In 1962, nurses at a small Newfoundland hospital sent home two women with the wrong babies.
FIFTY YEARS LATER, THEIR CHILDREN DISCOVERED THE SHOCKING MISTAKE.

BY Lindsay Jones FROM THE ATAVIST

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSIE BRINKMAN EVANS
Rita Hynes lugged her pregnant body up the rural hospital’s wooden steps. It was the night of December 7, 1962, and her rounded belly tightened with each contraction. At the hospital, she felt the intensifying crests of pain—at first bearable, then searing as the night wore on. Just after midnight, the cries of her new baby pierced the air. A boy! She named him Clarence Peter Hynes. He was deposited in the hospital’s nursery and tucked into a bassinet, while Rita dozed in the women’s ward.

Clarence, whom everyone calls Clar, grew up in a fishing town, St. Bernard’s, perched on the edge of Newfoundland’s Fortune Bay. His father, Ches, was a fisherman, and Clar was the first in a steady stream of infants to arrive at the Hyneses’ home. Clar slept in a top bunk in a room he shared with his brothers. They were fairer than he was—Clar had a toasty complexion and a head of thick, dark hair. He grew to become a local heartthrob, with a chiseled brow and lean, muscular frame. When he drove his navy blue Chevy Camaro around town, the teenage girls of St. Bernard’s swooned.

At age 24, Clar met a woman named Cheryl at a motel bar in Marystown, farther down the boot-shaped peninsula from where he grew up. She was the belle of the bar, and he was instantly smitten. As the two talked over beers and glasses of Screech and 7Up, Cheryl found him attentive and kind. They danced and chatted the night away. She didn’t want it to end. They were married two years later in Marystown’s white, steepled Anglican church.

Rita was diagnosed with late-stage ovarian cancer a few years later, at 50. Clar nursed her as a mother would a baby. He held her and rocked her in his childhood bungalow on the hill, making sure to face a window on the ocean so she could see the waves. Rita stayed with Clar and Cheryl at their home in St. John’s during her futile cancer treatments. Clar spoon-fed his mother bowls of fish and potatoes. He spent day after day with her right up until the end, so she would never be alone. Five years after that, lung cancer took Ches.

Clar and Cheryl raised three children of their own. By 2014, Clar was a
welding foreman at Bull Arm, where employees were building an oil platform that would eventually be towed out to sea. That December, 52 years to the day after he was brought into the world, Clar overheard a woman in the hallway just outside his office sing out to a co-worker, “It’s Craig’s birthday!” The woman’s name was Tracey Avery, and she was a cleaner at Bull Arm. She was talking about her husband, who also worked at the site. How funny, Clar thought. “It’s my birthday, too,” he said with a laugh.

“Yes, b’y,” Tracey replied. “How old are you?”

When Clar told her his age, Tracey’s next words came tumbling out: “Where were you born?”

“Come By Chance cottage hospital,” Clar said.

Tracey stood stock still for a second, her mouth agape. Then she ran, leaving her mop and cart behind.

**THE STIRRING OF THIS** long-buried truth might have been sheer coincidence, one of those wild things that just happens, or maybe it was inevitable, born of the quiddity of place. Newfoundland has a rugged coastline, with hundreds of communities nestled into crooks, crannies and coves, each its own remote kingdom, fortified by rolling bluffs. Extended families are vast and tightly bound. For a long time they had to be. In such an austere place, it was a matter of survival. Today on the Rock, as Newfoundland is affectionately known, your bay and your bloodline still define who you are.

Getting anywhere along Newfoundland’s 9,650 kilometres of mountainous coast has always been a challenge. In the early 20th century, people in many of the island’s approximately 1,300 outports—the local term for fishing towns—had limited access to health care. Cottage hospitals, homey clinics with beds and live-in nurses, were strategically located to serve dozens of outports at once and were intended to eliminate unnecessary death and suffering. The first seven cottage hospitals opened in 1936, including one in Come By Chance, which served more than 50 outports. Pregnant women arrived there in an unending procession, by dirt road and dory, from capes and islets. By 1958, Newfoundland’s families were, on average, the largest in Canada—households had seven, eight, even 10 or more children.

Many women returned to the cottage hospitals to give birth on a nearly annual basis. Among them was Mildred Avery, who came from a Protestant
“HOW DO YOU GET BACK ALL THAT YOU MISSED? YOU’LL NEVER GET IT BACK.”
—CRAIG AVERY
hamlet called Hillview, on Trinity Bay. By the time she was 29, five children, all boys, filled the house built by her husband, Donald. On December 7, 1962, Mildred arrived in Come By Chance to deliver her sixth child. At dawn the next morning, the baby emerged. It was another boy, weighing in at six pounds, four ounces. Mildred named him Craig Harvey Avery, and he too was placed in the nursery alongside the other squinch-faced newborns, including Clar, who just seven hours earlier had taken his first breath.

Mildred took Craig home to Hillview, adding him to her brood. From the start Craig was different. Nobody in the Avery family could figure out who he looked like. He grew into a strapping blue-eyed jokester, nothing like his quiet, dark-haired siblings. His father worked variously as a woodcutter, carpenter, fisherman and mason, with Craig often at his side. Donald had high, sculpted cheekbones. Craig had freckles and a bowl cut.

Craig quit school in the 10th grade and joined his brother Wayne in Ontario at an American Standard factory, making porcelain sinks and toilets. He was on the rowdy side, a guy who picked fights and chased all the pretty girls. When he moved back to Hillview, Craig got odd jobs, cutting brush and helping build an extension on the wharf. He did a little bit of everything, just like his father, and took care of family members when they needed a hand, stacking their wood or shovelling their snow.

Craig married his first wife, from the next cove over. Several years later, after three children and a divorce, he found his partner for life, the sister of one of the men with whom he played softball. Tracey was spunky, the type who didn’t miss a beat. Eventually, they both got jobs at Bull Arm—the same site where Clar Hynes was employed. It was Tracey who first noticed the man who looked strikingly like her in-laws. Clar had Mildred Avery’s brown eyes and strong nose, and he could have been the twin of one of Craig’s brothers, Clifford. But Tracey didn’t think much more about the uncanny likeness until that December when she discovered her husband not only shared a birthday with Clar but was born at the same hospital.

That night, Tracey and Craig sat up in their queen-size bed, talking and drinking black tea until the sun rose over the bluffs. It was a huge mental leap from recognizing a series of coincidences to wondering if he was switched at birth, but inside Craig knew—he just knew. Something clicked into place, a piece of his existence that had always stuck out awkwardly. His mind spun with questions: How did it happen? What was my life supposed to be like? Where would I be now? What would I be doing?

SOON AFTER, the Averys decided they needed photos of Clar to show Craig’s siblings. After a few days, Tracey got her chance. They were in the Bull Arm lunchroom, at their usual table,
when they spotted Clar. Tracey held her phone up, surreptitiously snapping a picture of him in profile. Over the next few days, Craig texted the image to his brothers and sister. They shook their heads in disbelief. Craig’s older brother Clifford, the one who looked almost identical to Clar, offered to do a DNA test to determine if Craig was really his kin.

When Tracey and Craig approached Clar to tell him about their suspicion, he found the whole thing outrageous. Sure, his mind wandered briefly: Holy geez, Craig does look a lot like my brother. And he remembered some odd encounters he’d had over the years. There was, for example, the time in a toy store when he heard a woman say, “Cliff! Oh Cliff!” After repeated calls, to which he hadn’t responded, the woman approached him. “Oh,” she said, surprised when he explained he was Clarence Hynes. “I thought you were Cliff Avery from Hillview.” Still, when the Averys told him their theory, Clar dismissed the possibility that he wasn’t the person he’d always been. Everyone looks like someone.

Craig got the email with the results comparing his DNA with Clifford’s in the late fall of 2015. He was too nervous to click on the message himself, so Tracey did it. Not only did he and Clifford not share the same father, but they weren’t even distantly related. The first person Craig called was Clar. Even while he felt a wave of sadness, Clar wasn’t convinced that the news applied to him.

That winter, Clifford started calling Clar. He wanted to meet, but Clar always had an excuse. Then, one day that spring, Clifford died by suicide after quietly suffering from depression for several years, following the death of his eight-year-old son. At work, Craig handed him the obituary, and Clar politely accepted it, but he couldn’t bring himself to read it, and he didn’t attend the funeral either. It has nothing to do with me, he told himself again.

The truth seeped in slowly for Clar. For the first time in his life, he didn’t want to go to work. Unshovelled snow piled up in his driveway. He was like a bird caught in a crosswind. Clar moved from his bed to the chesterfield, the chesterfield to the bed, sometimes stopping to sob at the kitchen counter.

Fearing her husband might take his own life, Cheryl hid the car keys each night after supper, tucking them into a black plastic box high in the bedroom closet, where she also stashed all the medication in the house. Some nights, when Clar couldn’t sleep, he walked to his younger brother Chesley’s home, where he talked and cried with his head in his hands until dawn.

Chesley had never seen Clar, 17 years his senior, in such a fragile state. Clar had always been a father figure, especially after their dad died. To see him like that shook Chesley to his core.
“I DON’T THINK CRAIG AND I WERE THE ONLY ONES WHO WERE SWITCHED.”
—CLARENCE HYNES
It took more than a year for Clar to surface from the abyss. His wife and sisters finally convinced him to see a doctor, and he was diagnosed with clinical depression. Once he was on the right medication, he slowly returned to his old self. That was when he decided it was time. He knew that mental illness ran in the Avery family, that Clifford had suffered from it. For his own health and that of his kids, Clar had to be sure: Was he a Hynes or an Avery?

IF A NURSE WAS IN A RUSH, A BABY COULD EASILY BE PLACED IN THE WRONG BASSINET.

When Clar’s test results arrived in the mail, in the winter of 2019, he called Craig. Clar had laid out his results on the kitchen counter next to Clifford’s, which Craig had shared with him. “Everything was a match,” Clar said. He and Clifford had been brothers.

There was silence on both ends of the phone. Finally, Craig spoke: “We know now that it’s all real.”

The next question has plagued the men and their families ever since: How did it happen?

DIGGING FOR ANSWERS led the Averys and the Hyneses to a nurse with an odd nickname. Christina Anne Callanan was born in the Irish city of Galway in 1924. She trained to be a nurse and, at age 19, moved to Canada for work. In her 30s, she relocated to Come By Chance, a town with one main road, a post office and a general store.

Callanan was brisk and competent, the first to emerge from her quarters on the second floor of the hospital each morning. She rose to the position of head nurse, which, in addition to delivering babies and assisting in the operating room, required managing the office, distributing prescriptions and supervising staff. Some colleagues described her as like a big sister. But other colleagues found Callanan to be like an army sergeant who put everyone on edge. Her underlings called her Nurse Tiger behind her back, for her fiery, domineering ways. She was known for pillorying the young nurses and their aides. “Where’s your hat?” she would roar across the room to a young woman who’d forgotten it that day.

The nursery was often packed. When all the bassinets were full, babies were deposited in red and white Carnation milk crates. Nurse’s aides, who were as young as 16 and didn’t have medical training, were overworked, with little to no time off. They were often the ones who looked after the babies at night while the mothers slept in the wards. They warmed bottles of milk, scooped up crying infants to console them, and changed soiled diapers.
The bassinets and milk crates were supposed to be labelled. Aides and other staff were warned: make sure the name on the label matches the baby’s arm band, and make sure both match what’s on the mother’s hospital bracelet. But sometimes arm bands slipped off after the swelling in the babies’ limbs—a common occurrence after birth—went down. If a nurse or an aide was in a rush, a baby could easily be placed in the wrong bassinet or crate.

By all accounts, Callanan ran a tight ship, but after one particular birth, something changed. She was having a difficult time delivering the placenta, the last stage of the process. She might have been kneading the woman’s uterus and asking her to push, growing increasingly worried as the afterbirth failed to appear, when a nurse’s aide got in her way. The aide was trying to put the correct identity band on the baby. Protocol dictated that both the infant’s and the mother’s bands be attached immediately following birth, in the delivery room. But Callanan became annoyed and sent the aide out of the room. “Do that outside,” she said. “It needn’t be done here.”

From that point on, protocol was relaxed. Identity bands could be attached to mother and baby after they’d been separated, once the infant was in the nursery with the other newborns. Callanan was in charge in December 1962, when Craig and Clar...
were born. She delivered both babies, and it’s her name, signed with tight, curlicued Cs, atop the medical records of the births.

It was difficult to find anyone who knew Callanan well. Most of her relationships seemed to be peripheral ones, made at work, but she did keep at least one close connection for many years: a former patient who helped her find a place to live in Hantsport, Nova Scotia, where she retired and later died. She knew no one there, and no one knew her.

CRAIG AND CLAR HAVE BECOME LIKE BROTHERS, BUT THEIR BOND IS ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT.

TOGETHER, CLAR AND CRAIG and their families decided to sue the Newfoundland government for the cottage hospital’s negligence and the irreparable damage done by it. They believe the department of health should have intervened, investigated mistakes made by and complaints lodged against Callanan, and set more stringent birth-management policies. The families also found out that a few short months before Clar and Craig were born, another family had been given the wrong baby—but they had luckily realized the mistake. If action had been taken, the Averys and Hyneses argue, maybe they would have gone to the right homes.

As they wait for the legal case to proceed, the families are coming to grips with what happened. In the summer of 2019, Craig went to visit St. Bernard’s for the first time. When he arrived, he stood outside for an hour and a half before he could bring himself to step inside the bungalow. At the kitchen counter, he numbly cracked lobster claws with Clar, conscious that all this—the view, the people, the walls—should have been home. Meanwhile, the Hynes siblings took in their new brother’s moustached grin, how he palmed his fork like their father had, how he too walked with a slight hunch, heaving himself from side to side.

Craig and Clar have become like brothers, but their bond is something altogether different. They spend time together, and with their various siblings, on snowmobile excursions punctuated by boil-ups—an afternoon snack of tea, chili, toasted bread, and hot dogs roasted over a crackling fire. On weekends they stay at Craig’s getaway cabin or park their camper vans in St. Bernard’s. They find comfort in the tics and mannerisms of cherished family members that they see in each other. Craig reminds Clar of his father—the way he taps one arm with two fingers on the opposite hand, the way he sits when he eats, hunched over with his knees apart. For Craig, looking
at Clar’s eyes is like looking at Clifford’s or his mother’s.

The men try not to indulge too much in the what-ifs and if-onlys. It’s been hard lately. With declining oil prices, Newfoundland’s fossil fuel industry cratered, and Craig was laid off at work. Matters grew worse when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the province into lockdown. Craig has struggled to fill his days and keep his mind from wandering. He used to be more easygoing, but now he’s quick to anger. “How do you get back all these years?” he said. “How do you get back all that you missed? You’ll never get it back.”

For his part, Clar keeps conspicuously busy. When he’s not at work, he’s been building a new garage and constructing a cabin in St. Bernard’s. The tasks help keep his emotions at bay, especially the regret about the family he never met.

All the parents—Rita and Ches, Mildred and Donald—are gone now, a sad fact that nonetheless means that the families don’t have to navigate an extra layer of emotional turmoil. Clar watched a video of his birth mother for the first time in February 2020. It was footage of Mildred dancing with Craig in the nursing home, stepping side to side. As Clar took in her short grey curls, the eyes like shiny river stones, the long nose that was also his own, he shook his head in awe. This was the woman in whose body he grew, who laboured to give him life, who surely loved him at first sight. This was the closest to her that he could ever be.

Nothing can undo or excuse that terrible mistake made in Come By Chance, but before there was any knowledge of wrong families, there were loving ones. Now there’s something else: an unlikely unit of Hyneses and Averys, welded together by the cruelest of truths, and also by compassion and devotion. But questions linger. Other people who live in Trinity Bay shared stories of near misses in their own families: babies returned to the Come By Chance cottage hospital after realizing they had the wrong infant, and temporary mix-ups within the hospital itself in the 1950s and ’60s. “I don’t think Craig and I were the only ones,” Clar said, referring to babies switched at birth whose families never knew, who still don’t know.

When he’s home in St. Bernard’s, he looks at local families differently. When someone appears a little unlike the rest, he can’t help but wonder whether there’s a secret there, just beneath the surface.


Forty Winks
No day is so bad that it can’t be fixed with a nap.
CARRIE SNOW