about a return ticket to Rome? I’m here for a few weeks. I could organise it for you. Let’s get back to how it used to be. Just you and me. Remember the good times.

Dear Annie

I’m in Paris. You’d be in heaven here. Even the pavements have style. Why don’t you come over? Let your folks take some responsibility for a change – leave the boy with them. He probably wouldn’t notice you’d gone anyway.

Dear Annie

No, I won’t stop writing. I know you want to be here with me. Your life is not with that boy in that place. You’ve yearned for the culture, the sophistication, and it’s all here with me. Stop kidding yourself.

Dear Annie

Seems I forgot the boy’s birthday. Just a few more years and he’ll be 18. You’ll be free then. I’d still love to see you.

My Family Geography

My mother stood framed in my bedroom doorway, hugging herself.

“He just left. He wanted the music, the glory but he never wanted us. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“But why did we come here? Why couldn’t we stay in Adelaide?”

She shrugged and I saw her then as the vulnerable, young woman she must have been, all that she had sacrificed too. “I wanted to start somewhere new. This place was cheap.” She bit her lip. “It was hard for me too.”

I suppose, looking back, I wanted there to be a catastrophic reason - an unholy row with my mother; an impossible choice presented to him; a breakdown, even. Anything other than the ultimate insult of him just not loving me enough.