

## WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?

Many family secrets are only discovered long after their inception. Some after many decades and in unexpected places. These days, Family History Apps, like Ancestry.com, can reveal secrets to you anywhere. A year ago, at breakfast in North Wales, I saw my great grandmother for the first time. She is said to have had my grandfather out of wedlock and given him up for adoption. His birth certificate has no father listed. Her picture was uploaded by an unknown fourth cousin, linked to me by strands of our DNA. He'd found it when sorting his late father's effects..

I have a similar task now, clearing my mother's loft after her stroke and transfer to hospital. I know she kept family photos, many a century old, some revealed in my childhood. She lived in the same house since she married and the loft is an Aladdin 's cave of family history from its first conception to the present day. In a random pattern are scattered the symbols of a relationship: among them a case with a wedding dress, a cot, a child's desk, wooden toys, cameras, projectors, reel to reel tape recorders and boxes of LP's and cassettes. I'll dispose of them all now. Only the family pictures will be passed to my children. Pride of place will be my parents' collection stored in a small brown suitcase. I've never seen all the contents until now. I am relieved the case isn't locked. Most of the pictures are sepia and most have names and dates on the back but one, a large sepia portrait, fascinates me. There's no name but a large cross on the back. The man pictured is certainly family, same bushy eyebrows as me, same snub nose as me, same uncomfortable grin. I see my heritage framed in his old age. But who is he? I think only my mother would know now and it may be too late to ask her.

I rush to the hospital. She's survived the night after another stroke, she's drowsy but awake. The doctor lets me see her.

"Mum, who's this?" I hold the picture comfortably close to her.

Anger flicks across her face, she gurgles, fighting for words that won't come and jabs at me fiercely. Is she saying it's me? Predicting how I will look, suggesting this is some symbolic Dorian Gray portrait? How I should look after a dissolute life and not have my freakish Peter Pan looks? I'll never know what she meant. She passes later in the day without any more communication.

The next day, I don't know why I think to do this but I send my newly identified fourth cousin, a copy of the photo. He recognises his great grandfather and we both deduce he's mine too and we are more closely related than we thought. This is a photo of the man who put my great grandmother in the family way, despised by the family he rejected.