

In praise of Greek grandmas

The day my paternal grandfather died, I was sick in bed, having managed to score a day off school. I don't think I was really ill — I had exaggerated my sniffles and my coughs and had used all my eight-year-old wiles to convince my father that it would be best to err on the side of caution and let me stay at home. My brother, as he headed off sulkily to school that morning, gave me a foul look: he certainly was not convinced. Mum was, fortunately, already at work: she would not have fallen for my performance either. But my father always indulged us. Once the small hand on the clock passed nine and I knew the school bell would have been rung, my coughing and sneezing magically disappeared. A day of reading and playing in the backyard lay ahead.

Sometime in the early afternoon, when I was tucked up in bed after lunch, there was a knock on the door. It was a neighbour whom we always referred to as the Kali Gria, the Good Crone, an elderly Scottish woman who must have been born ancient. "Quick, quick," she was calling out. "George, you have a phone call from Greece." When Dad returned from her house, I knew from the weariness and sadness in his face that something momentous had happened. I sank under the blankets, already scared of what was coming. Dad sat next to me on the bed and said, "Christo, your papou — my father — has just died." It was his tears that terrified me — I hadn't seen my father cry before. I started howling, and he held me until I stopped; soothed me, until I was still. What shocks me now is that in the afternoon when Mum came home, he told her the news and then put on his overalls and went to begin his afternoon shift at work. At midnight, when he returned, with the house full of his friends and the little family he had in Australia, the grieving could begin.

I never met either of my grandfathers. My maternal papou had died when I was a toddler. It still remains a wounding regret of my mother's that she never had a chance to go back home to see him on his deathbed. But with a small child and my newly born brother, there were neither means nor opportunity for her to return. We have become so jaded with the ubiquity of air travel that we are apt to forget just how difficult, how expensive, how magical it once seemed. Dad did return to Greece to bury his father. He has returned once more, to bury his mother. After that visit, he said to me: "That's it, no more. It has finished. Greece doesn't exist for me any more."

I am grateful that I did have an opportunity to meet my grandmothers — once when I visited as a boy in 1975 and then again as a young adult in 1990. But even those encounters were made difficult by the limitations of my Greek and the overwhelming chasm of experience that separated me, a privileged child of the developed world, and those two women, each born on the eve of the 20th century in a peasant eastern Mediterranean world that was to be torn apart by two Balkan wars, two world wars, an occupation, two dictatorships and a civil war.

I remember sitting in a kitchen in Athens with my maternal grandmother, who was crying, wanting to know why her daughter had visited her only once in all the time she had been a migrant in Australia. I tried to explain the distances involved, the expense. Uncle Mitso, who was sitting with us, took me aside and explained that once in the early '70s he was driving his mother from the village to Athens when they came to a fork in the road. My giagia asked, "Mitso, if we turn left instead of right, can we go and visit Georgia in Australia?"

"You have to remember, Christo," my uncle said to me, "this is a woman born in a time when women were doomed to illiteracy and the shadows. Your giagia can't even read a map. And look at you, you are now a university student, you want to be a writer. You don't know how proud that makes us. But if you ever forget where you come from, fa se sfxo [I will slaughter you]."

Those words startled me because they were the same words Uncle Costa had threatened me with a few years earlier. I was 18 and he was driving me in from the sub-



Writer Christos Tsiolkas met each of his grandmothers only twice. But what they taught him has stayed with him. Photo: Kai Koehler

urbs to the University of Melbourne. I had just got my results and was full of myself, a narcissistic adolescent delighted at getting into university and arrogantly believing the future belonged to me. I had never seen the university, had no idea where it was and my uncle said he would take me there, to show me how to find it. As we were approaching it, he pointed to a tall, ugly red-brick building that towered over the campus. "Do you see that building there?"

"Yes," I answered in Greek.

"Well, I helped build that. I was a bricklayer working on that building." We were stopped in traffic and I was surprised to see that his eyes were moist. That's when he slapped me, not hard, somewhere between affection and a warning. "We are so proud of you," he said, "but if you forget where you come from, fa se sfxo."

I call him Uncle Costa but he was not a relative at all. He came out on the same ship as my father. They met on board and ended up living and working together. Though Dad was from a family of a dozen children and my mother from a family of eight, only one of my father's other siblings migrated to Australia. But my parents' friends all became part of my extended family — every adult was addressed as theo and thea, uncle and aunt. Even now, as an adult travelling in Greece, I will still use this form of address when speaking to an elder, and my Greek friends and cousins will laugh at me. "That is something only rural people do," they say. "Only the real hicks. Do you still use those terms in Australia? You guys are still stuck in the '50s."

Their derision used to make me feel ashamed. It used to make me envy the Greeks for their sophistication, their being European. But recently I have begun to think that something has been abandoned and neglected in their mad rush towards consumerism. (In 1990, the first question my cousins asked of me when I landed in Athens was about the politics of Australia; in 2000, it was whether my sunglasses were Dolce & Gabbana — they were, shoplifted from duty free in Dubai.)

The global economic crises of the past few years have only reinforced my concerns. One common experience that so many of us who are children of migrants share, whatever part of the world our families have come from, is the need to challenge tradition but also honour the responsibility we feel to our families: the responsibilities that Uncle Mitso and Uncle Costa were reminding me of. Living in this contradiction can exact a great cost, across the generations, but as I have aged I have found that having to negotiate these questions of honour and obligation have proved a steadying influence in a world where individualism can so easily blur into selfishness and self-centredness.

Maybe because I never did get to meet my grandfathers, that I only met my grandmothers twice in my life, and for such short periods, I find myself envying the

bonds between grandchildren and their grandparents. That long-ago afternoon in that kitchen in Athens, my giagia did not only express her yearning and loss of her "missing" daughter; she also told me stories of a life that had spanned a near century. History was not academic that afternoon but something savage and brutal, beautiful and tender, ugly, comic, tragic, and something very much alive. I learnt the sexual gossip that young women would laugh about when visiting the village well in the morning; I learnt of what it cost a mother to plead for mercy for a son who was being kept in the torture prisons of Greece in the Regime of the Colonels (the Greek military junta of 1967-1974). Then my cousins arrived back home, talking of work and football, of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement — Pasok — and the EU, and history returned to the drying ink on the pages of a newspaper.

It was not the only thing she taught me. When I first met my grandmother, I was 10 years old and she was still living in her village. I remember her taking me to the chicken coop to get a bird to prepare for dinner. She pointed to one of them and said, "Go, catch it and kill it."

Now, I was an inner-city Australian child and poultry and meat were something I believed just magically appeared on butcher's slabs and supermarket shelves. My giagia pointed to the bird and I shook my head. "No," I insisted, "I can't do it." She was appalled. "What do you mean?" she said. "You are nearly a man and you don't know how to kill a chicken? What has your mother been teaching you?" She adjusted her headscarf, hitched up her heavy black mourning skirt, chased after the chicken and brought it to me. "Now," she ordered, "wring its neck." I started to weep. The bird was fluttering in her hand and I was too scared to go near it. Taking pity on me, she ordered me to sit down next to her and proceeded to break the bird's neck.

It was one swift stroke, a wrenching motion and the head pulled away from the body. There was blood, and the beast continued to struggle in her hand. By now I was howling. She ignored my tears and started to tell me how to prepare the bird for cooking. The hanging of the body in the cool of the cellar, putting the pot on the fire, placing the bird in the near boiling water, plucking the feathers first from the wings, the legs and then finally from the breast. When my mother arrived back from visiting her sister, she was horrified. "What have you been showing Christo?"

"Something you should have showed him a long time ago," my giagia admonished her daughter. That night we ate roast chicken and I learnt something about the real meaning of placing food on the table.

I look at my nieces as they play with my father and mother, watch my aunt surrounded by her grandchildren. I feel fortunate to have met my grandmothers, to have spent time with them, but I feel a sadness that I could not have known them better, and that I never met my grandfathers. I wonder what I could have learnt from them about war and occupation, dictatorship and democracy, poverty and suffering. But I also miss having been instructed on the smaller, just as important stuff, such as how to prepare the grapes off the vine for wine, how to dry tobacco, how to build a shelter, how to tend a vegetable crop. I watch my nieces play with my father and mother and think this is what unconditional love is.

A few years ago, a woman brought a dying bird into the veterinary clinic in which I work as an assistant. The vet I work with said, "There's nothing we can do — we have to put it down." She explained that we could inject it with poison but it is easy to miss a vital organ in such a small creature and it can be a horrible death as it literally drowns and suffocates. The most humane thing to do is to break its neck, she explained. "Do you want me to show you how to do that?"

"It's OK," I answered, "I can do it. My grandmother taught me."

Writer Christos Tsiolkas's fourth novel, *The Slap*, won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2009.

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