

NEVER ON SUNDAY

by Anastasia Handley

Sunday was always the worst day in our house. With the exception of the occasional good summer, during my youth, most Sundays were dismal and grey, usually marked by unstoppable rain or drizzle. We usually had a Sunday roast around three o'clock, after we were back from church. It was also the only day of the week when we all had dinner together as a family. It was the long awkward silences that I remember sitting through at the table during tea. After dinner, my father sat in a dark sofa chair in front of the telly and commanded my mother with his usual proverbial utterance, "Make me a coffee." It was always a Greek coffee, the way he always liked it — bitter and strong, with grit at the bottom of the cup.

My father always woke up very early during the week even on Saturdays, and he was out the house by 6am. My mother always complained, "Why do you work so hard, we almost have enough money for a down payment.."

"Almost is not good enough. Besides, what else is there to do?"

My father used to poke fun at Uncle Stelios, whom worked as a painter and decorator and retired after his fiftieth birthday. "He retired," my father said, "but what does he do? He goes to peoples houses all day!"

On Saturdays during term time, my siblings and I attended Greek school in the hall at St. George's church in Kingston which was immediately followed by Greek dancing lessons. I hated Greek music and Greek Dancing when I was a child. I always rebelled, but my parents provided the same reply,

“You are going! How will you dance at your wedding when you get married?”

For me, Greek dancing was a arduous task. Unlike my sister and brother, I lacked coordination and rhythm. The dance teacher always placed me between Anthi Bassas and Vikki Marinos, whom were both in the year above me. When we danced in a circular motion, and the momentum in the music would pick up - requiring us to dance faster to keep up with the tempo, they moved faster than the music called for and yanked me by the arm dragging me along as I tried to catch my breath. As the teacher turned around to change the tape in the cassette recorder, Anthi would raise her foot and quash my toes with her heel. Other torturous acts included; tripping me up and being simultaneously crushed in the middle from both directions by Anthi and Vikki.

We didn't attend church on Sundays during the summer months as often as we did during the school term. With my father working from Monday to Saturday in his shop, we never went abroad for a holiday. We usually visited my Uncle Perry and his wife Louise in Bournemouth. Escaping from the small cramped flat in Kingston- they lived in a large detached home that Aunt Louise inherited from her parents.

One Sunday morning on our way to Bournemouth, my father drove through the town centre and parked outside the Mediterranean café and went inside to see the owner, Nick Sideris. We sat in our Vauxhall estate, and through the shop window, we watched dad's abrupt and forthcoming gestures move with intensity, his jaw was forward, his chest leaned outward as he fought with Dora, Nick's wife. After ten minutes, my father came out, his face proclaimed anger and disgust.

He came into the car and said, "People buy fish and they just don't want to pay."

"Why, what happened?" my mother asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said.

I stared out the car window towards the sun, which danced on the horizon as we drove along the motorways smooth incline and decline elevations heading towards the coast. Sundays at Uncle Perry's house was the closest thing to Greece. Inside his kitchen he had several pictures of the white-washed houses with blue-trimmed windows photographed. The taste of charcoaled steaks and lamb, under the hot sun, by the sea side. The smell of fresh oregano that he kept in an old Nescafé jar, once opened - the fragrant odour would permeate throughout the back garden. That was the last time my father ever supplied the Mediterranean café with fish, and the last Sunday that we went anywhere together as a family. Since that day, we all led separate lives: my father began to open his shop on Sundays, my brother got into football, my sister replaced us with her friends. My mother still played the supportive role and spent her free time volunteering within St. George's Church, and I became a book worm.

My father came home early on a Sunday afternoon, the summer heat meant slow business. As my mother prepared Sunday lunch, a fragrant and radiant smell of mint travelled throughout the house. I went downstairs in the kitchen and my mother had prepared a minced lamb on skewers and a moussaka Dad stared at the telly, through our open plan living area whilst we ate our dinner at the table. A segment of local and international news had just

finished and then an announcer said, “Now for our feature presentation, *Never on Sunday*, starring Melina Mercouri and Jules Dassin.”

I father dropped his fork, his dark eyes widened with excitement.

“You’ve seen this movie?” I asked.

“One of the greatest,” he said, staring at the television screen.

“When this film opened, dad and I had just married and moved to England,” my mother enthused. “It was playing at the Apollo in London. I was a housekeeper for the Astor family..”

“Shhh! . . . keep quiet,” my father cautioned, “the film is starting.”

My father sat up with eagerness as the beautiful black and white imagery appeared accompanied by the sound of a lovely bouzouki. One early scene of Jules Dassin walking into a Greek café, watching Greeks sway their arms gently back and forth and snap their fingers- immersed in the melody. The most intoxicating moment in the film came when Melina Mercouri began to sing “*Ta Paedia tou Piraeus*”(The Children of Piraeus). The husky voiced thespian transcended energy and passion. She stood up to dance, flailing her arms in the air with a smooth intensity, her body swayed from side to side with a “watery” flow, like a dove gliding above the Greek sea shore.

My father began to sing and then he sprang to his feet and began to dance in a straight line like Zorba the Greek. I was awestruck. He never danced when we went to weddings and baptisms. My mother got up and joined him, my brother and my sister did as well. Their arms stretched out, entwined, their hands rested on a shoulder for support.

“Come on Anastasia,” my father urged.

“I can’t dance.” I paused momentarily, then I added, “I’m not- people say I’m not very good at it.”

“I don’t believe that,” he said.

“Ena, ke thio, ke tria, ke tessera paedia”. Melina sang for a love of her country and people amidst the harmonic bouzouki. I stood between my parents. My father’s big strong heavy arm rested on my shoulder, I felt his pulse on my arm- steady and smooth. My sister broke away from the dance, with her hand on the telly’s remote control, she blasted the volume and rejoined the dance. The stirring music filled our tiny front room with a haunting melody that travelled up the spiral staircase, echoing the sharp metallic sounds of the bouzouki, creating an atmosphere of euphoria as our voices matched the volume on the telly. My father began to dance solo, spinning and snapping his fingers, he picked up a bottle of Ouzo, which sat on a nearby table and poured a shot in a glass. “This song hit music charts all over the world. It’s the only Greek song that has ever won an Academy Award,” my father beamed with enamoured pride, gulping down another shot as he spun around snapping his fingers. Mercouri’s husky voice transcended energy and passion and the lyrics she sang expressed many emotions; desires, hopes, dreams, and fears of her life in the Piraeus, I looked at my father as he stood alone in the centre of our front room with his eyes closed, swaying his head softly to the music.

I understood what this song meant for my father and mother- their generation inherited tragedy and political unrest. They survived the Second World War and the civil war which quickly followed — then my parents married in 1960, leaving Greece to sink deeper into an undemocratic abyss

with a military coup and dictatorship throughout the 1970's. That day in our living room, we connected as a family where the gap between my parents' life of poverty, war, dictatorship, and our life growing up and fitting here in England drew closer.
