

A Bowl of Dry Soup

Robert Chiswick

Chapter One

Her real name was Elizabet Wiesniewiczki.

The Polish region of Dabrowa Górnicza had hidden the secrets of her origin, but its investigation suggested that she may well be the current produce of an ancient Eastern European royal family. In her mind, she was a princess whose ancestors had fled their homeland in a time of turmoil and had continued to run, always looking back but forever destined to run.

And that is how we came to have a postwoman called Lizzy Wizz.

The fastest mail operative in Copperthorpe, who always ran from door to door, delivering mail before anyone else in the town stirred into their daily routine.

The lies you tell your children.

We could have simply commented: 'My word, our postwoman is fast'. But no, in true parent style, we had dreamt up a story for our daughter, to support the evidence before us - a small woman who preferred to deliver our mail at a frenetic pace because it was a part-time job and the early completion of her tasks allowed her to take her own children to school.

And so it was that one January morning, Lizzy Wizz came racing across our lawn with the post.

'I wish she would use the path,' I moaned as I usually do when someone has committed the cardinal sin of trampling over my carefully cultivated lawn. Presidents of the world's great nations would be delirious with pride, if they could be seen addressing their nation astride such a lush, green rug in front of their palatial homes.

'Why Daddy?' asked Kayleigh, our own seven year-old princess.

'Because, at that pace she will scorch my prized turf,' I

whinged, 'and I don't want to be responsible for a bush fire that forces one hundred and thirty thousand people to evacuate their homes and flee to Barnsley'.

'It's got more weeds than a Rastafarian allotment,' came the sobering observation from Sharon, my spouse.

'Well, they are *our* weeds and I'm trying to do something with that lawn,' I replied, tartly. 'Anyway, here she is.'

And in an instant, there it was. Almost luminescent and resting perfectly square on the WEECOME rug (that we bought *very* cheaply from a car boot sale) lay an Air Mail letter.

'Wonder who that's from?' emerged the daft, rhetorical question from my lips.

In my experience, unless it's an overseas lottery scam congratulating you on the outside of the envelope for winning three hundred thousand pounds for doing nothing, you generally don't have a clue do you? And by the way, why is it that to claim your prize you have to send thirty-five pounds? Couldn't they just send you two hundred and ninety nine thousand nine hundred and sixty-five quid and call it square?

I picked up the item carefully. 'It's an Air Mail letter from someone.' My blinding revelation would probably give Stephen Hawkins many restless nights at the thought of such advanced intellectual competition.

'Who?' asked Sharon. Now, it was my turn to look at her and then toward an imaginary audience *à la* Oliver Hardy.

'How do I know? I haven't even – hang on, there's an address on the back.'

And there, on the back of the envelope in startling print was my name! Well, my surname at any rate.

Frank Bovington
2111 Bradley Hills
Perth
Western Australia

I looked at Sharon and experienced a strange sensation as I gingerly attempted to open the envelope without destroying the address.

I unfolded the letter within and began to read.

'Dear Gerald Bovington,

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Frank Cagney Bovington and I am trying to trace my father.

His name is Henry Lewis Bovington and he was born on the 8th March 1914 in Ilford in Essex. He married my mother, Rene Alice Nosworth on 14th April, 1938 and I am the eldest of his three children.

When I was 5 years old my mother died and our father suddenly disappeared without trace. I have spent all my life trying to trace him without any luck and as your surname is the same as mine (with an unusual second Christian name), I wonder if there is a remote chance that we may somehow be related and that you could give me any clues as to his whereabouts.

I cannot imagine that anyone from Yorkshire can be related to an East London family but I got your name from the election listings and you are my last hope.

I enclose a stamped addressed envelope and my email address is below, so I would be most grateful if you could reply to me.

*Yours faithfully,
Frank Bovington'*

I was dumbstruck.

'You look dumbstruck, love,' Sharon commented helpfully.

I was in possession of a letter from a complete stranger with my surname and referring to my father. Yes, *my* dad. I didn't share parents with anyone except my sister, Rubella, and even then she hadn't been crazy about being his daughter.

'I can't understand this. What's it all about?' I finally exclaimed to the room, like a Shakespearean actor about to de-

liver a 20-minute soliloquy. But I got as far as muttering: ‘The old sod – I can’t even ask him about this.’

That was the truth. The old man had been dead for nearly twenty years now as the result of a freak accident at work, which was odd in itself - he never really needed help with misfortune as he was really rather good at it.

My memory will forever recall the times when he would wander into the kitchen just slightly ahead of a trail of cascading blood, clutching some part of his anatomy. He would always complain about the fact that modern day work tools were not constructed as sturdily as they had been in his youth. Saws flew through the air with grace and style as if they had been built for that purpose, rather than as a result of him not being knowledgeable about how to use these deadly, bloody weapons.

He wondered why cars fell on him after he jacked them up on bricks to change their brake pads. Pet German Shepherd dogs turned on him within days of ownership to render light surgery necessary - first aid boxes could be found empty, save for the housing of hospital outpatients reports.

His mishaps continued at work where trains crushed him as he wandered between trucks on railway lines during his ‘less-than-successful’ experience as a goods guard. He spent time in hospital with food poisoning as a result of sampling his products as a door-to-door snacks salesperson before his worst mishap before death. Working as a miner, he put two large lumps of coal in his pockets to take home and fell over on his way out which required surgeons to labour for hours to extract his testicles from his inner stomach wall.

So when the day arrived which brought the message of doom, there was a sense of inevitability which accompanied it. Father had passed quietly away in his sleep as the two-tonne forge hammer he was responsible for maintaining, sought revenge on its custodian. Over the years I had made light of it by joking that it was the first eight-foot diameter, six-inch deep coffin ever produced in South Yorkshire. Yes, I jest now but I

wonder how on earth he had stayed alive long enough to produce a total of five offspring.

‘You’d better reply to him quickly because by the tone of his letter he’ll want to be put out of his misery as soon as possible,’ Sharon instructed.

‘Yes, of course but how can I tell him that after all this time spent searching for his old man, that he’s dead and his grave can be seen from outer space?’

‘Oh, shut up, Gerald,’ she snapped, ‘that’s just not funny any more. Think about the poor man – he wants to find out about his father.’

‘Him?’ I raised my voice a decibel higher. ‘What about me?’