

QUAKE

(893 WORDS)

Everyone has a skeleton in their closet. Most people, in general, have a family secret. Some people “generalise”, I hate that. Unlike everybody else, I cheerfully divulge my darkest secrets. My favourite family secret is very dark indeed, divulged here for the first time in over a century of guilty silence. I hope it horrifies you as much as it brings me relief as well as some macabre satisfaction in its revelation.

Now, where was I?

In the beginning: My Great Grandma, Miss Mary O’Brien, voyaged from Ireland to Colonial New South Wales, a convict, sentenced to life, charged with stealing a costly delicately embroidered silk handkerchief, a charge she coyly denied. She was 14.

The long and harrowing passage by Convict Ship was particularly unpleasant for a vulnerable young female. Mary was the frequent victim of carnal assault and as a result arrived in the Penal Colony “In the family way”.

As was customary at that time convicts would frequently be transferred on as unpaid labour or domestic servants to favoured settlers. Mary and her infant son were dumped with a Mr Huff an ironically labeled English Gentleman. Huff was a publican, a heavy brute of a man with a reputation for drunkenness and violent behaviour, his hotel in the Central West was a two story affair won by Huff in a gun fight. Huff’s treatment of Mary though clearly insensitive was discretely ignored. After all, she was just another miserable Irish Catholic criminal whore sent here for punishment.

One kindly resident of the community was the widow, Mrs Anne Lynch, mother to three young adults and fluent in Gaelic, Mary’s Mother Tongue, the only language she knew. Mrs Lynch would visit poor Mary, and quietly teach her to speak English, help with cooking and housework, and assist in caring for Young Joe, Mary’s “Pride and Joy”. Mrs Lynch had seen evidence of a beating, black eyes and a broken tooth, when Mary had once failed to prepare a late supper for the drunken Huff. Mrs Lynch discretely kept such domestic matters to herself without even discussion with her son, Constable Bobby Lynch. As the only policeman in town, she determined that he had enough on his plate.

Mary’s darkest day began on Saturday peacefully enough with her teaching Young Joe a song she liked about a Highwayman and a Landlord’s black eyed daughter, and when night fell and Huff stumbled home she thought it might please him to hear the boy sing. Instead, and in a drunken rage, Huff grabbed the child by the neck and hurled him at the kitchen wall. No sooner had his tiny body hit the floor than Mary had taken hold of the axe by the stove and smashed it into Huff’s towering head. Slowly he turned, only to cop another whack to the forehead. As soon as he fell, commencing to rise again, three more blows completed the job. There he lay at the foot of the staircase as Mary carried her baby boy, no serious damage, up stairs to bed.

Next morning, she and Joe headed to Church in their Sunday best.

After Mass and without engaging in conversation with anyone, Mary took a stroll with her son. This was a glorious day, the first day of Spring in fact. They would picnic by the river with rolls warm from the baker, fresh fruit pinched from Charlie Chan's orchard and a milkshake each from The Bluebird Cafe.

After lunch they walked and walked. Dusk by the time they reached "home", the back door was still open. Little Joe was asleep in her arms when she carried him to bed. The body of Huff appeared like a shadow floating in some fateful abyss, a calm restful silence lingered unhindered.

Next morning Mary cleaned the axe before chopping kindling to light the stove, her regular daily duty. She then dressed Joe, gave him breakfast, and let him out to play with the group of boys and girls on school holiday who liked mucking about behind the pub. Mary then sat at the head of the kitchen table with a cup of hot tea, the rest of her life coiling freely like steam in front of her.

Constable Bobby Lynch was first to investigate, he concluded the deceased had clearly tripped and fallen headfirst down the stairs. Any further speculation would be inconclusive as the scene had been disturbed and compromised by the fact that several portions of the deceased's skull were missing - found later outside the premises as children had played a game of Hop-Scotch with the afore mention bits. Suspicion that this might have been a felonious act, a robbery gone fatally wrong, was unclear, nothing was stolen from the property, there was no blunt instrument found that could have inflicted such injuries. Verdict: Death by misadventure.

Ongoing responsibility for the deceased's two wards would subsequently be transferred to Mrs Anne Lynch. On hearing the judgment, Mary O'Brian wiped away a tear with her costly delicately embroidered silk handkerchief.

THE END

Max Cullen QUAKE October 2020

NOTE: The alleged TRUE STORY was relayed to the writer by a "Man With no Name" in a shaking church with a population huddled in anticipation of the World's End when a QUAKE struck the town of DALTON in the month of November, 1989.