

If I'd played a Beach Boys record I might never have known

For the first fifteen years of my life I thought I was a Kiwi. Well, not a flightless bird, just the son of a New Zealander.

I don't recall exactly when I realised I didn't have a father, what you've never had, you never miss I suppose. I lived with my mother in a little house in a seaside town on the south coast; it was the late 1950's and my mother used to go to work in a big country house, which was a reception centre for Hungarian refugees. We had a Hungarian refugee family living in our home, George and Elena, and their little boy Czaba. George taught me to play football, how to fight dirty and how to ride a bike (I still get on and off my bike on the right like a continental does) and Elena taught me to knock my shoes on the floor before I put them on, in case there are scorpions inside (well I've grown out of that).

I don't know how old I was when my mother told me that my father had been killed in a plane crash, shortly before I was born. He had lived in Auckland, and my mother had met him shortly after World War II when she had been stationed in Japan. She had a small faded black and white photograph of him in uniform, which I saw only once.

I did have other relatives, Uncle Neville, my mother's older brother, and Aunt Judy, my father's sister, who still lives in New Zealand. She would send me lovely presents every birthday, many of which I still have, and she came over England to see me a couple of times when I was very young. There was also a big family nearby, with four children my age and I often used to spend holidays and weekends with them, I still consider them my siblings.

I was packed away to boarding school when I was seven; a cosy little prep school in a windswept seaside town. It was run by a barmy old man and his ferocious wife. Many of the staff had all seen action in the First World War and were still patently shell-shocked, there were some younger staff who took easy subjects like Geography, or taught games, and the assistant Matron, Miss Champion, who looked to us just like Brigitte Bardot. Sometimes Uncle Neville would drive down in his Jaguar and take me out to tea in Brighton, and one time my mother came down with a friend, who I was told to call Uncle John, but he had a Rover – I preferred to go out in Uncle Neville's Jaguar.

I was nine when my mother told me she was going to marry Uncle John – I don't remember being shocked or surprised, I liked the old chap and he seemed to make her happy. They got married quietly, somewhere in Surrey, off the A3, and went in a banana boat to the Canary Islands on honeymoon. When they came back, they brought a huge bunch of green bananas with them, which the school put in their kitchen and doled out to the boys when they were ripe enough.

Uncle John lived in Liverpool, near where my mother came from, and after they were married I moved up to live in his large house there, but still went off to boarding school in Sussex, travelling by train down to Euston, across London to Victoria and then on a school special to Seaford. I had a new family up in Liverpool, my step-sister, who lived in a flat at the top of the house, and my step-brother, who was married with children my age and lived down in the West Midlands. Holidays were different after my mother married, Christmases became big family gatherings, instead of being spent in a hotel, and summer holidays were spent "on the Continent" with my mother and Uncle John driving through France and Italy and along the Riviera.

My friendly little prep school closed down when I was twelve, and I moved up to a much bigger prep school in Cheshire. Just before I did, my mother and Uncle John suggested I might change my surname to be the same as theirs "because it will be much easier at your

new school, and when we go on holiday" – so I did, changing from Allen to Flanagan, like a music hall act!

After I was thirteen I moved to another school, this time down in Dorset. Uncle John said he wanted to be like a real father to me, and would I like to call him Dad. Well, I had never had anyone else to call Dad, so I didn't mind at all. I had an idyllic time at school; I was reasonably bright, reasonably athletic and was well versed in dirty fighting, so I was never bullied. Dad retired and moved down to the West Country and all was well in my life until one summer weekend my Godmother came to stay.

My Godmother's name was Anne, she was an extraordinary woman, very tall, silver haired, with an infectious laugh. She had two pugs and a Pekinese, which snuffled around her wherever she went. She was a doctor, but what kind I never knew, she had lived much of her life in India and her house was full of exotic artefacts. I liked Anne a lot; she would always listen to me, and was interested in what I was doing. I remember sitting alone with her in our living room playing her a record I had bought, Leonard Cohen – Songs from a Room – she was quite moved by the poetry, and she told me, straight out, matter of factly, "Well you know Uncle John is your real father. But you must never tell anyone that I told you." So I didn't. I got on with my life, pretending nothing had changed. Then shortly after I left school my father became very ill, my whole life was put on hold as he gradually worsened, and then died, just after my nineteenth birthday.

He never told me he was my father.

Tony Flanagan
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