

KIP FENN
REFLECTIONS

FOR ADAM

WITH THANKS
TO A AND B

EXTRACTS FROM THE AUTHOR'S DIARY
ON THE WRITING OF THIS NOVEL
CAN BE FOUND AT WWW.KIPFENN.CO.UK

PAUL K LYONS

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REFLECTIONS



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For Guido and Jay, and Alicia

*Any questions/comments about Kip Fenn or his Reflections
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PROLOGUE

'Reflections (2): The life of an individual written by the subject, generally in a looser, less formal way than an autobiography. First found in common usage during the early part of the 21st century to denote an autobiography written in a descriptive, impressionist style; later used more generally for informal autobiographies which combine professional and personal revelations.'

Encyclopaedia Universal (2098 edition)

I was born, at our home in St Albans, two days before the end of the century, on 29 December 1999. My father Tom tried, or so he said, to bribe the doctor into filling out a false date on the health authority paperwork so that Julie would be able to register my birth on 1 January 2000, but he refused. I am glad about this since, if I survive as planned until next January, I will have lived in three centuries. My mother, Julie, never told me why she decided on a home birth. I suspect Tom bullied her into it, because he knew there would be no chance of fiddling my birth date in a hospital. Nor was it ever explained why a doctor rather than a midwife attended my birth. I met him, the doctor, at an afternoon drinks party hosted by our family solicitor to celebrate his retirement. It was the day before my tenth birthday. I had never seen a house so full of Christmas cards. I was nibbling my way through a bowl of sweet nuts when a tall man, smelling of alcohol, edged up to me.

'I delivered you, boy,' he said without so much as a hello, and confident I would understand what he was talking about. I didn't. I looked down shyly.

'Dr Jessop. I delivered you, boy.' He repeated with such urgency I had to raise my head and respond.

'Thank you,' I said. This seemed to satisfy him and he lurched off to impose on someone else.

I lie here, all these years later, reflecting carefully back over my life, editing and dictating, editing and dictating to the wallscreen in front of me. I have a wealth of personal and more general material to help the process, not least a lifetime of email communications which, from my 20s, I collated and stored. One day they may be net-published along with this, the bare bones of a biography – or, more accurately, my Reflections – which I am preparing in these last months of my life.

You may have heard of me, Neil or Kip Fenn, thanks to my career within the United Nation's International Fund for Sustainable Development, the IFSD, (especially during the First Jihad War), or my modest efforts within an organisation called REACH in the aftermath of the Grey Years. You may also have heard of me in connection with my daughter Crystal, who fell victim to the

suicide epidemic of the 2040s, or my son, Bronze, whose idiotic caper in the 2060s disrupted both our lives (his tragically more so than mine). Or, possibly, you may recall my name in connection with a sexual weakness, but which was, essentially, a private matter and should never have been exposed in public. I will not ignore the personally painful and embarrassing, but I hope other areas of my private life, for which I am thankful, will take precedence: my co-op children, Guido and Jay, for example, or my role in launching The Josephine Collection archive of 19th century photographs.

I should explain this thing Tom had about dates. He was born on 12 April 1961, the day Yuri Gagarin went into space. It was eight years later, on 21 July 1969, when he sat with his father, Barry, watching (on 'a dinky black and white') the live coverage of Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon that he realised the significance of his birth date, although he was shocked to learn that Gagarin had already died. By the age of 15, Tom knew more about the moon, the planets and rocket technology than most boys did about football or popidols. Unfortunately, his knowledge was generally undermined by a failure to be accurate with details (other than dates). He dreamed of studying aeronautics at university, but only managed to scrape through into a second-rate college course on business studies. In consequence of his enthusiasm, perhaps, and some talent for spiel, Marconi admitted him to their graduate training course on marketing, but he never made the grade. By 23, he had settled for a well-paid job selling oil field equipment.

It was a wonder Tom asked Julie to marry him, given that she was born on 3 September 1973, a nondescript day if ever there was one. The best he could do in later years was to talk about his wife as having been born in the year of Skylab, or to suggest she should have delayed emerging into the world by a few days so as to coincide with Jackie Stewart's retirement – motor racing being another of his interests. I like to think that love overcame that early obstacle to their relationship, although there was scant evidence of it left by the time I was old enough to notice. Julie, née Hapgood, came from an average mid-20th century family, one with traditional values, and traditional hopes. She had one older brother, Alan, my uncle. The father, Oswald, was a manager with the Central Electricity Generating Board, and the mother, Eileen, was a housewife and a teacher. After difficult years at school and college (not least because of Oswald's untimely death), Julie took up a teaching job in a large comprehensive school in Harpenden.

Tom found her one Saturday night in a tenpin bowling alley, slightly drunk, and playing on a fruit machine. The next weekend he took her to the British Grand Prix at Silverstone. Although Tom had a predisposition for exaggeration while Julie usually had an umbilical relationship with the truth, I am inclined

to believe Tom's version of events that weekend. I do not suggest my mother lied to me, rather that her memory became distorted in order to accommodate her subsequent resentment to the man. She remembered how hot and bothered she was in the traffic jams during the drive, and how she hated the noise and the crowds during the race itself. Tom told me, though, that Julie had sparkled all day, like a shop girl taken to a palace, and that she had accepted his chancer invitation for them to spend the night together with undisguised enthusiasm.

Despite all that happened, my mother could never completely extinguish her love for him. There had been boyfriends before, but none had lasted. I do not think she fell for him as such, but rather that she made a decision to love him, as if he were a last chance, a last credit in that fruit machine, and once the decision was made, she allowed herself to fall. I can see her now, after his funeral, standing outside the crematorium in the sunshine. She is slim and frail, dressed in a dark grey suit, her hair clasped up in a silvery bun, and she is crying.

'I've met with him three times in 20 years, why these tears?' she asks me apparently puzzled. Behind her I can see my first wife, Harriet, with our children, Crystal and Bronze, all anxious to depart.

'Perhaps you are thankful for what was, and regretful for what wasn't,' I say.

'My little wise man, you, my little wise man,' she says for the first time since I was a child. I smile despite myself. 'No. It is that I am sorry for what was, but grateful for what wasn't.' This is so unlike my mother, never one for complicated or psychological analysis of behaviour, that I avert my gaze from Harriet who is now marching towards me, and look directly at Julie as if to ask for further explanation. Her tears have evaporated.

Writing in the Reflections mode means I am less constrained by time – although I wish to keep to a rough chronology – and I can embellish the facts more generously than in a formal biography with feelings and impressions. More importantly, I need not worry where failures of memory (especially in middle and later years) or records would otherwise leave me struggling to fill in certain obvious gaps. I am struck, for example, that I recall nothing about my own emotions at that funeral. This leads me to the more unsettling thought that my writing might be unduly biased in favour of my mother, or even, perhaps, in favour of Tom. But then it occurs to me that another advantage of the Reflections format is that I need not worry too strenuously about being fair.

I keep trying to find a beginning, but there isn't one. Did my life begin with birth, or with conception? Will it end with death? In a physical sense, the answers may be yes, but surely the least interesting part of my life is its medical record. Or should my beginning be confined to what I can remember all of a hundred or so years ago? Yet these are only memories of memories,

photographically fixed and collaged (not dissimilar to a Henry Peach Robinson print), and re-photographed in my head, or digitally recorded and re-remembered in soft focus, or in the wrong colours, or ...

I could call up from Neil the transcribed video recordings taken by Alan of me as a baby, or as a primary school child, but, to be honest, I can't be bothered. Meanwhile, I could introduce Neil, my personal digital memory store for more than 60 years. I was named after the astronaut, but the memory store was named after me, in a backhand gesture towards my father. I swapped my given Neil for Kip not long after he left my mother and me. It began as a school nickname. A teacher had caught me napping in religious studies, and Horace, that's Horace Merriweather, called me Kip as a taunt. Later, he decided Kip was a more suitable name for a friend of his than the dull Neil. Although he never took to the name Hip that we gave him, as I did to Kip, we became known for a while as Hip and Kip, he in the foreground, and I in the background. He died not very long ago, in the mid-80s. I remember thinking at the time how, in general, civil servants like me often age with more dignity than politicians like Horace who never quite become accustomed to living beyond the limelight.

I see I have not yet mentioned Diana or Lizette, with whom I came to know something of the love that people talk and sing and write about, nor even Arturo, the second greatest surprise of my life.