

## An accident of birth

Am I adopted Mum?

Of course not, said Mum brusquely.

Then who's this Christina Palmer on my birth certificate?

At this point, my mother quickly ushered me out of the bank.

I'll explain outside, said my increasingly embarrassed mother.

I was applying for my first passport, my entry to the England of my childhood storybooks. In the sixties, I often felt more English than Australian despite having a mother who was fiercely patriotic. In fact, my mother disliked all things English and I sometimes wondered why...

Later Mum explained that Christina Palmer was her legal maiden name. No, grandma was not her real mother, she had been adopted. Well not officially. And then she astonished me, telling me that Kitty, an old family friend who'd recently died was her birth mother. Didn't I realise, after she'd left us few dollars each?

At 21, I was totally self-centred, and didn't give it a second thought. Why should I? I'm not a mind reader, Mum.

But, if I'd been more observant, I might have wondered about the steamer trunk with the initials KEP that my mother had acquired after Kitty's death. It had accompanied my grandmother on the Friedrich der Grosse to Sydney in December 1911.

The following April, Kate Elizabeth Palmer, a 30 year old parlourmaid from Kent was found crying in Belmore Park by a kindly old man. She was obviously pregnant and was just beginning to realise that she'd been badly let down by the father of her child, and was never going to hear from him again. The old man suggested she contact the Women's Hospital in Paddington, and later found her domestic work.

Kate, now Kitty gave birth to baby Christina in June. But she had no support – her parents, siblings, cousins and friends were half a world away in Kent. Her ward neighbour, Alice Smith had just given birth to a stillborn son. Alice impulsively agreed to take Christina back to Dunedoo and raise her as her own.

In 1918, Kate married a returned soldier and had another child. She corresponded with her family in Kent but never saw them again.

Meanwhile Christina had been renamed Freda and had grown attached to Alice's husband George. He was a stolid farmer who made the best of his marriage to the much younger and flighty Alice. When Freda turned 18, Alice told her she was adopted and it was time to leave home. She also told Freda that her birth mother lived just 30 miles down the road.

Freda didn't know what to think – she'd been told to leave home, she felt rejected by Alice, but later she was overwhelmingly relieved. Alice's flightiness embarrassed Freda severely – she could disown her!

So Freda spent a weekend with her birth mother Kitty, and was rejected a second time. Maybe she asked too many questions; maybe she got on too well with Kitty's husband Harry, out in the yard talking to the horses. But maybe it was another reason, only dawning on me five years after Mum died in 2004.

Could it have been because she looked so much like her father?

Nevill Forbes would not have been top of Kitty's Christmas card list. In fact, she would have despised him.

His background was so very different from Kitty's. Nevill was the son of a stockbroker who owned a grand house just outside Kitty's village in Kent. Nevill Forbes was the son of the house, a Reader in Russian at Oxford University; Kate Palmer was one of eight household servants.

Kate was the illegitimate daughter of a field worker who later married a labourer and settled on the village High Street. Meanwhile, Nevill had been educated at Marlborough School, then privately in Russia whilst convalescing from tuberculosis; he obtained an undergraduate degree at Oxford and then a doctorate in Switzerland. He'd travelled extensively with his family, but was shy and socially inept as a young person. His grandfather died with an estate of £140,000 in 1888. Kate's grandfather Cornelius died a pauper in a nearby poorhouse.

Age and proximity would have been Nevill and Kate's only common attributes. But the pretty young parlourmaid and the serious and shy young Oxford don would have had plenty of time for private conversation in the spacious dining room I later visited in Kent.

And accidents do happen.

So Kitty thought he loved her when she discovered she was pregnant. He persuaded her that they should start a new life in Australia; he probably chose the steamer trunk for her; he escorted her to Antwerp to board the Friedrich der Grosse to Sydney; he promised her he'd follow her out just as soon as he'd tied up his business affairs.

She wasn't to know that he already had another child –by his charwoman in Oxford – a baby girl just one month old at the 1911 census. She thought he loved her. She wasn't to know that he was also homosexual – maybe he didn't know himself at that time. She really thought he loved her.

Kitty realised soon enough that he'd let her down. In the hard years that followed: lonely years, no family, no child, no-one to share her childhood memories; poorly paid work and later a sickly husband – she would have had no respect for Nevill Forbes. Her love would have turned to anger.

So no wonder she too rejected young Freda, who looked like her father and had obviously inherited some of his characteristics. For Freda too was shy, grave and had an enquiring mind.

But somehow – accidentally when she wasn't looking – Freda met my dad; and although for the remainder of her long life she was afraid of being rejected, she never was.

She'd found an Englishman whose best attribute was constancy. She valued that.