

A Dangerous Delivery

*Go to sleep, dear baby
See the stars in the sky watching over you.*
-John Rynn, Sleep well little sweetheart

7 FEBRUARY 1955

The young doctor did a good job, but it was too late. I needed to be turned in the womb to let the birth take a healthy course. Earlier. Instead, I had insufficient oxygen for sixteen hours.

The doctor's birth report predicts cerebral palsy.

I will always be grateful to that young man because he braced my left arm to support it. That simple intervention meant my left arm, the one I now write with, would be the only useful limb I had.

From the moment I was born and for the next twenty-four hours I cried without stopping. I have no way of remembering this; I suppose it was from the pain. For the next three days, my mother and I were on trial. They expected both of us to die.

Even though those days were filled with darkness, there were such moments of grace, I have to pause.

The nurse was a friend of my parents. She played tennis with them. She managed to hide Mum and me from the older doctor until we could be safely whisked away to a hospital in Townsville a few days later.

Mum recovered quickly and was discharged. She stayed in the Red Cross rooms nearby just so she could come over to the hospital and feed me. Gradually, we both gained strength and the sense of disaster passed. Three weeks later, on a rainy night, we left the Townsville hospital and boarded a plane for Bowen.

Years later, as Mum told me the story of my birth, she told me that when we arrived home my brother, Geoff, filled her with amazement. Going to his room, he gathered all his toys and all his books and brought them to my cot and, leaning over, just dropped them in it. Every time I hear Mum tell me that story, my eyes fill with tears. That was Geoff's way of welcoming me. And, he was right. I would need all the love and all the welcome I could get.

My first problem was that I had a lot of trouble feeding. I couldn't suck and I had trouble swallowing. Mum fretted in the first few weeks for fear of losing me to malnutrition. They fiddled and ruminated trying different teats and consistencies until one day Mum snipped a huge chunk out of the teat and, holding me at a certain angle, started pouring it into me.

You see, I never actually got to eat like most people. I never grew out of the dependency of having Mum and Dad there to feed me. I have always been fed by someone else and, over the years, this would steadily grow worse until later when I couldn't eat at all.

Secondly, I never got to speak. Except for a few early words like "mum", "car", "water" and "orange" that I spoke in my first two years, I went silent after my second birthday. Even though I have always been passionate about words, I have been non-verbal ever since.

And, I never moved around like other people either. Sure, I crawled and rolled until they could get me into a wheelchair, but despite persistent therapy in standing irons I never, ever walked. I also never drank a drop of alcohol in my life, and I never married either. But, those are other stories.

Strangely, despite the extent of my incapacities, I was given a very good brain which I have always loved to use.

RECORD OF BIRTH REPORT

PRESENTATION: BREECH

TROUBLE ESTABLISHING RESPIRATION: YES

**ABNORMALITY OF BEHAVIOUR: KEPT IN NURSERY FOR 5
DAYS, SAID HE WAS EXHAUSTED**

WAS KEPT IN HOSPITAL: 12 DAYS
WAS C.P. SUSPECTED: YES
WHY: DR SAID IT WAS LIKELY

All Good Things...

*Wherever we may go
We will remember
Mum's meat pie
And the love
She has for us*

-John Rynn, Mum's meat pie

One of my favourite memories is of my mother rubbing Vick's VapoRub onto my chest early in the morning before she got me out of bed. I had turned three.

My mother's touch held a world of meaning for me. The tender contact of her fingers on my skin created an intimacy I have never felt with any other human being. That bond between Mum and me remains with me, unbroken by distance or death. At three, I couldn't conceive a world in which Mum and I would ever be separate.

My very earliest memories are of those mornings when she was busy cooking. I loved watching the steam rise off her hot beef mince pies as it drifted the aroma all the way across the red Laminex table toward me.

After she had done the housework and baking, Mum would take us into the living room and read stories to Geoff and me. I never felt any different to Geoff. In fact, at three I don't remember being different to anyone at all.

I do remember feeling loved by my brother. It was in the things he did for me. I didn't have many words, only words for the things that were important, so I only had to say to Geoff, "bear" or "blocks" and he would take off at high speed on his long gangly legs and get them for me.

I accepted all of this without question and even now it all seems quite normal. I don't remember wishing I could



I remember feeling loved by my brother

walk and run like he did. I never questioned any of it really. I don't think any three year-old ever does. It was just how it was and my family never gave me any reason to think that I was any different to them or to anyone else.

I did have physiotherapy. That was different. Because we lived in Bowen, a country town three hours in those days from a major city, there were no physiotherapists, so it was left to Mum and Dad to learn how to do it and give it to me. I knew they didn't do it to Geoff, or to each other, and none of my young relatives or family friends needed therapy either. But, I never questioned it. I never thought my therapy was anything out of the ordinary.

From as early as I can remember, I loved books. The Little Golden Books series were my favourite. We had all twelve I think. I loved them so much I learnt to crawl to the tiny dark stained book case and claw my way up trying to reach them.



My mother's touch held a world of meaning for me

Mum got the idea quickly and transferred the whole collection down to the bottom shelf. I could scoot along on my bum pushing with my feet and then, without lifting myself, pick out the one I wanted and take my selection back to her. I loved *The Little Red Hen* and I can still hear her reading *The Three Little Pigs*.

Whenever she read that story, the fate of the two lazy little pigs seemed hilarious. I had a very active sense of black humour even then and I relished what happened to them.

When Dad read, it was even better. Out of his mouth it became a different story. The wolf became the main character and what he made happen to each pig was horrifying. It worked so well I remember shaking in fear whenever early in the story the wolf made those loud gobbling sounds.

On many levels, Dad was my hero. It was partly because he had impeccable manners. It also had to do with the many encounters he had with the Japanese in Papua New Guinea including a Japanese sniper he had caught off guard after their unit had been pinned down on a jungle trail. The main reason he was my hero, however, had to do with something else.

Whenever Dad came home from the meat works at four in the afternoon, he often brought a parcel of meat for Grandma. Before he delivered it, he'd come home, kiss Mum and then he'd put me in the car and drive me around to Gran's place with him. She'd ask him how much it cost and he always said he hadn't worked that out yet and that she could fix him up later. I can't remember money ever changing hands.

In my father's world, family came first and every one of us knew we were the most important stars in his universe. Like my mother, his mother held a very special place in his affections.

Because it had a slight hole in the muffler, Gran always heard the Vanguard drive up and ran out to swing open the heavy door and give me a great big hug. I loved those hugs. They were the safest place in the world. My Gran was full of love which is a bit surprising really when you know what sort of life she'd had.

Mary Elizabeth Beaver was born in England. I don't know why her family immigrated but they decided to leave and come to Australia before the First World War. I don't know why but they chose Brisbane.



Out and about with gran

In 1916, she met Alfred Rynn and took a liking to him because he, like her, was a Sunday school teacher at church in Brisbane. Following a whirlwind romance they got married.

At that time, Alfred ran a fruit and vegetable shop in Brisbane in partnership with another man I also know nothing about except that one day the other man ran away with all the

profits from the business. Forced to sell the shop, Grandad needed to find other work.

Soon after they were married, Alfred and Mary headed into Queensland's deep west looking for a new start. Grandad landed a job with the railways, working long hard days as a fettler and laying track to build a rapidly developing Queensland. They both lived in a tent and followed the laying of the track.

I still remember the story of Gran pulling out the handgun that Granddad gave her to protect herself from any rough working men or other blowins who could drop in while he was away all day laying track. It was frontier stuff and no one ever knew what might happen with Gran being the only woman in the camp. I'm sure it's from my Grandmother and Grandfather that I get my courage.

Eventually the railway stopped at Bowen, as it still does, and Gran decided this was when she'd had enough and where she'd settle down.

In Gran's house in Bowen, cooking and heating and washing were all done using wood heating. The wood stove in her kitchen meant there could be fresh bread, breakfast, lunch and dinner and a warm room on cold nights. The large 'copper' outside in the tiny sleep-out off the porch was used as a laundry under which a raging fire was lit to heat the water that washed the clothes.

From early settlement right up to the late 1950s, the quality of life of families in rural Queensland revolved around what seemed to be a never ending supply of firewood. Before electricity, people treated their fuel stoves like a religion. The kitchen lay like a ritual at the centre of their lives and the old fuel stoves drew a clear line between civilized living and survival.

I still remember Dad taking the whole family out once every fortnight with a trailer and an axe and filling it up to lump back to our place. When he'd stocked our woodshed it was back out into the bush to do the same for Gran.

In the middle of cutting and stacking, Dad would gather together some sticks, kindle a small fire and suspend a billy over it.

A billy is a pot with a single wire for a handle and a spout and a lid that was made specifically for heating water. A packet of Billy Tea would appear and two or three rusty old teaspoons of the jet black leaf would go into the seething water. The fragrant twang of the gum tree fire and the smell of jam-smothered pikelets - like sweet little pancakes - wrapped in a tea towel inside an old biscuit tin taken with the hot, sweet, milky brown liquid are set together in my memory like one solid experience from which nothing can be taken away.

My Gran's life happened at the tail-end of a generation of doughty pioneers where women had to be very skilled at many things.

A speciality of Gran's was her dress-making. I remember when I was older, I looked longingly at a photo of Mum in her wedding dress, admiring its beauty. I really wasn't

surprised when I found out that Gran made it all herself on her Singer Treadle sewing machine.

Gran also played the organ at the Anglican Church in Bowen for so many years I can't say. She had three children. Uncle Matthew, my father Robert and my aunt Edith.

Every family has a black sheep. Ours was a goat. If you think I'm being uncharitable you should read *The Indispensable Goat* which illustrates the history and importance of goats to the development of Queensland and which can be found at this website - <http://allthingsgoat.com/2009/08/the-indispensable-goat/>. Then you will understand me when I say my Auntie Edith seemed to be very much on the Lord's left hand.

Why she left her son, my cousin Alf, as a little boy of five sitting by himself at the Bowen Railway Station while she climbed aboard with a one-way ticket to Townsville, I will never know.

There's a much greater story here than the wise old facts sitting on the verandahs of Bowen over tea and plates of scones can ever tell.

I met Aunt Edith only once, on the day of Gran's funeral. Whatever it was my family thought of her, she hadn't given them much of a chance to express it. The day of a funeral was one of those moments when bygones are bygones and nobody dared ask awkward questions.

We had given her a lift from the church to the graveside. What comes back to me half a century later is a distinct sense of sadness that seemed to settle around her like a veil. We took her back home for something to eat but she couldn't have stayed long because when I went looking for her I was told she had been taken to the station.

And so, that was how my cousin Alf came to be living with Gran. Not knowing the story until I was in my teens, I could never work out how Alf fitted in. I hadn't been told anything and I didn't ask. Alf just lived with Gran and that was that.

From the time I turned four, Alf was a frequent visitor at our home. One day as a teenager, Alf came over and played doctor on me while my brother Geoff, who was just six, was his nurse.

Both of them thought I needed fixing, and actually, I went along with it because it really didn't seem like such a bad idea. Alf was seventeen and doing a trade as a motor mechanic so I thought he was more than qualified. Practical to a tee, he took a long look at me one day and decided I needed fixing.

Using Geoff as his nurse, Alf operated on me without mercy or anaesthetic. But, after sewing me up he somehow forgot to remove the knife, the scalpel, a pair of scissors and a slug of chewing gum that had lost its flavour.

As a married man, Alf came to own a service station and was always busy working. Dad had our Vanguard serviced there. I often wondered if a pair of pliers or a gob of gum was left in Dad's engine.

And so when it seemed, at four years of age, that life was as close to perfect as any child could hope, things changed. The time had come for me to grow up.

In late 1959 when the sharp, sticky scent of mangos ripening in those big, leafy trees announced they were ready to eat, my mother and father took me far away south to Brisbane for a medical review.

Every year since I had been born I'd had a trip to Brisbane for a review, none of which I remembered previously. Being four, my memory must have kicked in so I remember with great clarity this trip to the doctors and therapists. This time they even let me play with toys as part of an IQ test.

Even though I felt I was just like any other child, it hadn't dawned on me that I would need a lot more therapy and that I was going to need it for the rest of my life. That therapy was not available in Bowen. I would need frequent access to the speech, occupational and physio therapists that are only ever available in a big city.

I hated physiotherapy, if the truth be known, and I know I made it as difficult as possible for Mum and Dad to give me physio. But, Mum was always tactful and never mentioned how much I played up on her during our sessions. She would say things like, "Outstanding, John. What a good boy you are," but it wasn't true. Mum and Dad actually hated giving me therapy.

The problem was that when they were giving me physio, I'd cry and they could never work out if they had really hurt me or I was just playing up. The fact that there were no therapists in Bowen played on their minds and I played it for all it was worth.

That behavior was probably my undoing. During that trip to Brisbane I still remember Dad ask one doctor, "Would it help John if we all moved to Brisbane?"

In that special way medical specialists use when they think they have to be firm Mum and Dad were told that there was no need for that because, "John will enjoy his holidays at home".

Either Dad must have slipped them a few dollars or I actually passed that IQ test.

...IS NOT ABLE TO SIT UP, IT IS DIFFICULT TO ASSESS HIS INTELLIGENCE YET. HOWEVER HE WOULD APPEAR TO BE RETARDED MENTALLY AS WELL AS PHYSICALLY.

DR SCHONELL, 1957