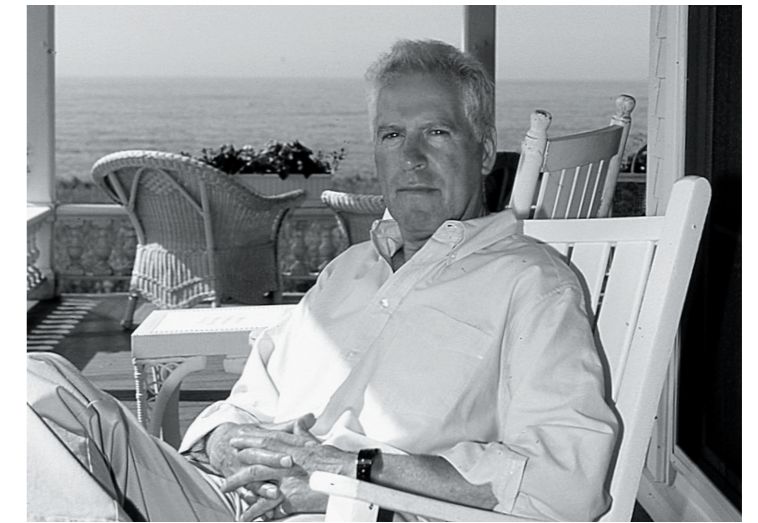


John de St Jorre with his mother in London, 1936.  
**Opposite** De St Jorre now, in his home in Newport, Rhode Island



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JOHN DE ST JORRE. NIK WHEELER



# Missing mother

As a secret-service spy, he was accustomed to covert investigations. But **John de St Jorre's** greatest assignment was to discover what happened to the mother who vanished when he was a small child. Here, he picks up the trail

**I**n 1940, when I was four years old, my mother disappeared and, with her, all trace of her existence. Growing up in London during the Second World War with my younger brother, Maurice, we were looked after by elderly spinsters and, later, sent to a Catholic boarding school. My father travelled for his work and was largely absent. He never talked about my mother, nor did anyone else we knew. Maurice and I never discussed her either. I did not know her name and had no idea what she looked like. In those early years, it did not seem so strange being motherless because we did not know anything else. It was only when other children – most kids had two parents in those days – asked what happened to her, we said, 'Oh, she's dead.' A lot of people were dying in the bombing, so it seemed reasonable that our mother could be one of them.

After the war, when I was 12 years old, my father remarried and the arrival of a stepmother further sealed off the past. It was almost as if my mother had never been born. But I had something no one else knew about, my own family secret. It was a single memory, fleeting yet vivid, of a mysterious woman, and I held on to it like a precious stone.

The memory was enmeshed in imagery of wartime London, a city of monotones: shades of grey, brown and black with the occasional splash of colour from the red double-decker buses. Somewhere in that city, in that time, I recall seeing a young woman whom I believed to be my mother, a shard of memory that, true or false, remains with me to this day. She is standing in a large room with a tiled floor. I think it is a kitchen but cannot be sure. Through a window, I see snow falling. The woman is wearing a loose blouse, half-open, revealing large breasts. She has blue eyes and blonde hair framing a full, plump face. Smoke curls upwards from her cigarette. She looks at me, throws back her head and laughs. I look down and see that cigarette ash has fallen between her breasts.

I don't know how old I was, but since I can recall nothing before that time, I was probably very young. The vision of this blonde, blue-eyed woman was powerful though not shocking. She sounded happy and that made me happy too. She seemed familiar, someone close to me, and that is why I thought her my mother. Who else could she be? Then she vanished. It was as if she had been swallowed by one of London's fogs, never to be seen again.

**T**he arrival of Edith Ross, our new stepmother, was a godsend to us all. She took Maurice and me out of the Catholic boarding school, where for four years we had suffered hunger, physical punishment and loneliness, and put us into good state day schools. She loved and cared for my father, and she created a warm and stable home, something we had never known. Her only flaw, as I saw it, was that she embraced my father's conspiracy of silence about my mother.

As I was growing up in London, I clung to the memory of this woman, my way of opposing the family's omertà. But I did nothing to find her. Simply getting through the turbulence, dislocation and danger of the war years, then the dreary, impoverished aftermath in the decade or so that followed, was as much as I could handle. With stepmother Edith assuming the role of mother, I was happy to focus on my new life and leave the past where it was. We became a typical middle-class family headed by two professional people. My father, born into a French family on a plantation in the Seychelles, was a marine engineer, and my stepmother was a well-born Scot who became a schoolteacher.

My brother and I did well at school. I spent two years in the army, much of it in Malaya during the Communist insurgency, followed by a degree at Oxford. My brother, on a National Coal Board scholarship, became a mining engineer, married, and moved to Canada. During my last year at Oxford, I was recruited into MI6 the old-fashioned way by my medieval-history tutor operating as a discreet 'talent-spotter'. I entered a secret world in an organisation that did not officially exist, yet had two names (the Secret Intelligence Service was the other), via an arcane recruitment process.

During this time the silence about my mother's fate continued. That silence, when you



My father was forced to reveal some basic facts that I needed for MI6's vetting process. As a result, I finally learnt my mother's name. I was 24 years old

**Above** De St Jorre with his father, George, in Exmouth, in August 1939; his father on his wedding day to his second wife, Edith, January 1948.

**Below** De St Jorre aged four, with his brother Maurice, aged three



think about it, was astonishing – but it was something that my brother and I accepted without question. It was part of the quasi-Victorian mores and conventions of the time. If your parents, or indeed any adult, did not broach a subject, you never did either. Whole areas of discussion now completely normal – religion, politics, sex and family secrets – were then taboo. I was a creature of that era, respectful of its conventions, curious but cautious and, after a miserable, dislocated childhood, willing to trade anything for stability and happiness.

However, as I grew older, I felt increasingly guilty about not doing something to find my still unnamed mother, and increasingly resentful of my parents for covering up the past. It was complicated by knowing that my father loved us. He was our daddy, the kindly man who shielded us from an unrelenting hostile world in our motherless childhood. I never forgot it and loved him back. It was clear that he wanted to protect us. But from whom? Our mother? What had happened to trigger that need? Mayhem, madness, murder? The only breakthrough before he died in 1965 was when he was forced to reveal some basic facts that I needed for MI6's vetting process. As a result, I finally learnt my mother's name. I was 24 years old.

After his death, I felt liberated to take action. By that time, I had quit MI6 – I had spent most of my time working in Africa – and begun to drift doing odd jobs to survive but enjoying the freedom of the era. It was, after all, the 1960s and it seemed the right thing to do.

The limited world of the 1940s and 1950s had given way to a brighter, more expansive universe. London, the city I knew best, had become prosperous and vibrant. New plays, films, novels, even clothes and furniture seethed with rebellion against the old order; the young were at the centre of the universe, or so it seemed; time-encrusted social taboos were discarded like cracked china; the chiaroscuro tones of old London that I remembered from my childhood ceded to the bright colours of a confident future. 'You never had it so good,' trumpeted a political slogan of the day. The

Second World War and its drab, exhausted aftermath were forgotten. London was swinging and it was cool to be British.

As all this changed, so did I. I not only witnessed this social revolution but participated in it. At state secondary schools and at Oxford on a government scholarship, I took advantage of the Labour Party's radical reforms in education and health, both cost-free and freely accessible. Emerging from the jungles of Malaya, I saw the sun sinking on the British empire, and it became clear that America called the shots while Britain obediently followed. I found

myself becoming more independent, bolder and scornful of many of the social conventions I had once regarded as sacrosanct. In a profound way, I felt like a different person, a person who could do anything he wanted, including looking for his mother.

But it wasn't easy. My brother, preoccupied with his work and growing family in western Canada, was distant from the problem. He had no memories of our mother and, as he later explained, her 'death' was real for him. The past was past and emphatically dead.

**W**ith Edith, my stepmother, it was more complicated. By this time, she had settled into the maternal role. Most people did not know she was not our real mother, something we all tacitly agreed not to divulge. I was fond of her, but a sense of betrayal over the woman she had replaced never left me. This manifested itself as a shearing away from any physical contact, something I am sure Edith noticed, and which made me ashamed of myself. Although she professed to know nothing about my mother's fate, she later turned out to be a key witness.

My search, which stretched over 10 years, was a tortuous one. It entailed false leads, miraculous coincidences and discoveries, frequent dead ends, and sheer good luck. As time went on, I realised that an initial rebuff was not necessarily the end of the matter. My sources, all women – not a single man ever came forward – were rather like me. It took them time to absorb and ponder. Unlike my brother, the past never let me go, but I had to make a sustained effort to draw it out. The flow of information was neither rapid nor constant – but the reward was lifting another veil.

For people who have lost relatives, finding them raises all kinds of difficulties, of which the physical search is probably the least demanding. Tough – and, at times, agonising – moral choices have to be made. After long separations, is it a good idea to break into lives that may have been rebuilt on the rubble of a shattered past? Does the person who has disappeared really want to be found? Some form of prior consultation would be reasonable, but how can that be done without revealing identities and connections? How much collateral damage will be inflicted on close relatives and friends of the seeker and the sought? These problems are common to all attempts to restore broken blood ties, but they are particularly acute when the search involves reconnecting a mother with her child. At various times, in the long search for my mother, their collective complexity almost scuttled the enterprise.

One of the many things that slowed me down was the necessity to find a regular job and, after freelancing in central Africa, the *Observer* hired me. While the search for my mother never left my mind and I began to make progress, I was deflected by covering political crises in Africa and the Middle East, and wars, notably the Nigerian-Biafran conflict, the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and the Iranian Islamic revolution.

During the search, I pieced the story together,



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**Above** A studio portrait of de St Jorre's mother, inscribed 'With best wishes for Christmas 1933, Grace'; Grace and de St Jorre's father in 1934. **Below** De St Jorre with his aunt Olive and his mother, 1975



the full version of which can be found in my memoir (see below). The salient points are that my mother had a breakdown after the birth of my brother, probably due to post-partum depression, but found herself going in and out of mental institutions, often full of mad and violent inmates. My father became increasingly worried about our safety. To make matters worse, my maternal grandmother, with whom we lived for a while, was a fearsome, tyrannical figure who hated my father. Rows between him, her, and our mother got worse and worse, swirling around our young heads.

By the time the war started, my parents' marriage had broken up and, in the summer of 1940 as the bombing of London began, my father took my brother and me away. My mother agreed to the separation thinking that she would continue to see us regularly and would always be part of our lives. But my father had another plan. For him the break was final – with his wife and with her entire family. And so it remained for the next 35 years. Meanwhile, my mother was institutionalised increasingly often and subjected to the barbaric treatment of the mentally ill at the time – electronic shocks without anaesthetics, a frontal lobotomy, physical abuse, and neglect.

Finally, I found her, damaged by 40 years in mental hospitals. I also discovered she had an older sister, the only person who had stayed by her side through years of illness and anguish. My aunt knew I was alive through tracking me by my *Observer* byline. But she never dared to contact me for fear of breaking into my life uninvited. She was a wonderful find, hale, resilient and loving, and proved to be a vital go-between for my mother and me, as well as a brimming repository of family history.

My mother lived for four years after our reunion, which happened just after my 39th birthday, and during that time we managed to re-establish the ties that are the deepest in human experience, the bond between mother and child.

My sense that something seismic was happening came about six weeks after we met, when she greeted me thus: 'I don't know you,'

she said. 'Who are you? What is your name?'

After three or four meetings, I left London for Spain to work on a book. Shortly after I arrived, I received the first letter my mother had ever written to me. Among some stilted pleasantries, she wrote three words on a separate line: 'Darling baby mine.' I had found my mother and now she had found me.

*Darling Baby Mine: A Son's Extraordinary Search for his Mother*, by John de St Jorre, is published by Quartet Books (£20). To order your copy for £16.99 plus p&p, call 0844-871 1514 or visit [books.telegraph.co.uk](http://books.telegraph.co.uk)