

## **Bugler**

by John Thomson

Dad was fifty-four when I was born. As a boy, I was often asked by other boys if he was my grandfather. I'd say, "No, that's my dad," and the face of the questioner would twist into mocking disbelief, something as a child I didn't really understand. Back then my dad seemed like other dads. He played catch with me on the street. He took me camping. He taught me the difference between right and wrong. All with what seemed like youthful energy.

But by the time I started high school, I was forced to confront how much older my father was than the fathers of my peers. I began to see it in the way he'd fall behind me when I'd walk and I'd hear the rasp of his shuffling feet, or when he'd ask me the same question over and over again, or when it became difficult for him to rise out of his chair. And then, a month after I'd turned twenty-one, he died of stomach cancer at the age of seventy-five. Many attended his funeral. All of them, I believe, were from the last life my father had lived. None were from his former lives, which would finally come to me as a kind of ghost story, a bizarre tale I'd share with my wife and children, siblings and friends, and now with people I've never met. In doing so I've learned something beyond the story's surreal coincidences, and have come to appreciate the care we must take when judging the people who've loved us.

I'd learned a few things about my father while he was still alive, coming to me in fragments and from some sources I can't recall. I knew he was born in Salt Lake City in 1900. His parents divorced when he was very young, perhaps when he was only three or four. He probably lived an impoverished childhood. His birth name was John Albert Morris. He acquired the last name of Thomson when he was adopted by his stepfather during what was his mother's short-lived second marriage. He had three siblings, an older brother and two sisters.

I knew he'd had a career in law enforcement. I still remember pieces of stories he told me: getting his palm sliced with a knife when he confronted smugglers at the Mexican border; seeing a dead body fall from a closet; hitting a horse while driving his patrol car on a country road; being a motorcycle cop on the rural highways of Arizona.

But he never really shared much else about his life, and as I grew older I sensed there may have been a reason for this. Surely a man who'd lived for nearly half a century before meeting and marrying my mother would likely have been married before, and perhaps had another family.

So this, whether Dad had been married before, was the first question I wanted to answer. It didn't take long before I found a record of at least two of Dad's previous marriages on a free family history site run by Mormons. There was one in 1928. The woman was twenty, Dad was twenty-eight. All of this was spelled out on an official marriage certificate. And then, soon after, I found an obituary of a woman who was the only child he'd had during this marriage: a half-sister I didn't know about. She was eighty when she died in 2008—old enough to have been my mother. The other marriage was in 1931, just three years after the first. I could find no evidence of children being born from this marriage. Then I went back to the first marriage and looked more closely at the certificate. Under my father's "marital status," it indicated, "divorced," leading me to believe there was yet another ex-wife out there somewhere, the first of three marriages before marrying Mom.

I pursued finding this woman, Dad's potential first wife. I searched the Mormon site more thoroughly, trying an array of filters. I went on to state and county record sites in California and Utah and Arizona, but found nothing.

I began to accept I'd never learn of this alleged first marriage, until my youngest daughter found something. The investigative nature of her job, along with her own curiosity about the grandfather she never knew, led her to a newspaper clipping, dated August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1920. Pressed into the local announcements section was a brief description of a wedding, identifying the groom as John Albert Thomson, from Salt Lake City, Utah.

There was no doubt this was him, only twenty at the time, living in the world of prohibition, the Ford Model T, the start of jazz and Mickey Mouse and telephones and radios, and just after the end of World War I.

Within a matter of days my daughter came upon another newspaper article, dated July 31, 1924. In it was the announcement of the baptisms for my father's two infant children born of that marriage, a son and daughter, two more half-siblings I hadn't known existed. The daughter's name was Joyce. The son's name was John, the same name as my father.

The same as mine.

Then came the shock, the dismay and anger. The disbelief. Dad had given me the same name as a son he'd already had, born thirty years before.

So who was this half-brother of mine who bore my name? Where was he? Was he still alive? Did he look like me, or my father? Once again it was my daughter who'd make the discovery, locating a newspaper article telling of my half-brother's death.

He was killed in a tanker fire in San Francisco Bay in 1942. The article referred to him by the last name he'd acquired from his stepfather, who'd adopted him, just as my father had been adopted by his own stepfather. It said his body was never found. Then I located his draft notice. I'd learn he was to report to the Army to fight in World War II, just days after he died in the fire. This draft notice, along with a death certificate, recorded his date of birth: the same day, though a different year, as mine: June 6<sup>th</sup>.

My father had a son with my same name, born on the same date in June, only a whole generation earlier.

I realized Dad must have known this other son he'd named John had died 12 years before I was born. I imagined he must have grieved when he'd gotten the news of his son's death, even though they'd been estranged. Then I began to wonder if Dad gave me this other son's name as a way of carrying on his memory, especially since I was born on the same date in June. How could this not have jarred my father? Perhaps when my Dad looked at me, he saw a piece of the John he'd lost, still living.

But I don't know, and I may never know. My discoveries came after all the characters in the story were dead. There was no one to ask, no one to tell me what my father was like as a young man, why he'd had so many other wives and had, it seemed, abandoned his other three children. And I will probably never learn whether I got my name because a brother I never knew had died before me, and I became his ghost and a second chance for my father to show the commitment he'd once abdicated. But I'm at peace with not

knowing these things. I've wondered if it's better they remain undiscovered. Over time, the revelations have coalesced into simply an amazing tale, the kind of thing you might watch on Dateline. When I tell people of the half-brother who bore my name and birth date, they often gasp with amazement, as if they've just seen something they can't believe is really there. Then the story, even with all its implications about my father's character, becomes more like a harmless dream.

I've often wondered if it would've been better or worse if my discoveries about Dad were made while Mom was still alive. I've considered how difficult it may have been to tell her about the secrets he might have kept, if they were secrets at all. During her life, my mother never shared with me or my siblings any of the things I'd later learn, and so I'll never know if it was because she didn't know of them herself, or if she was trying to protect us.

Mom was fifteen years younger than Dad, and so she lived well beyond his passing. She embraced a full and resilient life into advanced years, walking daily, praying the rosary, watching "The Golden Girls," getting jokes wrong and humoring us all with her word malaprops, like saying she was going to go sit in the Hibachi when she meant the Jacuzzi.

It took a few years after her death before I discovered all of these things about my father. My search was prompted in part by the records of Dad's military service Mom gave me before she died. These records helped me realize the great span of time and culture that separated me from my father and the parts of his life that remained unknown.

Among Dad's enlistment and discharge papers, was a commendation he'd received. It was a War Service Certificate, marking his honorable service in the U.S. Navy from 1917 to 1919. He was commended for his service on a ship during World War I, and at the height of the Spanish flu pandemic. Under his specified rank, it said: *Bugler*. When I read the word I remembered Mom telling me how Dad had to play Taps for all the sailors who'd succumbed to the sickness and were buried at sea. I envisioned my father on board that ship. He might be only seventeen. According to Mom he'd lied about his date of birth so he could enlist, and was actually serving before he was of legal age. I imagined Dad, a boy, really, playing Taps on deck for the many young sailors who'd died from the flu as

their bodies were cast into the ocean. I pictured him pressing his bugle against his mouth as he swayed with the roll of the ocean. I imagined the blow of his horn, music meant to overcome tragedy with virtue. I imagined him pushing his breath through his trumpet as a way of affirming he was still among the living.

Whenever I'm tempted to judge him, I see him as that bugler on the Navy ship, playing Taps. And I remember a time in the living room of our little house. Mom and Dad had a party, a lot of drinking and arguments about politics, religion, what kids should be learning in school. Then, out of nowhere, it seemed, a bugle appeared in Dad's hands and he stood in the middle of the room, swaying from too much drink. He tried to play, his cheeks swelling red, his forehead erupting with sweat. Out came the weak burst from his trumpet, a raw and desperate song about the universal struggle of the living.

My father, like all of us, participated in that struggle. But for him it began at a very young age during an arduous time: poverty, war, disease, death on the open ocean. This is not an excuse for his failures or derelictions, but it is a truth I empower to lessen condemnations of him. Now I simply live knowing my life is *my* life, no matter what my father did or whether I'd once had a half-brother who shared my birthday and name. I consider my own mistakes, and how I owe my existence to Dad's desire to start another family after he'd lived for half a century, after he'd already tried to have a family three times before. And when latent judgments rise in me, I remember how Dad appeared to me when I was a boy, how he was a father like other fathers, for as long as he was able.



**John Thomson's** novel for young readers, *A Small Boat at the Bottom of the Sea* was published by Milkweed Editions, and his short fiction has appeared in several literary journals. His story, *Out of Good Ground*, won Terrain.org's Fiction Contest in 2018. He is a retired wildlife and land conservationist and lives with his wife in Northern California, close to their two grown daughters and three grandchildren.