

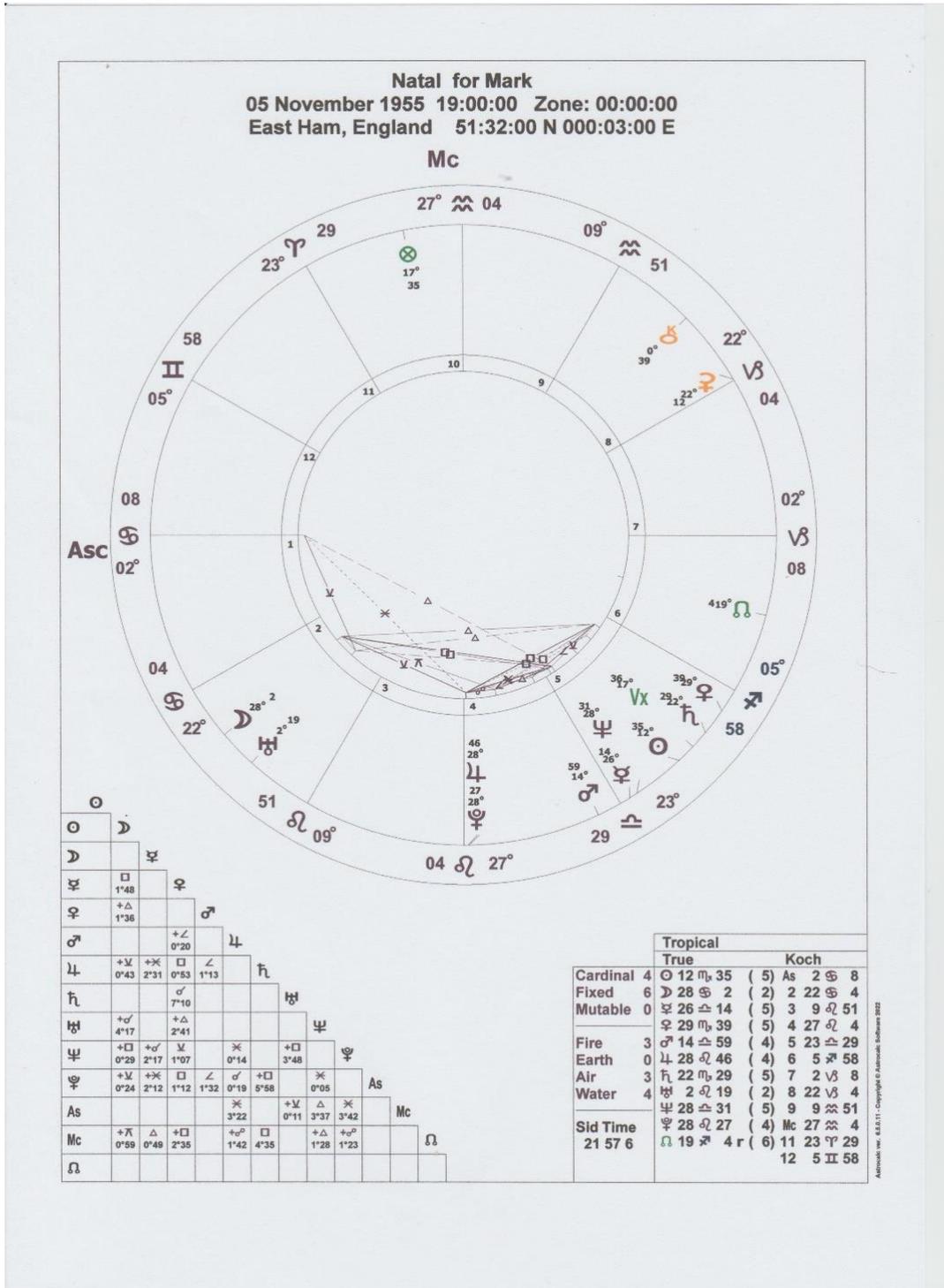
Paper 3 part 2

Mark

5 November 1955

19:00

East Ham, London UK



Mark is this man's real name, not the one he used professionally throughout his career. He was born in London's Docklands to parents from old Dockland's families. His father worked as a warehouse clerk at the Royal Victoria Docks and his mother ran her own hairdressing salon on a local shopping parade. With two steady incomes, Mark's home life was much more comfortable than those of his school friends, many from families experiencing the consequences of changes brought about by extensive wartime bombing of the London Docks, and by the move towards container transport and the seaports. By the 1970s, unemployment in Docklands was high and rising exponentially.

Mark's parents, Shelley and Francis (who disliked being called Frank), were not obviously well-matched. His mother was 10 years younger than Francis and an attractive, vivacious, fun-loving Leo, golden blonde through choice and the tricks of her trade. His father, a Scorpio, was slight, dark and closed. His range of affections did not extend far beyond Shelley and Mark. He thought a great deal, read the newspaper cover to cover each day and said little, although he was an acknowledged master of the one-line, conversation-stopping rejoinder.

'Well,' Shelley would say breezily to those offended by this, 'I ask people not to call him Frank, but they do and so he is.'

Francis never talked about his childhood and family. It was Shelley who told Mark that his grandfather had been a drunk and bully who made Francis's life hell for choosing the cissy job of a clerk rather than docker or lighterman.

In fact, it was their differences which drew his parents to each other in a very happy marriage. His mother relied upon his father's rock-like reliability, disciplined nature, and resistance to personal drama; his father relied upon his mother's ability to bring him out of himself. Mark recalls that they laughed a great deal together, and as a child, not really understanding what they were laughing about, he felt left out of what ordinarily was their close-knit team of three: Goldilocks and two of her three bears, as Shelley described them. The space for the third bear was never filled because his parents decided it was better that they keep money aside for Mark as he grew up.

So, Mark remained their only child. They lived in a neat, smart terraced house in one of Tower Hamlet's better streets, never with less than three cats, and had a life that did not change significantly in all the years he lived there. His father went to work Monday morning, then Tuesday through to Saturday morning. Monday afternoon was Mark's time to spend with Shelley whose salon was closed on Monday. On that day, each week, Shelley washed the net curtains and scrubbed the doorstep before he came home at lunchtime, and then together they did d-i-y jobs around the house which they both enjoyed. Mark went to school Monday to Friday and went to the salon with his mother on Saturday. Sunday was for outings and family visiting. Shelley had a large family living on the Thames's South bank where Mark had countless cousins. They never crossed the river to see Francis's brothers in Canning Town. Shelley had cast them all into Outer Darkness for what they had allowed her father-in-law to do to Francis.

For Mark, Saturday was the was the best day of the week. The salon was at peak busyness on a Saturday and at its epicentre was his ebullient, Leo mother. It was her brand of loyalty not to outshine her husband when she was out with him, but in the salon, she was in her element, offering hairdressing as performance art and therapy, involving all her customers in tea, biscuits, jokes, gales of laughter, and Christmas singsongs. She was loved by her clientele. On Saturdays, it was non-stop from 09:30 - 4:30. Every seat was filled, every sink in use and women having perms under every drier. At closing time, his father would come by in the car to collect them and the money from the

safe, and settle up with his aunt Carole, also a hairdresser, who came to help out. Later, Carole's daughter, Lisa, became an apprentice at the salon.

Mark's job was to sweep up the trimmings, collect up the towels, and put them in the washing machine; run errands for women trapped under the dryers and talk to customers who had to wait for their appointment. When he was older, he was allowed to make tea for those having perms and serve it with biscuits on a tray with a doily. Shelley liked a bit of camp provided it was English. Mark learned early how to listen to women and make them feel heard. It became second nature to him.

Belonging to a different generation -- and with a different kind of father from Francis -- his cousin, Lisa, took a dim view of Francis turning up at closing time to collect their hard-earned the money. One day it burst out: 'Why, when we work so hard why does Uncle Francis come and Hoover up all the money?' Mark said his mother looked at Lisa in astonishment. 'Why wouldn't he? Because he's good with figures and keeping books and I'm crap. I leave all money matters to Francis. Me and Mark want for nothing -- and you and your mum get paid on the nail as well as keep all your tips. Comprenez?'

Mark got plenty of tips, but his mother's unconditional trust in her husband set an example to Mark that was cost to him dear when he and his partner Carl, split. Carl, who had always dealt with the banking because he, too, was good with figures and keeping books, one day cleared all the money out of their business account and disappeared for a new life in a new country with a new partner. But that was still some way in the future for the boy at school in Tower Hamlets where all his close friends were girls.

His circle included the best lookers in the school. During the lunch hour, he braided and trimmed their hair, shaped their eyebrows, and heard their confidences and confessions. They were tough girls with tough lives, but they trusted him as they did not trust many men, and their fierce loyalty protected him from the bullying of the boys. Cissy or not, no boys dared lay a finger on him because of what, collectively, twelve girls sitting on a lot of anger, would do to them.

Mark knew he had had a charmed life in the two bubbles of love and security which protected him, one at home and one at school, but he did not realise until he went into business how much he had to learn the hard way about life outside those bubbles. The first thing he had to learn was that opposites might attract physically but that rarely makes the kind of loving, respectful relationship which his parents had.

What he understood well from a very young age was that he would have to move on from the East End. Around him the streets were being flattened and rebuilt and he was haunted by the realization that everything that meant anything to him and his parents, was on borrowed time. All the Royal Docks, where his father, grandfather, uncles and great uncles on both sides of the family had worked all their lives, were scheduled to close in 1981. This happened to be the year that Francis was due to retire. His father would be there to, quite literally, turn out the warehouse's office lights.

The pubs, cinemas and dance/bingo halls were being bulldozed and replaced, when eventually they were replaced, by restaurants and wine bars for the office workers who had not yet arrived. The houses in which his parents had been born and raised were demolished, his mother's in a redevelopment programme and his father's in the Luftwaffe's bombing of the Docklands's refineries, which killed his grandfather at the same time. Shelley considered the bombing of the family house with his grandfather in it the one good thing Hitler did.

To Mark, their destruction was vandalism, the worst in his view, being that done in peacetime, which stripped people of everything they cared about and which kept the community together. He knew what hardship his school friends with fathers either unemployed or facing imminent redundancy were suffering and what that brought with it. They often appeared at school on Monday morning with bruises, split lips, and smoldering anger. Then they learned that his mother's salon was scheduled to be demolished in 1977 as part of a road widening scheme. At the behest of whom? In the name of what? Everything he loved he would lose and there was nothing anyone from his world could do about it. They were powerless. Mark wanted to run from the evidence of this because it caused him such pain and cast a shadow over his life as he entered his teens. Only later did he realise the shadow was grief, and not just his own. He was picking it up out of atmosphere.

His parents were more philosophical, at least in their conversation in front of him. In her cheerful way, his mother would say things like: 'We have our memories. No one can take those away, and I have such good memories of life at home with my mum and sisters, and now with you and Dad.'

When Mark was 15, he and Francis were watching the demolition of the pub on the corner of their street which had been burned out by a fire the previous year. It was the occasion of one of his father's rare, unsolicited utterances. 'The only constant round here is change, and there's much here that's needed to go, attitudes, slums and people, and that includes many who drank in here.'

'Tina at school said the Krays used to come here. Her brother once had a drink with them.' Mark offered this tentatively. He knew his father despised the Kray twins who had recently been handed life sentences for murder. At his school, gangsters were figures of great glamour.

'I never saw them, but they may have done. It was the kind of place they liked - full of scammers and scumbags with a bent landlord, although it wasn't always like that.'

'Do you think he set it on fire?'

'Think? I know he did. I saw him with a can on the Commercial Road buying 5 litres of petrol, a couple of days before it went up in flames. Why does he need that when he gets his car filled up for free each week at Lockwoods?'

'For the insurance money?'

'Or to destroy evidence. The Krays might be inside, but their scent is still out here, the stench of people who will kill their own kind to better themselves. It's a poison in a community like this that has yet to make a future for itself. Anyway, we don't need to talk about the Krays. There's too many people talking about them now and turning them into National Treasures.'

Cautiously, Mark ventured a little further. His father did not encourage personal narrative. 'Did you ever think of leaving here, Dad?'

On this occasion Francis surprised him. 'I never thought of anything else, but I had to get some money behind me first. That's what I was doing when the War came, and my job was made a reserved occupation. I couldn't get away then even by way of the army. The War changed everyone's lives and plans. I met your mother during the War, and she wasn't ever going to leave here, was she? She's got family in just about every street still standing south of Bow. So here I am now with a son I never expected to have, still around to watch the demolition of the pub in which I celebrated the night I got my first pay packet. And I don't regret a thing,' he said, noticing Mark's anxious face. 'Not a thing. But you need to go, Son. I'll have a small amount of money to give you to help you on your way.'

'Thanks, Dad, but it's a big thing to get your head round when all your family and friends are here.'

'Well, it won't get any smaller. Go whilst you are young and still free.'

Later, when Mark was living in US and on a home on a visit to his parents, he and Francis went to view the construction of the new university on the sight of the Royal Albert Docks. Francis said again 'The only constant round here is change.' This time he shook his head and added 'There's nothing you can do about it, but you don't have to like it, and I don't.' What does a university offer to workers who've lost their livelihood? It's an insult.' It was to be the last time he saw his father.

When Mark left school, he did a hairdressing course at the local technical college. Francis had no issue with his only son being a women's hairdresser. He knew what money was in it. If his father realized, he was gay, he never said anything. Mark mentioned this once to his mother after his Francis had died.

'Well', said Shelley, sensibly, 'It's not like there was anything to negotiate, was there? Of course, he knew. There wasn't much got passed your father.'

'Did he mind?'

'Your father had his own mind. He didn't care what people thought, especially those round here. We agreed that it was far better to be your way than a caveman like the men in his family across the River.'

Mark left London for New York when he was 20, having completed a hairdressing training from which he graduated with distinction. He went on to win every competition he entered because a salon was a home away from home for him in which he felt relaxed and confident, and this helped his clients feel the same.

Doors just kept opening for him. After a period of working in two big-name West End salons, he, at last, escaped London when he was offered a job in Manhattan working for one of the major fashion houses, getting models' hair ready for the catwalk. He was only 21, but he already a reputation as a soother of over-wrought, skittish women, and he was in great demand.

He changed track professionally some years later when he met Carl who was another stylist, some years older than he. They moved to Los Angeles and opened an upmarket salon which was very successful over a period of 3 years and was still building when Carl left with all the money. Mark stayed on with very little to live on and tried to salvage something from the situation, but his heart was no longer in it. He preferred working with a partner.

He was upset and his pride was dented by Carl's defection, but it did not cut him as deeply as he expected it would, because nothing about his life in the US felt like real life. He had left that behind in England, because he assumed that was the best way to prevent more blows on the bruise.

His father died suddenly in the late 1980s and he returned to England for the funeral. It was a bleak time for him because he had loved his father, deeply if undemonstratively. He would have stayed on if he had felt needed, but Lisa was now in charge. She had found a flat in a rather upmarket new block by the waterside which Shelley and Lisa's mum, also a widow, could afford if they sold their two properties. His mother agreed with alacrity. She was still a comparatively young woman but had no intention of re-marrying. No one could replace Francis. She had her memories to enjoy, and she would appreciate a nice view of the Riverside, 'where she could watch the sun go down and think of him and all the good times they had had.'

After that, the family home was sold very quickly. Mark felt as if more ground was being cut from under his feet. And so, he returned to Los Angeles.

His next business partner was a female friend who became his wife, but they were never more than friends and business partners. Both had affairs, both dated men. Stephanie was a very astute entrepreneur who quickly developed a range of natural, cruelty-free, hair products at just the right time.

For twenty years, Mark was more a well-being guru than hairdresser, and he did a lot of magazine and TV interviews in support of their products and a better quality of life. They were very well received. He and Stephanie made a name for themselves and a fortune, but when it came to a split because Stephanie wanted a proper marriage 'before she was too old to enjoy it', they sold the company. Mark was entitled only to a proportional share of the capital which he had had to put into the company at its formation and which after the Carl defection had been very little. The bulk had come from Stephanie.

They parted friends and he walked away, back to New York with a good sum of money, but what he was leaving behind represented 80 percent of the fortune they had made together. Once again, he had lost out. Mark tried not to be sour about it because, after all, it was what he and she had agreed at the outset, and now he had his freedom . . . if he could find anything to do with it.

He seriously considered returning to England at this point but then he met Paul. Paul made documentaries and expensive promotional videos for celebrities who wanted to improve their image by being filmed doing good works. Paul was some years younger than Mark but had a maturity and sobriety which Mark found deeply attractive. Paul had his father's dislike of personal drama, a quality which he had come to realise was both unknown and unappreciated in Los Angeles. In fact, there was much about Paul which reminded Mark of his father, including the ability to hear a thing out without interrupting and then deliver a minimally worded response which shut down the issue for all time. He did so on the occasion when Mark was expressing concern about the fact that he really did not have the kind of financial resources to be living in upper Manhattan as Paul was proposing.

Paul heard him out and then said, 'I didn't invite you to live with me so that you can share the bills. I can pay those myself and have done so for the past 10 years. I asked you because I love you – except when you start up with this kind of anal English stuff.'

So, Mark moved in with Paul and his two Pomeranians, Claudia and Christophe, which, having no other work, he walked every day in Central Park. He certainly saw more of them than he did of Paul who was always travelling. But the relationship was good. Neither had any doubts about the other's fidelity, and Claudia and Christophe no longer had to be walked by professional dog walkers 'at \$200 a poop.' They were comfortable with each other, but Mark, increasingly, was not comfortable with himself.

When he returned to New York, he felt he had had it with fashion and glamour; then he began to feel he had had it with New York as well.

At about that time, his mother died of the heart condition which had taken her mother and two of her sisters. When he returned to England for the funeral, he didn't ask Paul to accompany him because he knew how much he disliked London. His aunt said his mother had brightened up the lives of everyone in the ward whilst she was dying and even helped them fix their hair for as long as she could. Mark didn't doubt it. The pain he felt was terrible.

'Why didn't you tell me sooner she was so ill?'

'She didn't want us to. She wanted us to be able to tell you she had had the op and it went fine – and if it didn't, then she'd be with your dad all the sooner, and you would understand perfectly what that meant to her. Win win! That was your mum, always. Even during the War, she turned air raids into an opportunity for a singsong in the shelter. I always thought she knew something different from the rest of us. Even as a small girl she would say things like 'Life's bigger than us, Carole. We got to stay on the right side of it.'

When he returned to New York, Paul said he had not really returned. Mark knew this was true, but he didn't know what to do about it.

It was Paul who suggested that he should go back 'and write it all out. Become a writer now rather than a hairdresser. You've done that now. Do something else. Write your memoirs or whatever. Do something. See if you can get to the bottom of this pain that you have always been on the run from.' He then said something that gave Mark a big clue: 'Perhaps it's part of an acknowledged part of yourself stifled by your staying loyal to things and people who have gone. Seems to me that a good childhood can be a bit of a curse. You're freer now your mum's gone.'

So, Mark rented a flat for 3 months in what once was the heart of Docklands and returned to those of his family and friends still living in Docklands. He did a lot of listening and was introduced as Uncle Mark from New York to a bewildering array of ethnically mixed babies and children. He was made very welcome but it was no longer a world he recognized or felt a part of.

That autumn, three years ago now, was when he first came to see me. Could I explain what he was doing? He had left a partner whom he loved, and who loved him to return to live amongst ghosts. Why? Had he got some kind of death wish? Professionally this was a challenge for me and one that has continued through the years by correspondence.

When Mark returned to the US for Christmas at the end of his 3 months in London, he was not at all sure how well he and Paul would pick up. Christophe had died whilst he was away, Claudia was looking very old and Paul had grown a big black beard. But it took returning to realise that something else about Paul had changed: he was quieter, more thoughtful and less impatient with Mark.

After he had been back some days and, unusually, had been pressed by Paul to recount in detail his experiences in London, Paul told Mark that he had missed his calming presence so much that he had done a bit of research and found old footage of the TV interviews and talks that Mark had given back in the Stephanie Years. He reported that it had 'blown him away. You have such a gift with people. You talk to them like you're really interested in them, and they open up like flowers in sunlight!'

'Well, it's not difficult. Mostly I am interested in them'

'We should make a documentary about Docklands in which you talk to the different generations there about their thoughts and expectations now. I've been working out the figures and we will go when Claudia pegs out. What do you say?'

'You don't like London.'

'I don't like many of the places I work in, but then, it's the project which counts not the place. This project could work.'

Mark was touched by Paul's gesture. It would be the first thing they had undertaken together, but he was unhappy about the idea from the very beginning. He had left the East End nearly 30 years ago, and for it to be the centrefold of a documentary felt wrong. Of what relevance was he to the future of Docklands? It no longer had a meaningful place in his life, and without that his involvement seemed intrusive, patronizing, even exploitative. It was taking, not giving. If he had realized one thing during that autumn in England, it was that he had indeed moved on. If Manhattan did not feel like home, it was still where he chose to be with Paul, and perhaps the real problem was that he had never yet given himself permission to let it feel like home. Paul was clearly disappointed that they would not go ahead but he took his point and didn't try to persuade him although Mark knows he is still thinking about it, as he is himself. Even if they have not found the right angle yet, he hopes that they might eventually. He very much wants to give something back to the place where he grew up, and regrets that he no longer has the kind of money that would have enabled him to set up some foundation for local young people to improve their prospects. But he has made a promise to himself which he has shared with me: if the time should ever come that he and Paul part, for whatever reason, he will not hang around in the US. He will return home.

Mark's book is coming on. It is not a nostalgic memoir – it was never going to be that -- so much as an exploration of the role of identity, of where we place memory, and where we move on, in order to stay on the right side of Life.

To an Astrologer, this means moving off the Moon into the Sun.