



GAVIN PEARCE

Chapter 1

I can't now recall who first suggested it, but I know that we were sitting at our computers in my study. Although it is 'my' study, Noelene spends more time here than I do. She occupies a one-metre square credenza attached to my substantially larger mahogany desk.

Noelene has her own sewing-room-cum-study, but the problem is the WiFi reception. It's poor, despite my best efforts with repeater stations, new modems, etc. I could get a professional in, but I believe that I can sort out the problem.

Eventually.

Fortunately, Noelene is a patient woman and tolerates me and my many DIY projects. Sometimes she even joins in. I *think* she enjoys working beside me on these projects, but maybe she does so to keep an eye on me, so that they don't become too grandiose and never be completed.

My hands are a permanent record of my endeavours; a crooked little finger (garage door), a damaged fingernail bed (gate post) and a scar from a drill bit through my right thumb (kitchen).

I'm an introvert, so when I'm on the computer, beavering away at my next (okay, hopefully first) blockbuster, I spend much of my time rummaging through the junkyard that is my inner consciousness.

While in there, I occasionally half-hear a fuzzy announcement over the PA system, a sure sign that Noelene is saying something.

I respond immediately, but find I'm lagging way behind in the conversation stakes. I know this because Noelene says 'Welcome back! I asked you that five minutes ago. Where have you been?'

Still, we enjoy each other's company. Most of the time. Sometimes I practice my cigar box guitar, with which I have an on-again-off-again love affair. If I also sing, Noelene invariably decides that she might retire to her study to watch TV.

Anyway, back to the suggestion: 'Maybe we should sign up to Ancestry?'

For me, it was Mum's failing memory and Auntie Thelma's passing that triggered the desire to record our family history. The family's collective memory was crumbling like old lace. Like Nanna before her, my mother Mae was the one who you could rely on to know birthdays, who Stella was married to, what regiment Uncle Doug served in, where Maureen fitted into the family.

For Noelene, it was a chance to play detective. (I suspect that it was also the nostalgia of making contact with ex-Rhodesians on the web. Nothing like a diaspora to make people want to know where they come from.)

So we signed up. This is what we found:

How do we start?

I complete the sign-up form online and once I've paid and registered, am prompted to begin entering my family's basic record:

Gavin Pearce, born in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Wife – Noelene Pearce, born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

I hesitate when prompted for the names of our children. Instead, I leave it at 'Child one, female, born in Durban, South Africa. Child two, female, born in Durban, South Africa.'

Next, I'm asked for details of my parents, Jack and Mae Pearce.

Promises Made and Broken

A slideshow of black-and-white images of my parent's early life scroll through my imagination: Mae at primary school, her severely straight black hair cut in a classic 1930s bob, dressed as a Chinese maiden for her school play. 'All the kids thought I *was* Chinese after that.'

Jack picnicking in the veldt with his mum and brothers. In the background is a stranger wearing a dark floppy hat. Jack is wearing a worried, almost desperate frown. I suspect that the cameraman is his father John and I can almost feel my father's panicked hope that *this* day would end well.

Later, Mae, a striking beauty, all permed curls, sitting in a rickshaw on Durban's beachfront with her best friend Mavis; Jack riding a horse on the beach at Margate (looking quite like a young JFK).

They met at a dance. I can still hear them tell the story:

Mae begins, 'I went to the dance with this other bloke, but your father kept filling in my dance card and then he asked me if he could escort me home and that was that!

'Your father had already volunteered and he left for North Africa a month later. For the next two or so years we wrote to one another.' (I remember these letters, bound with a satin ribbon, in a corner of Mum's cupboard.)

Jack breaks in. 'I was planning to join the Transvaal Scottish. Guy – Dad's best mate – persuaded me to enlist in the Engineering Corps. The pay was better. When we signed up, we wrote on both our forms that we did so on the condition that we were to be posted together. The staff sergeant smiled and said "sure".

'After basic training, I was informed that I was off to Tobruk but Guy was not. This wasn't what we agreed to, so I went AWOL the night before we were to ship out.

'I reported back at camp the next day and found myself in

the slammer. When I appeared before the court martial, I explained my and Guy's contract with the army. This didn't seem to advance my defence at all.

'They shipped me out immediately. I did get an assurance from the same staff sergeant that Guy would be in the next group, which as you can imagine, did not fill me with much confidence. I re-joined my unit in Nairobi, a "Deserter", and was put to work as a blacksmith's labourer.

'In the first week, I discovered pain in muscles I didn't even know I had! But soon I was the fittest and strongest I've ever been. You know my friend Wally Kelly? He was the blacksmith. After a week, at knock-off time, he said "let's grab a beer" and we've been friends ever since.

'Tobruk was a mess. We were there for only a month. Word came through that Rommel's army was ready to overrun the place and we were ordered to retreat eastwards. Afterwards, they called it the "Gazala Gallop".

'To add to the confusion, a huge dust storm overtook us and a few trucks, including the one in which I was a passenger, got lost. We wandered around in the desert for three days until we finally came across a telegraph line.

'We had to decide which way to go. All the drivers were Coloureds, so, as the only European, I made the call and was very relieved when we caught up with our unit two days later.'

At this stage of the story, Mae breaks in. 'Your uncle Doug told us that some of his Armoured Car Division also got lost and arrived at a camp just after dark. It took them a while to realise that they had driven into a German convoy!

'They parked at the edge of the encampment, took their caps off and spoke only Afrikaans. After a very uncomfortable night, they sneaked off before dawn!'

Jack continues, 'Surprisingly, the army did honour their promise. A week after we arrived at our camp just east of El

Aleman, your uncle Guy arrived. He and I ran across the dunes towards each other and embraced like long-lost brothers. I had been saving up my hard liquor allowance and we got so drunk that night, we fell into a trench and only woke up when the reveille sounded!

‘After Tobruk, Field Marshall Montgomery took over command of the Eighth Army. With him in charge, we began believing we could beat the Krauts.

‘I remember the briefing before the main battle of El Alemain. Our CO gave us final orders and asked if there were any questions. One big Afrikaner stood up and said, “Why was there weasels in the porridge this morning?” It certainly broke the tension!

‘Our job was to head out at dusk, to clear and mark a path through the landmines. We got that done and were back in camp, sitting on a large sand dune having a beer, when our artillery barrage began. The night lit up like daylight. This went on for hours. I remember turning to Guy and saying, “At least we’re on the right side tonight!”

‘Once the African Campaign was over, the South African army returned home. Before demob, the CO addressed us and asked whether we would sign up for the fight in Europe.

‘Now, I had asked your mum to marry me and she had agreed. The army assured us that we would have at least a few months back home before embarkation, so Guy and I signed up. You’d think I would have learned from the last contract I signed with them but I was young and stupid. The ink was hardly dry when we were told that we would be shipping out in three weeks.

‘So, once again, I was going to go AWOL, unless your mother agreed to marry me within the next two weeks!’

Mum breaks in.

‘We had to have special dispensation to shorten the period of the wedding banns. I couldn’t get any white fabric for my dress,

so had to make do with an ordinary day outfit.’

It’s difficult to make out what colour this ‘outfit’ was. The wedding photos were all in black and white, but one was colourised.

If the colourist got it right, Mum’s jacket was an army great-coat brown, very far indeed from white.

Not being in virginal white really bothered her and she didn’t want *anybody* to think that she was anything other than pure. To emphasise the point, she would add, ‘I waited for your father, unlike *some* people!’

She actually waited another three years before the war in Europe ended and Jack returned.

Welgedagt

Mae loved living in the city. She was working as a diamond sorter at De Beers during the War, becoming the company’s youngest-ever supervisor.

If she lived in modern times, she would have pursued her own career – something she would have relished – but after the War, Jack’s job took them to a mining town in the bush called ‘Welgedagt’.

Mae became a stay-at-home housewife, not her first choice, but a godsend for us kids. She would sing and draw with us, and would read us stories. My love of literature is rooted in the magic of the worlds her reading transported us to. One of my earliest memories is her reading to us as we lay on our beds and I realised that I could *see* the story playing out in my head, my very own movie house.

Miners were a tough lot and they didn’t come tougher than the Lee family. One day, my sister Bev and I got into a fight with the Lee kids. We went home for lunch and told Mum all about it. We had hardly finished our story when my friend,

Bruce Hunt, dashed through the kitchen door.

‘Mrs Lee is coming up the road!’

This panicked Mum and she herded us all into her bedroom, Bruce included.

‘Climb under the bed, quickly!’ she urged, peering through the lace curtains. Just as we heard the crunch of Mrs Lee’s footsteps on our gravel path, Mum surprised us all by joining us under the bed.

My father wasn’t a big punter, but while we lived at Welgedagt, he got in early on a good thing by the name of ‘Mowgli’. This magnificent horse won six of seven starts in just over two months.

On Palm Sunday, the Sunday school teacher asked, ‘How did Jesus travel into Jerusalem?’

I put up my hand and replied, ‘He rode.’

‘Very good Gavin! What did he ride on?’

‘It was Mowgli.’

Love at the Tropicale

Noelene and I are so unlike in our approach to this ancestry thing. I began with a flourish and now find my dedication waning somewhat. Noelene, on the other hand, began slowly and is building up steam. She is beavering away, keying in details of her parents, Bill and Winnie Selmon.

‘Were Bill and Winnie born in Bulawayo?’

‘My mum was born in Northern Rhodesia.’ (Now Zambia.)
‘Her father, Johannes van Eyk, worked for Rhodesian Railways.’

‘I didn’t know that. What else do you know about the Van Eyks?’

‘Not a lot. My aunty Vera always said that we are related to the Queen of Sweden and that is why Mum’s name is Wilhelmina – something to do with it being a family name.’

After a moment’s thought, she adds, ‘Mum said that the Van

Eyks came to South Africa with the Settlers.’

‘The 1820 Settlers?’

(When Britain’s 100-year war with France ended, the returning troops were offered land in the Eastern Cape around the town of East London. The fact that it was already occupied by the Xhosa nation was a mere inconvenience.)

‘I guess so...’

Contrary to the popular notions about mothers-in-law, I loved Winnie. She was always laughing and happy; even when they emigrated to South Africa, their pension payment plummeted along with the Zimbabwe Dollar and they were living close to the breadline.

She had a way with men, flirting, but with what seemed to me to be a touching innocence.

Maybe not that innocent.

I mention the flirting to Noelene and she says, ‘For sure! Mum always said that *I* should flirt more.’

Like many attractive women, Noelene received more than enough attention and had no need to get down and dirty in the flirting trenches.

I had just arrived back from surfing when her cousin Cilla pulled up with a blonde in the passenger seat. She opened her window and said, ‘This is my cousin Noelene. I’ve just picked her up from the airport. She’s moving to Durban.’

Cilla was in a relationship with my best mate Brian. They were living in the beachside town of Amanzimtoti, not far from Durban.

Cilla continued. ‘We’ve invited her to the party tonight. She is staying with my mum and dad. Will you give her a lift?’

I glanced at Noelene and was immediately struck by her almond-shaped, blue-grey eyes, which were framed by high cheekbones and long blonde hair. But it was her mouth that most drew my attention. It was wide, with lips that were

soft and full, and in my imagination (which was racing wild like a Brumby in the high country), they held the promise of voluptuous sensuality.

As I was contemplating all of this, the edges of her mouth turned upward in a slight smile. This broke the spell and I shifted my gaze to her eyes. They displayed her slight amusement at my gawking.

I thought of myself as a pretty cool dude, and to be caught with my mind *in flagrante* was definitely not cool. I quickly turned to Cilla and assured her that giving her cousin a lift would be no problem, all the while hoping that I would have a second opportunity to prove that I was *really cool*.

However, despite my assurances to Cilla, when we arrived at the party there *was* a problem. We very quickly discovered that we didn't get on at all. After a few attempts at chatting her up, which were met with a frosty response, I cut my losses. By the end of the night, we were hardly speaking. When Brian asked what was going on, I said, 'Man, talk about an ice maiden!'

I learned later that Noelene thought I was 'up myself' and at the bullet-proof age of twenty-four, that was most probably true.

Brian and Cilla were having a party the next weekend and Brian asked me to 'just give her a lift.'

When I phoned to arrange a time to pick Noelene up, she thought I was someone else whom she had met. There was an awkward moment when I asked for the address of the residential hotel she had moved into and her reply was, 'But you know how to get here.'

The trip to Brian and Cilla's home in Amanzimtoti was fairly relaxed. Neither of us felt the need to impress the other. For my part, I had just ended a serious relationship and was enjoying the freedom of not being with someone.

When we arrived at the party, we parted ways, until a guy whom I knew to be a real prick began hitting on Noelene. For

some irrational reason, this annoyed the hell out of me, so I cut in on his play.

As it turned out, she was even less impressed with him than she was with me. When I said, 'Do you want to get out of here?' she readily agreed.

On the trip back, we both loosened up and by the time we arrived at the outskirts of Durban, I was beginning to like this woman.

'Would you like to go for a milkshake? They have great double-thick malted milks at a place called the *Tropicale...*'

I still like to think that it was my irresistible charm, but Noelene insists that it was the double-thick malted milks that sparked our relationship.

How Embarrassing!

'Where was your dad born?'

'In the Transvaal. Somewhere around Krugersdorp, I think.'

Bill was an impressive man. Large nose, hands and ears.

'Going to a shopping centre with your dad was a revelation. He knew everybody and everybody "did a deal" for him.'

'Tell me about it! I was sixteen and going out with a boy who worked for a paper company. I remember one day, as Mike left, seeing my father talking to him at our gate. The next time he came to see me, Mike arrived with this *HUGE* pack of toilet rolls! Dad had asked him whether he could do him a deal on *toilet rolls!* How embarrassing!'

Desert Rats

Bill rarely talked about his war. One day, after he was diagnosed with lung cancer, we were visiting and he sat rifling through a box of 'war things'. In the box, was a stiletto, burnished black,

the most lethal-looking weapon I have ever seen.

I picked it up, examined it and looked quizzically at Bill.

‘I joined the RAR – Rhodesian African Rifles – but before we could ship out, I got sick and so my unit left without me. When I recovered, I made it as far as Nairobi but was stuck there waiting for transport. A major came to our camp, recruiting for a new unit called the “Long Range Desert Group”. I was tired of hanging around, so I volunteered.’

(This unit became known as the ‘Desert Rats’, the toughest and most renowned fighting outfit in North Africa.)

‘After Africa, I was shipped to Brindisi in Italy. I was given three jumps training, then parachuted into Albania. Jerry was retreating and our job was to work with the resistance, to slow them down, by blowing bridges and stuff.’

He closed the box and that was the end of the conversation.

I remember, when he was on his death bed, delirious from the morphine, him waking up sweating and whispering, ‘Be careful! Jerry!’

The End of Days

Next, I enter the details of my grandparents (Mae’s parents), Edward James and Mary Ella Stanley.

Nanna was born in a house on Constitution Street, Aberdeen in Scotland in 1893.

The only Aberdeen story I remember her telling was, ‘As a wee lass, I was walking on the beach when suddenly the Northern Lights lit up the sky. I had never seen such wonders and thought that it was the end of days. I ran home as fast as my legs would carry me.’

She came from good Presbyterian stock, which explains why her interpretation of this phenomenon came from scripture. My kids, raised on the scriptures according to Hollywood, would

think that aliens were invading.

She always displayed a good, solid Presbyterian work ethic, raising eight children in the dust and heat of the South African Highveld.

She met Edward Stanley at a costume ball (there is a family trend regarding meeting future spouses at dances).

'He was dressed as a Cavalier. He made a dramatic entrance, standing in the doorway in all his finery. He swept me off my feet.'

Edward was an American, which intrigued all of us grandkids.

His first grandchild, my cousin, Daphne's best effort at 'grandad' came out as 'Yay-Yay' and so Yay-Yay it was.

Yay-Yay's standard at-home attire was a starched, button-up shirt and flannel longs held up by a fine pair of braces. Whenever he went outside, he added a bow tie and white Panama hat and if he was going beyond his front gate, a lightweight jacket. All this clothing was worn with composure in the sticky, sweltering summers of the Natal South Coast.

Perhaps it was good that he did so because Yay-Yay had very sensitive skin. I remember one holiday when we were staying at Nana and Yay-Yay's cottage in Amanzimtoti.

Mum said, 'Why don't you come to the beach with us, Dad?' (I suspect Nana had put the word out to Mum that she wouldn't mind a few hours alone.)

Yay-Yay thought this to be a grand idea and he proceeded to 'take a walk around the garden to acclimatise myself.'

Now Nana and Yay-Yay's garden was hardly palatial, built as it was on the sand dunes, separated from the beach by lush green and silver-leafed coastal shrubbery, which constantly threatened to encroach and reclaim its territory.

After a minute or so of walking bare-headed, Yay-Yay declared that he was too hot (a fact borne out by his bright red face) and he retired to his dark, cool bedroom.

Daphne's sister, cousin Rosemary, seeing his ruddy complexion

and putting this together with his country of birth, stated that he was a Red Indian.

Yay-Yay loved western novels. I spent many afternoons, sunburned and exhausted after a morning at the beach, lying on a camp cot, absorbed in the works of Louis L'Amour or Zane Grey. All the kids slept on camp beds on the back porch, protected from flying insects and creepy crawlies by flimsy fly netting. I used to lie awake, listening to the waves crashing on the beach not more than 50 yards away, breathing in the humid, salty air, a scent that is forever linked in my mind to our holidays there.

'Here, read this,' he said, handing me *The Last of the Mohicans*. He looked whimsically at the book. 'I grew up on Mohican lands. Schenectady.'

He told great stories, when in the mood. One, I remember, went like this:

'When I was a young boy, I left home to go west. One day, I found myself on an Indian reservation. It was getting dark and so I knocked on the door of the only house in sight. An Indian with black braided hair answered and looked me up and down.

"I was hoping to find somewhere to sleep tonight," I said.

'Without a word, he turned and grabbed a lamp and led me into a small barn. Pointing to the thick, scattered hay, he said, "Make your bed here", then he left.

'I made myself comfortable and slept soundly. Early the next morning, something disturbed me and through my half-closed eyelids, I saw my host leaning over me. It took only an instant to realise that he was gripping a large hunting knife!'

He paused for dramatic effect.

'However, he leaned a bit further and cut a huge slice of ham from the pork leg hanging above my head. "If you hurry, you can share our breakfast," he said, turning away with a grin on his face.'

The Sun Never Sets

My dad's parents were John and Gertrude Pearce.

I never knew my father's father as he died the year before I was born.

What I do know is that he left his birthplace in Wales to work in the gold mines of the Transvaal. (There was a rumour, told by his brother's offspring in Wales, that he left because he had made a girl pregnant, so we may have a second cousin we don't know about.)

When the First World War broke out, he volunteered and fought in the trenches of Flanders.

Ypres, which my mum said he pronounced as 'wipers', turned out to be his last battle. The order came to advance. As he reached up to pull himself out of the trench, his arm was blown off at the elbow. He fell backwards and when the dust and smoke cleared, he saw his dismembered limb lying nearby. He grabbed it and placed it under the stump that was his left arm so that he could remove his wedding ring.

After rehabilitation in a UK hospital, he was shipped back to South Africa. My dad was born about nine months after his return, before John Senior's drinking became a problem.

And it certainly became a problem.

As he could no longer work as a miner, he was given a war pension and worked on Saturdays at the races, selling peanuts. Most of the money went on the grog.

My dad's only comment to me was, 'The old man would come home from the races full of hooch. He'd get sentimental and tell us kids to "never forget that you are from British stock. The sun never sets on the British Empire!"'

I guess he drank to dull the horror that still lived in his head, the flashbacks of the killing fields of Flanders, the true cost of his service to the Empire.

Anyway, the result was that my dad became the 'man of the

house' and even when his sister Thelma was married and had kids of her own, she would say, 'don't tell Jack' if she thought there was anything that he would disapprove of.

His youngest brother, Des, had his own way of dealing with the turmoil at home. 'Dezzy would sing in the church choir on Sunday and get into fights every other day of the week. When war was declared, he was the first of us brothers to sign up. He was working as an electrician at the power station and they told him that he could not join up. Something about being employed in an essential service.

'This didn't stop him. He went down to Durban with some of his mates who were embarking to go to Kenya and he stowed away onboard their troopship. As they were leaving the heads, he was discovered and put into the pilot ship to be taken back to port.

'He was feeling sorry for himself so decided to take a walk along the beachfront. It just so happened that there were British troop ships in port and the promenade was full of Pommy soldiers. One of them made the mistake of telling Des to "be a man and sign up". This was too much for Dezzy and so he popped the guy on the chin. The soldier dropped in a heap.

'His mates took offence and chased Des along the foreshore. Every time a soldier got too close, Des would turn around and floor the poor sod. This carried on until they reached the mouth of the Umgeni River. Des dived in, swam across and hid in the mangroves. The Poms took the longer route across the bridge. They searched for Dezzy but it was getting dark and fortunately, they never found him.'

Dad thinks for a while and then says, 'Arthur was also exempt on health grounds.'

He grins and continues, 'I thought of myself as a lover, not a fighter, yet I was the only brother to go to war!'

Snakes and Ladders

I loved my Granny Gertrude, Dad's mother.

I have never met anybody with a more wrinkled face! The pain and the laughter had left their marks.

With us grandkids, it was always laughter. On rainy days she would play with us for hours – 'compendium' games such as Snakes and Ladders, Dominoes and my dread, the card game 'Old Maid'. The jolt that went through my body each time I picked the Old Maid card is still vivid in my memory!

Her mother, Hannah Warburton, was from Wales. The Warburtons were living in Johannesburg and Hannah had already seen off one of her daughter's suitors, who, in her opinion, 'had a touch of the tar brush', when a young Welsh miner began courting Gertrude. This was a great relief to her and she gave the match her blessing.

When John came home from war a broken man and began drinking, there was no question that Gertrude could leave with the kids and go home to her parents. The marriage vow was 'until death do us part' and that was that.

Small Packages

I glance over to Noelene. 'How are you going?'

'Not bad, I'm entering my dad's mother's, Tienie's, details.' (It's pronounced 'tee-nee').

'What was Tienie like?'

'She was four-foot-nothing tall but was quite terrible. She swore like a trooper and all the kids in the neighbourhood were petrified of her. My cousin Cilla was so scared that Auntie Daph phoned my mum and asked her not to bring Tienie to Cilla's birthday party. Of course, Winnie wouldn't leave her mother-in-law at home, so we missed out on going to those parties for all the years Tienie lived with us.'

‘My other granny was such a lady and yet they got on extremely well. Often, they would both be staying with us and I remember them sitting on the front stoep, shelling peas and talking in Afrikaans, which none of us could understand.

‘Later, when Tienie went blind, she would sit on the same front stoep and pray out loud, “Oh Lord, please take me! Take me now!”

‘This panicked us kids and I would run to the back of the house, praying fervently, ‘God, please don’t take Granny. At least not until Mommy and Daddy get home!’

Siege of Mafeking

Noelene’s paternal grandfather is William Robert Selmon, born 1874.

‘I didn’t know my dad’s father very well. All I can recall is when I was small, visiting him in an old age home. He came to South Africa to work and stayed to fight in the Boer War. I’ve got an article that my dad kept.’

Noelene disappears for a while and comes back with a box covered in faded cherubs. It looks like something from the fifties. After a minute or two’s rummaging, she hands me a yellowed, tattered newspaper article. It is dated 8 December, 1959.

‘Mr William Robert Selmon, who fought at Ladysmith and Mafeking, has recovered from a recent illness and is still going strong at the age of eighty-five. He lives at Cement, near Bulawayo. Mr Selmon came to Pretoria from Bromley, Kent, in 1896 and worked for a contractor running coaches between Pretoria and Pietersburg.

He joined the Imperial Light Horse during the South African War and served for about eight years, including the battle of Elandsplaagte. Afterwards, he transferred to the Imperial

Military Railways, then the Central South African Railways and finally the South African Railways. Part of that time he was on an armoured train and was awarded five medals for his services.

He came up to Bulawayo in 1919 to join the Rhodesian Railways and retired in 1931. Mr Selmon has three daughters and a son, also William Robert, who has followed him on the Rhodesian Railways.

If you know of anyone going to the Ladysmith Diamond Jubilee, please tell Mr Selmon. He's at P.O. Box 2169 and he's going too. He, at least, will represent us at the sixtieth anniversary of the Siege and Relief. He was awarded The King's and Queen's medals with six clasps for his duty at this siege.

Aged eighty-five now ("I'm eight days older than Churchill"), he's sure he is up to the journey because last year he visited his birthplace in Kent.'