

DADDY'S GIRL

Despite *nannu*'s absence, mum is a daddy's girl. She has countless memories of her father that brighten her eyes. Throughout my childhood, while other kids were read storybooks, I was told stories about him. One of my favourites is 'The Whistler'.

'Your *nannu* loved to whistle.' She sighs, each time she tells the story.

'Like a chattering bird, he whistled everywhere he went. And like the Pied Piper, people followed him; not because he had a delightful voice but to catch his joy. Your *nannu* was contagious. Always happy and always whistling. The people in Malta called him *Sufarel*, Whistler, as a mocking reminder of his habit'.

While my responses to this story have changed throughout the years – from, "What does 'chattering' mean?" to "Naw, that's beautiful, mum." - hers have stayed the same. She smiles, tears up and giggles in the same parts of the story every time she tells it.

Mum was born on the islands of Malta. She grew up surrounded by the sea and by 365 churches, 'one for every day of the year,' she would joke. There was a cheeky innocence in the times. She would often sneak out to the park with her baby sister when she should have been bathing her. Laughter was the language of teenagers. They braved no-nonsense parents and secretly disobeyed them for a short play in the sun and a few giggles. Then mum migrated to Australia with her family at aged 17.

Melbourne was different in 1964. The outer west, where she lived, was underwhelming. Apart from the modest houses with outside portable toilets and corner milk bars, there were unmade roads and isolation. At least other Maltese families in the neighborhood looked familiar, eyes dripping with homesickness like hers. She missed stepping outside of her house in Malta to a street filled with relatives; walking to the beach; freedom. Here, she couldn't walk anywhere but to the shop for milk. Any form of entertainment was all the way into Melbourne city

which was an outrageous distance for someone who came from a country that measures 316 square kilometers. Then she met my dad, who she knew in Malta, and her new life was a little happier.

When I had children, I often visited mum and dad. On this day, mum looked like she had been crying.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked, cradling the baby.

‘Everything is so good’ she laughed. ‘I have a photo’ she cried. I have a photo of him when he was small,’ she laughed and cried at the same time. ‘Your *nannu*’s stepsister gave it to me’. Her voice quivered. She hurried to her kitchen draw to get the photo. Her eyes welled again, and her hand shook while she held the photo toward me.

She looks like him.

My mother’s childhood wasn’t easy, but her father’s absence was the most difficult. What made this harder was his mysterious ancestry. It was complicated, as she found out through her investigation.

His conception was loveless; a result of authority vomiting abuse of power. His mother was taken without permission and conceived him. Then, one unextraordinary afternoon, 50 years later, his stepsister shared some news that would both comfort and disturb my mother.

‘Why this day?’ Mum asked herself as she listened.

She had been endlessly searching for information for years and by now knew that her dad was likely born from a rape. She learnt that his mother gave him up for adoption at birth. In those days in Malta, there was no official paperwork either. The parish priest was the only person that documented adoptions. To make matters more complicated, *nannu*’s first adopted mother was believed to have died and so he was adopted a second time. This is why the priest may have lost track of this particular baby. He only had records of the Christening which stated the

mother's name, who could either be *nannu*'s birth mother or one of his adopted mothers'. Father stated 'unknown'.

Now she was listening attentively to her father's sister who was telling her a story for the first time.

'I was about 14, cooking in the kitchen when I heard the knock. I heard mum tell the lady at the door that he was gone'.

'Why didn't she tell the lady at the door about us?' mum's inner voice screamed loud enough to shatter her insides, but her outer voice was soft. 'It was probably my *nanna* looking for her son'.

Even after years of dead-ends, mum continued to search for her father's blood line until her last visit to Malta in 2015. She went again to the officials but there was no trace of her father. Her desire to find any living member of her dad's family has been great but her search has always been mindful of the complication and considerate of upsetting others. Consequently, she never attempted to go to the street and knock on house doors.

'If God wants me to know, I will,' she said many times.

In the meantime, she continues to tell stories of her dad's antics and personality, now to her grandchildren too, perhaps as some consolation for the stories that she cannot tell.

Though mum spared me the details of her childhood until she felt that I could relate. Even when she did tell me, she didn't tell me all at once. She gave me snippets of her life in Malta over a cup of tea, while we were in the car together or hanging the washing on the line. For when I was young, I thought the man who lived with my *nanna* was my *nannu*. Even though I wondered why mum called him by his first name; Maltese children didn't ask these types of questions. She respected him. I saw that too. Now, through mum's carefully chosen words I was learning that he was not my mum's dad at all, and he was never married to my

nanna. They never wed because he had been married before and in the 1940's, Malta did not believe in divorce.

There's no denying mum had a difficult childhood. Maltese parents refused to allow their children to play with mum because her mother, as they saw it, lived with a married man. It was a scandal and mum inherited the scorn. She was bullied and made fun of, but she was not an easy target. She fought back and defended her mother's honour with the same chivalry that in fairy tales comes riding on a white horse. But her life was no fairytale, and neither was her mother's. Even today, mum cannot mention my *nanna* in conversation without acknowledging her virtues. The virtue of resilience was one of my *nanna*'s greatest. At the age of 22 she lost her 23-year-old husband to kidney disease leaving her with an 18-month-old baby boy to raise alone, and 8 months pregnant with my mum.

This is no textbook happy ending. Mum never met her father. He died before she was born. Yet, she has loved him every day of her life. My *nanna* was not perfect; and who *is* perfect? Though she believed in God and prayed daily. With His help she managed to give her daughter a perfect gift - descriptive, continuous, emotive accounts of her husband's character which gave her child a dad that she has loved with all her heart. My *nannu* did not have a beautiful beginning. He did not have the gift of a long life or the privilege of seeing his kids grow up, becoming a grandfather, growing old, but he does have the blessing of being adored by his daughter; a daughter that he was unable to touch in life but is able to touch so deeply from heaven that even today at 72, she is a daddy's girl.