

16. The Letter

Aunty Ruby

In early 1992, while still studying in Adelaide, Brenda and I returned home to Mooroopna for a visit with family. We tried to get home as often as we could, to catch up with everyone. On this trip we called in to visit Aunty Ruby Near (Dad's sister) at her home in Mooroopna. As we walked up her driveway, there was the smell of freshly baked scones spilling out of her house. The smell took me back to the days living with Nanny Pris and the constant aroma of baked goods coming from her home. Aunty Bay Atkinson (Dad's sister) was there visiting Aunty Ruby too, so we all sat down to hot cups of tea and hot scones covered in jam and cream and had a good yarn. It's as though Aunty Ruby knew she would be getting visitors that day and was well prepared. She was just like Nanny Pris in that way.

We sat and talked, laughed and shared stories about the old times. As always, I began to ask questions about Grampa. This day, before I could say too much, Aunty Ruby pulled me up, so abruptly she gave me a fright and she exclaimed: 'YOU can answer that letter!!'

She then explained that a letter from family in Sri Lanka received many years earlier had ended up in her hands. It had originally been sent to Grampa's son Uncle Shady (Shadrach) who had passed away; it spent some time with Aunty Becky, and then made its way to Aunty Ruby who says she had tried to get others to answer it, but no one was interested. So, given my incessant questions and long standing interest in Grampa and his family, she now passed it on to me. I couldn't believe it! My heart was pounding in my chest and I felt enormous excitement at finally coming across a connection to Grampa's family overseas. And yes, it was from Sri Lanka. I was nearly 50 years old and had been searching for this link for so many years; now, finally, here it was!

I could have cried but I was too excited. Aunty Ruby walked into her loungeroom and returned with a blue envelope that had written across the front of it 'By airmail Par Avion'. We finished our visit and I thanked Aunty Ruby a thousand times before we headed off with a hundred things going through my head.

Aunty Joyce

When we finally got home I was well and truly ready to sit down and read the letter. It was from a lady named Joyce Danforth (nee Thomas). She was trying

to connect with Uncle Shady and hear news of her family here in Australia. I wrote to her immediately, and posted the letter first thing Monday morning. I had never written a letter overseas before so this was all a new experience.

Quite a few weeks later I received one of those blue 'By airmail Par Avion' envelopes in the mail and I was over the moon. It was a letter from Aunty Joyce with her first line saying: 'I was so happy and excited to get your letter after trying so long to trace you all.'

Aunty Joyce went on to tell me about herself including: her church life where she was working with Billy Graham the American Evangelist we used to see on TV a lot in those days; her work and travels; and her family life. She wasn't able to answer any of my questions about Grampa and his family, but she did introduce me to Aunty Priscilla Thomas in Mauritius, declaring that 'she knows everything about our families'.

Aunty Priscilla

I made my connection with Aunty Priscilla soon afterward and we began to write back and forth. She explained that she was a second cousin of Grampa James and therefore an Aunty to me. Her grandfather was Manuel Thomas, the brother of Grampa's mother Miriam. I was fascinated to see that Aunty Priscilla had the same name as my Nanny Priscilla. I was sure that was not a coincidence. It would seem that first cousins Grampa and Aunty Priscilla's father had given their daughters the same name.

Then, on 1 April 1993, Aunty Priscilla wrote to give me more detailed information about Grampa and his parents. She told me that Grampa James' birth name was Shadrac¹ James Peersahib and his parents were Miriam Thomas and Samson Peersahib.

She went on to explain that Samson and his second wife (name unknown) had a daughter named Ruth who married a man with the surname Ramchurn. They had three grandchildren (Arlette, Sydney and Laurent Purahoo) who now live in Mauritius too, near to Aunty Priscilla, in the area called Rose Hill and nearby. They are the grandchildren of Grampa's half-sister Ruth.

She also said that Shadrac (Grampa) lived with his parents in Port Louis, the capital, and went to a private school because he was highly intelligent. Apparently Grampa's father Samson remarried too soon after the death of his mother Miriam, and Grampa was devastated by this, so he left the island of Mauritius when he was 17 years old, in search of greener pastures.

1 Aunty Priscilla's exact spelling from her letter. Because there are varying ways of spelling Shadrach, from this point forward we will spell the name Shadrach precisely as the person or record we refer to, has spelt it.

Aunty Priscilla also knew of Shadrac writing 'lengthy' letters from Australia to her Uncles, (his cousins), in Ceylon. And she spoke of Grampa's marriage to Ida (that was her recollection of Granny Ada's name) and surmised that 'Poor Shadrac must have had a tough time, being a coloured Muslim lad in a strange land'.

Great! At last I had some information about Grampa and his family and why he came to Australia, and he was a Muslim. So my next step was to find out just who Miriam and Samson were, what Grampa's life was like in Mauritius before he found his way to us here; and how Grampa came to be the special man he was.

Amazing Women

Aunty Priscilla then introduced me by letter to Cousin Arlette Purahoo the granddaughter of Ruth – Grampa's half-sister. But before I had a chance to write to Arlette, I received a letter from her, very excited to finally be connecting with her family in Australia. Then Aunty Joyce in Sri Lanka introduced me to yet another cousin named Yvette Casperz also in Sri Lanka.

I had been given this letter by Aunty Ruby Near in 1993, after searching all my life, and now I was suddenly connected to this group of four amazing women, who were the family of Grampa and therefore family to us here. They were so eager to be connected to their family in Australia and our relationships deepened over the years as we wrote back and forth getting to know each other. Aunty Yvette and cousin Arlette even came out to Australia a couple of times and met up with my sister Carmel, Cousin Fay Carter, Brenda, me and others. As it turned out, I continued writing to Aunty Joyce, Aunty Priscilla, Aunty Yvette and Cousin Arlette for the next 25 years.

On the Back Burner

During the period of my leaving university and making contact with our family in Sri Lanka and Mauritius, life took many twists and turns for Brenda and me, due to the many challenges that came our way. It seemed that at every turn there was some kind of health crisis or other stress and this placed enormous strain on our wellbeing for the next 13 years. There were many hours, long days and longer nights, spent in hospitals, holding hands, fighting one medical condition or another together. Between us we faced heart attacks, strokes, bowel cancer, prostate cancer, chemotherapy, radiation treatment and more.

So my research quietly slid onto the backburner, while we concentrated on caring for each other and just getting through each day as best we could. But

in every quiet moment, I kept looking, visiting, collecting, photocopying and reading. I knew that one day I would be able to finally pull together all that I know, to tell you what I have learnt of Grampa and his life before Maloga.

2006

Suddenly it was 2006 and we were living with our daughter Robynne and her husband Larry Jackson on their property just out of Shepparton in Victoria. It was a beautiful little place on two acres and we lived in a granny-flat beside the main house, which was great for us now that we were ageing and dealing with more serious health problems. Brenda and I spent our days sitting out on the love seat that was given to Brenda the year before, on her 70th birthday. Brenda knitted, talked and did a number of other tasks all at the same time, without missing a stitch; I read the newspaper, did crosswords or wrote letters, as we talked about life, family and days gone by. Even after 54 years marriage, we still had plenty to talk about.

On this particular day, I remember the birds around us were deafening; I was trying to write with them all around us in the lush trees, on the verandah rails and on the ground picking at the grass seeds – willy wagtails, magpies, pee wees, kookaburras, pigeons, sparrows, swallows, blue wrens, ibis and cockatoos screeching in the background. They were all gathered around, going about their daily business of searching for a feed for their family. From the time I was a seven-year-old boy, looking up into my dear Grampa's dark, loving and mysterious eyes, I had been on a journey of discovery to find out from whence he came. And now it seemed that all I had gathered in my research, was taking over our home with boxes in every nook and cranny.

Robynne came over to sit with Brenda and me while I read out loud the latest letter from Aunty Priscilla. This resulted in both mother and daughter bailing me up to tell me it was time I went to Mauritius to meet the family and finally find the information I had been looking for all these years. I laughed this off as a joke, because the only time I ever take my feet off the ground is to go to bed. But they were serious! I think they had had enough of the boxes and boxes of research materials which were now taking over our home. They wouldn't take no for an answer and so, in the time it took my passport to arrive, I was packed and ready to go. This trip to Grampa's homeland, at the age of 73, was to be the culmination of all my years of searching; the trip that would prove to answer many of my questions – or so I hoped. And now I take you on our journey across the Indian Ocean and from there we will see where the story takes us...