

Most children, and in particular most boys,

like to think that their mother is different from other mothers. Not necessarily better, just in some way *special*. I didn't fully appreciate that my mother was different until I went to my first proper school, tucked away on the south coast of England.

The majority of my schoolmates were from a stolidly English or Anglo-Irish background, the main factor in common being our Catholicism. Their fathers were usually stiff-backed and formal, their mothers more often than not prim, cool and emotionally distant. By contrast, my mother's Latin temperament and physicality made her, and the few others like her, exotic birds indeed. One friend of mine also had an Italian mother; another was of French parentage; two others – brothers – were Nigerian. It was no surprise that my mother gravitated towards them.

My mother's classic Mediterranean looks – dark hair, hazel eyes – the way she dressed, her vivacity and warmth and the directness of her approach to people, all set her apart and drew varied reactions from the parents she met. Most were charmed and many evinced admiration; unfortunately there were always a few who were reserved and even suspicious. This was nothing new for my mother: as an army wife she had occasionally encountered bigotry and distrust from the British wives of other officers, particularly when she first arrived in England soon after the Second World War. (Not only was she a foreigner, but as an Italian she was a former 'enemy'). Happily most people, even then, were captivated by her personality.

The irony is that my mother was always a tremendous Anglophile. She loved the British, their traditions and their way of life. The one thing she could never master however, was the art of *sang*

froid, the emotional detachment which is, outwardly at least, one of the defining traits of that great island people. I remember some of my school friends telling me that they wished their mothers would hug them and show them the affection that my mother demonstrated to me.

Ours was a Mediterranean household in a traditional English setting. By the time I was born we had settled in London and our lifestyle was as multicultural as the capital was becoming in the early 1960s. My sisters and I had a Spanish nanny, and for a while an Indian ayah. Our diet was wonderfully varied – Italian, Spanish, French, Moroccan dishes, as well as Indian and Chinese. Among her many accomplishments my mother was a very good cook. Family meal times were convivial, relaxed, with little of the formality of English custom beyond an expectation of good manners. Laughter and warmth were the norm, something I appreciated all the more when noting the contrast with my school life.

For me, and I suspect for my sisters, the difference between our parents – our father's quiet reserve overlying a mischievous humour, countered by our mother's temperamental exuberance – was a challenge, but also a great benefit and a source of pride. Like two complementary gravitational poles our parents' influences kept my sisters and I happily balanced in the middle, though of course we drew traits or inherited temperaments in different measures from each parent. There is no doubt, however, that my mother's influence pervaded everything. Above all she brought colour and a certain glamour to our lives.

In some respects my mother was as Mediterranean as it is possible to be. She had strong views on families, marriage and grandchildren and was orthodox in her religious beliefs. (I've often heard it said that Italian mothers and Jewish mothers have a lot in common and I think there is something to it.)

A devout Catholic, my mother grew up at a time when the Church still had enormous influence over the lives of the faithful and certain religious anachronisms still abounded. I have a Papal Indulgence given to my grandparents which absolves them and their children from any sins they might have committed, or might in future commit. It was only my even more devout Spanish grandmother, Ascension Maro, who took any real comfort from it; my mother viewed it as a relic, yet it never interfered with her fundamental beliefs.

My mother was born Marcella Renata di Borghetti in Ancona and educated there and in Bologna, where she received a classical training in art. This included visits to a mortuary where



she and her classmates saw bodies stripped of their skin. A small sketchbook of my mother's, which she carried with her everywhere when she was 14 or 15, contains sketches of relatives and friends. These show that she was already developing into an accomplished draughtsman. Her particular passion, even then, was costume design and early photographs show her wearing costumes and striking poses which demonstrate a flair for the dramatic. In the one on page 205, taken when she was about 13, she is wearing a traditional Spanish costume for a school production. No doubt she inherited her theatricality from her mother who had been an opera singer.

Other photos, taken when my mother was in her late teens, appear to be studio poses, made it seems with a view to promoting a career on stage or in film. Some of the photos are really 'glamour shots', taken for fun and quite probably to give to boyfriends. Often, though still a teenager, my mother appears with a cigarette in hand, the picture of cool sophistication.

As it happens my mother did briefly appear in one film, the 1951 epic *Quo Vadis*. When visiting a relative who was working on the film at Cinnecittà my mother was asked if she would like to be one of the Christians thrown to the lions. Inevitably she said yes and duly found herself walking into the arena to face martyrdom. Alongside her on the lions' menu was a rising star of the screen (though not credited in this role), Elizabeth Taylor. Also in the film and also uncredited was another movie icon in the making, the then relatively unknown Sophia Loren.

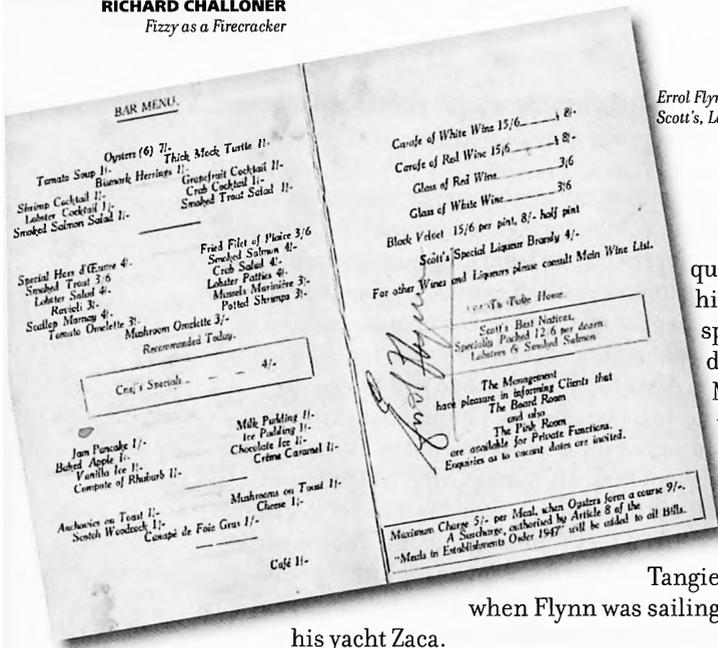
In addition to this Mediterranean flair and artistic talent my mother was a keen swimmer and diver, becoming an Italian junior freestyle swimming champion. She also had a natural ability with languages. Both she and my uncle could speak four languages fluently (Italian, Spanish, French and English), by the time they were in their mid-teens. She was always spirited and adventurous, sometimes too much so. During the German occupation of Italy in the Second World War she often ventured out when she should have been safely indoors, her curiosity leading her to see some dreadful sights and come close to losing her life in an American bombing raid. On another occasion she and my Uncle Elios, still in their late teens, decided to fulfil a promise and made a pilgrimage on foot from Ancona to a shrine in Spoleto some 80 miles away. They had obtained a pass from the German authorities in Ancona, but it in no way guaranteed their

safety between the two cities. It took them several days to walk there and back, but they survived.

Courage was something my mother never lacked and learned early. When she was a child during the Spanish Civil War she and her family had to flee for their lives from Communists in Bilbao, where my grandfather Eugenio was Italian consul. During the Second World War my grandfather spent much of the German occupation in hiding from the Gestapo, who wanted him for helping Jewish friends and Allied airmen escape. After the Germans had withdrawn my grandfather emerged, only to be targeted by Communist partisans. They turned up one day, dragged my grandfather out of the house and put him against a wall to shoot him. My mother, who had followed them out and was still just 19, immediately stood in front of her father and told the Communists that if they wanted to kill him they would have to kill her first. They would have done so, but as luck – or fate – would have it, at that moment an Allied patrol arrived commanded by a New Zealand RAF officer my grandfather had saved from the Germans. He had come back to thank the family and his timing could not have been better.

This, then, was the vibrant young woman my father met and took on as his interpreter when he was appointed Town Major of Ancona/Falconara in the summer of 1945. In February 1946 they were married and a new, exciting life began for my mother. She enjoyed good company, conversation and dancing and loved being the glamorous Latin wife of a dashing British officer. In so many photographs taken over the following years my mother is seen surrounded by men, none of whom is my father. Content either to take the photographs or remain quietly in the background, my father let his wife enjoy the platonic adoration of his male friends and colleagues, no doubt with considerable pride.

In 1947 my mother came to England for the first time, alone, as my father had to stay on in Italy. With typical verve this young Mediterranean bride, suntanned, pretty and vivacious, took on England with its post-war austerity and rationing - and thrived. Flouting convention, she often went about bare legged, drawing disapproving glances from stocking-clad English women. One day, while having lunch at Scott's in Mayfair, she met Errol Flynn with his second wife Nora Eddington. Flynn was as charming and rakish as ever and, taken by my mother's Latin looks and quick intelligence,



Errol Flynn's signature on a menu from Scott's, London, 1947.

quickly asked her to join him and his wife. They spent the rest of the day together, visiting Madame Tussauds, taking tea at the Ritz and finally dinner somewhere in the West End. They would meet again in

Tangiers a few years later, when Flynn was sailing the Mediterranean on his yacht Zaca.

Army life suited my mother. Wherever my father was posted, assuming she could go with him, she enjoyed hosting parties, painting and working on amateur dramatic productions. In Gibraltar my mother designed the costumes and sets for various productions, including one of *Henry V* for which she received excellent reviews in the local press. Unfortunately the union stranglehold on theatre work meant that she was unable to get work as a costume designer in Britain when she, my father and my two sisters finally returned to England.

Not long after I was born my father left the army and the family settled down in London. My mother began a successful career as an interpreter and translator, but there was always time for me. Inevitably there must have been differences between the young mother who my two older sisters knew and the version I came to know growing up; certain things never changed however, including my mother's curiosity, her enthusiasm for learning and her encyclopaedic mind.

Even today debate continues about education in Britain compared with the Continent, especially when it comes to the study of other cultures and languages, in which our European cousins still seem to outstrip us. How lucky, then, were my sisters and I to have a mother with such an extensive education and breadth of knowledge to pass on to us. While holidays, of course, included time on the beach, many days were spent visiting Roman remains, castles, museums and

ltar, 1952.



places of historic interest wherever we happened to be. Best of all, in our mother we had the perfect guide. I recall occasions listening to my mother while she explained the background and history of artefacts in museums only to glance about me and find a number of people gathered around us, all gripped by my mother's discourse.

Through our mother my sisters and I developed an interest in people, and in the diversity of their backgrounds and cultures, which has always brought us pleasure and made our lives richer. We learned to keep an open mind, embrace new experiences and appreciate the richness of life. My father once said to me of my mother, "she changed me, made me a better person." By this he meant that she brought him a broader perspective and a wider emotional life than he might otherwise have had. In the same way I can say that having a Mediterranean mother has broadened my personality, though an underlying exuberance is usually kept in check by a veneer of English reserve.

One thing I have inherited from my mother is a dislike of officiousness and authoritarianism, although I cannot claim to have her panache for bending the rules. A typical example of this is an incident that occurred when she and I were shopping in a certain well-known department store in Central London.

It was early in the 1970s – I was about ten years old at the time – and we had our dog, a Maltese Terrier called Fufi, with us. There was a particular department my mother wished to visit and the quickest route to it was through the food hall. Naturally, since we had our dog with us the food hall was out of bounds and I assumed that we would take the long way round. My mother would have none of that, however; she promptly picked Fufi up, draped him round her neck as if he were a fur collar and announced that we were going through the food hall. I was horrified and protested that we would get into trouble. I had visions of us being ejected from the store and told never to darken its doors again. "Nonsense," my mother exclaimed and sailed into the food hall with me lurking some way behind just in case.

Half way through, a male member of staff stepped forward and stopped my mother. "Excuse me, Madam," he said, "I'm afraid we don't allow dogs in the food hall."

My mother gave him a look of utter astonishment and replied "Dog, what dog?"

At which the gentleman nodded towards Fufi.

Incredibly Fufi had remained completely still the whole time, almost as if it was an everyday occurrence for him, and having long white hair it was difficult to tell which end was which.

“This isn’t a dog, it’s a fur collar,” my mother exclaimed indignantly.

At this point I was prepared to make a run for it, but then I noticed that the man, having overcome his initial surprise, was struggling not to laugh. He simply nodded, gestured with a hand and said, “In that case, Madam, do go on.” Clearly he had never had an encounter like this before.

“You see,” my mother said as we reached the other end of the hall, “no problem.”

I was just relieved to have made it through, especially as I saw Fufi’s head move and his nose start to twitch at all the inviting smells.

Another incident illustrating my mother’s *laissez-faire* attitude to regulations as well as her ingenuity occurred before I was born, at a time when my parents and sisters were living in Gibraltar. They would come back to England every so often by car, usually laden with goodies for family and friends. On this occasion the car was filled with much more than the permitted amount of alcohol and other goods and my father was concerned about passing through customs. As usual my mother was undaunted and conceived a suitably cunning plan. Once they were on board the cross-Channel ferry she unwrapped a selection of particularly aromatic cheeses and locked the car.

By the time the ferry docked in England the car reeked of cheese and my sisters begged to have the windows opened – a request my mother adamantly refused. When the moment arrived and the unsuspecting customs officer stuck his head in the car window to ask if there was anything to declare, he was assailed by a most noxious odour and, just as my mother had anticipated, waved the car through.

My mother’s mischievous streak and her linguistic pranks were often the source of great amusement for her friends and colleagues when working as an interpreter at events such as the Royal Agricultural Show and the Boat Show. (She was almost unique amongst the interpreters in her ability to do simultaneous technical translations in four different languages). Sometimes my mother would make a play on the similarity of sounds between Japanese and Italian phraseology. There would be calls on the public address system for mysterious Japanese gentlemen, such as ‘Mr Non Surino Sui Muri’ which, especially when spoken quickly, does sound

Japanese. However, as those who spoke Italian knew, it translates into English as 'Mr Do Not Urinate On the Walls'! Some of the names were even more inventive and ruder still, much in the earthy style of classical Roman humour.

I think it is fair to say that no one who met my mother was likely to forget her. Whatever she chose to do, whether it was talking politics, exploring caves, crawling into Etruscan tombs (which she did while pregnant with me) or entertaining friends, Marcella acted with passion and charm.

With her accustomed flair my mother died on Bastille Day, July 14 2008, assuring that her passing will be forever marked by fireworks and festivities. Shortly after I contacted an old family friend to tell him the sad news; his memories of her were vivid and delightful and he captured her essence quite beautifully and appropriately when he described her as being "fizzy as a firecracker." I don't think one can get more Mediterranean than that.

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