



### **The Tribal Family Outsider.**

*How a repeated anecdote at family events became an empowering truth - and moulded me into a new archetype.*

This isn't revenge writing. It's a confession of someone who has carried the weight of this for years.

I'm not here to prosecute anyone - I am here to draw the boundaries that were never drawn for me.

This is my personal account, written from my perspective. I share it in the hope it helps others that have similar field notes.

Another family event results in the usual opportunity for the narrator of the tribe to remind me of a fact I have refused to accept - I'm not entirely welcome. At least not in the overall familial sense. I am welcome to join in the conversation (as long as they are not speaking), I can partake in the food and drink their coffee but one thing has always felt clear to me - I am not a full time member of this tribe.

Complex dynamics exist in all families, often forming around a central power that people compete for. In this case, that contest was short - power was claimed early, from the moment I first met my stepmother at four years old.

"Hi, I'm Strat and I'm a space alien." A small innocent version of me had said, in a meeting that I barely remember,

but feels vivid by its constant retelling. It comes up at most family events, and generally when there is a wider audience. Siblings, peers, my wife and those family members that I barely know - due to them only coming out of hiding when someone gets married or dies.

I have routinely accepted the recanting of this tale as nothing more than a tease. Yet despite this being a typical parental narrative - a moment to remind the adult of the child they once were - I have started to pick up on a discerning pattern of what may be a more concerning intent. To others it comes across as a jest - but I read something else in the tone, timing and body language.

To me, it resembles someone trying to maintain control and dominance. Normally, I uncomfortably play along after the laughter has finished. A laughter that doesn't feel with me, but at me. This time, I didn't feel so inclined.

I decided to act on the pattern and discuss it with a psychologist. Analysis of patterns in social settings is how I find psychological safety, so it's important to get a grounded and impartial expert to help review my findings.

The formula I tend to work with is to; study body language and tone, anticipate intent, track cadence, replay micro-expressions, and note when behaviour shifts - example; what triggered it, and what changed.

As the study progresses in the session, it's clear what I have identified has substance.

"When Children feel vulnerable, it's common for them to use imagination and fantasy as a language to convey what they feel but don't have the means to communicate." She says.

This revised context is disappointing - what seemed like a light-hearted story becomes the dismissal of a four-year-old struggling through his parents' separation. An interstellar declaration with subtitles that were either ignored or never understood.

When I said, "I am a space alien", I was trying to convey the feelings that still resonate today. That I feel different, out of place and out of phase. The fantasy was a form of

protection. If I was from another planet, it explained why I didn't fit - because I wasn't like them.

This epiphany in my session brings only one question:

Why would someone choose to repeatedly mock the comments of a vulnerable four-year-old?

Digging deeper into understanding this anecdote, my therapist and I start to draw some conclusions. It appears to us to be a form of spectated belittling. A way of locking me back into that prior childhood identity - a subtle way of reminding me that they are the elder, and that I am that weird four year old. In just one simple telling, it reduces me from the independent, articulate and self-defined man that I have become to the child I once was.

The only solace I can take in this behaviour - my therapist assures me - is that this act, in their view, likely comes from insecurity. Despite my frustration, I can empathise with insecurity. After all, we all have our hang ups, and I can see why a new partner might struggle with a constant reminder of a life that existed before them.

The empathy only goes so far though. Being reminded that you're different on a regular basis will eventually whittle down any semblance of compassion - even if it is born from insecurities. Especially when this individual has often in moments where they could have shown themselves to be a parental figure have often chosen not to. Many stepparents speak of the stepchildren as 'like their own' - a narrative I've heard often, but not one I've experienced.

A good example would be a few years ago when at a family party, they were discussing with my wife in a chauvinistic way that their children had never had any surgeries - my wife taking no pause to highlight my two surgeries that I'd had up to this point.

"Oh, I meant the ones I gave birth to..."

In the past, I have challenged the behaviour, but it's difficult to navigate due to a locked-in conversational mechanism. The structure tends to follow a pattern; instigation through a comment or story, the emotional reaction

they're seeking - which I naturally deliver - then inversion, where my reaction becomes the problem, followed by a repositioning. The instigator becomes the wronged party. A behavioural trait that both my therapist and I have coined as a carefully constructed victimhood. At least so it appears.

I can't of course hold this individual totally responsible for this situation. My father had his part to play. In a divorce a single parent has two choices.

Put the child first above the new partner,

Or

Pick the new partner.

I love my father immensely, and I don't want to hold this against him - life is too short for that - but I do wish he had recognised the patterns and stepped in. The dismissive comments, the belittling of my achievements, the refusal to call me by my name - times when I would call the house phone and hear "your son is on the phone," instead of, "Strat's on the phone." It's all out in the open, but not readily acted upon, and when I was younger, the least that could have been done, would have been to create boundaries for me that I was unable to.

As an adult I don't need my battles fought on my behalf - but being backed in the moments that matter would go a long way.

Love, I understand, can be a blinder, but true love means stepping in when your partner is crossing a line with others - especially your kids. Whether it's blind devotion, comfort, or incompetence, is hard to determine. In my view, it leans toward the latter.

I have accepted that this dynamic has two players. The narrator stepparent choosing me as an outsider, and a biological parent that has moved further into the new tribe they are building, leaving me to pick myself up and become self-reliant. A child that they perhaps look at and think, 'he'll be fine.'

That's where the silver lining begins to appear. The person I am now is independent, resilient and indeed self-reliant. Something that seems to highlight my parents' insecurities on both sides - a fact proven in the regular pattern on Mother's and Father's day, when they make statements like; "I could have done better," and "you're doing better than I am." A glimpse of regret, perhaps presenting as shame. Deep down I believe they recognise the challenges I faced when they both brought new partners on the scene and began constructing their new tribes.

"In tribes, you can have two types of characters - Tricksters and Observers." explains my therapist, as we look to conclude my session.

The trickster is a person that within what they perceive to be an unfair system, looks to disrupt, break illusions and test boundaries - thriving on chaos, and using it to expose contradictions with a lick of humour - something I am well known for.

Observers are detached and identify patterns. They quickly develop acute understanding of complex dynamics and are able to zoom out, and step away from narratives that others may be falling for. Observers drift - and become unaffected.

I ponder on this for a second. My parents may not have known how to handle me through their divorces with their new partners - leading me to become an observer and thus an outsider in both camps. But they have done something else. They have created a new archetype that has been the spine of my entire life - driven by a need to challenge what I saw as an unfair system.

Now I can read rooms on a deeper level. I can see words between spaces. I can drift in and out of any tribe, whilst never fully integrating. I have the ability to withhold loyalty where appropriate and set stronger boundaries. I refuse to play along and be civil - there is no gain in keeping peace with those offering dogs of war by way of insecure passive aggressive comments or stories.

Further vindication comes from knowing that my pattern recognition was formed in these spaces - and now it's aiding me in breaking a cycle I've felt put upon for years.

Their behaviour isn't acceptable - but it is understandable. They could have done better, but they did their best with all that they knew - even as adults in separation, they would have had an innocence not unlike a four-year-old, just in an adult body - trying to navigate the unknown.

That said, now I have recognised these skills, it's time to stop reacting and start stepping away, creating distance with those who seek to make me feel like an outsider. If I am not welcome, then no problem, they can have their wishes fulfilled. All that I stand to lose here, is simply holding me back.

There is also a palatable irony. In trying to control the tribal narrative, they're blissfully unaware that they've created something else entirely - a more self-reliant outlaw that will take their failures as an example of behaviour to evolve away from.

It's time to set clear boundaries, learn from their mistakes and build a system within my own tribe that does better.

To achieve this, I must embrace the archetype that I have been moulded into.

A wandering watching trickster.

An alien - drifting between tribes, as if they are planets.

**Doc**