



Karis Cooper's story of
Marcia



Marcia Penfold's arrival into the world was recorded on a small piece of brown paper in curly whirly Burmese script on the 19th of November, 1935. I have omitted her middle name as she has never liked it!

Marcia was the first child born to Dolly and Freddie. Her brother, Tommy, arrived eighteen months later and her little sister, Dinny, when she was eight years old.

Marcia's parents could both be described as 'fusion cocktails'; vivacious and talkative Dolly had a Burmese mum and a Scottish dad. Thoughtful, quiet and incredibly patient Freddie came from Uruguayan/Burmese stock. Freddie let all the hubble & bubble that Dolly created flow over him while he played his mandolin, sketched or painted. Love and warmth were never in short supply in their household, even though, at times, money was.

When World War Two started, Marcia's father joined the Medical Corp of the British Army. In 1940, five year old Marcia was with her mother and brother in the Burmese hill station of Taunggy when news arrived of the imminent Japanese invasion. Families were to return to Rangoon by bus and train, where they would then be evacuated by plane to Calcutta.

On the first part of their journey down from the hills, their bus collided with a lorry. The bus overturned, and many people were killed. Marcia was thrown clear and, although outwardly unharmed, she was left paralysed. For the remainder of the journey a soldier was assigned to carry her. When the survivors boarded a train for the final leg of the journey, the driver was too scared to continue. There was news of stations down the line in flames. No bother. A soldier took over the train and sped them to Rangoon in record time!

During all of this, her father's battalion was retreating north through Burma to escape the Japanese onslaught. Freddie, who had heard about the bus crash, had no means to discover whether or not his family had survived it. In Calcutta, doctors could find nothing physically wrong with Marcia and attributed her condition to shock. Inexplicably, six months later, she started to walk again.

Marcia, her mum and her brother went from Calcutta to Ranikhet in northern India, high up in the foot hills of the Himalayas. For over a month, they had no word from their beloved Freddie. Marcia's mum wrote to friends who were nurses on the Indian-Burmese frontline, asking them to look out for Freddie. Maybe it was serendipity, but the day after Dolly's friend Maisie received this letter, Freddie was brought into her ward on a stretcher! The family were soon reunited.

War over, the Penfold family returned to Rangoon. The 'old order' was gone and, in 1948, when the Union of Burma gained independence from the British, the populace were given a choice — take up Burmese nationality or leave the country.

Marcia's parents decided to chance their hand elsewhere, so, in July of 1949, with just a few belongings, they set sail for a new life in Britain. In August, the ship docked in Liverpool, and thirteen year old Marcia Penfold stepped onto British soil for a new life in a very different country.

Initially, the family stayed with one of Marcia's three maternal aunts in north London. Once her parents found their feet, they bought a rambling Victorian house close by. Social life revolved around family gatherings at home; a pot of curry, the adults playing cards and smoking profusely and all the cousins hanging out together.

At Trinity Grammar School in Wood Green, Marcia met Ted Cooper, a bright, ambitious young man from a working class background, whose family did not understand or value education. His family were

displeased when he started dating this foreign girl and — oops, aged nineteen — they were even more displeased when Ted announced Marcia was pregnant.

That was me!

This was an era when the only honourable thing to do was to get married, so in June, 1955, six months before my birth, that's what they did! Whilst Ted's family thought he was nuts, Marcia's family actively encouraged him to go to university as part of the very first student cohort to be awarded a government grant. But this meant that Ted was away a great deal; first for National Service, a mandatory two year stint in the army, and then for another three years at University.

Barely twenty, Marcia was left holding the baby for five years.

With no home of her own, Marcia lived between the two parents' homes and went out to work as a secretary while my grandmothers looked after me. Living with my dad's family was initially a big challenge for her, as it was such a different culture from her own parents' home. That said, once Dad's family realised that Marcia was a real gem, their initial prejudices rapidly vanished.

By 1960, Ted had a BSc Honours in Economics, and a job! A year later Marcia, Ted and I moved into a dinky semi-detached house next to an industrial estate in Enfield, north London; not too salubrious, but it was our very own home!

For a short while, Marcia and Ted planned to emigrate to Australia as "Ten Pound POM's", but when Ted's mum was diagnosed with cancer, the plan was off. It was Marcia who later nursed her to the end.

Instead of Australia, they took up an opportunity nearer to home in Lancashire in the north-east of England. These were the swinging sixties and Lancashire, home to The Beatles, was swinging! For the first time, Marcia had a social life. Golbourne Conservative Club, which had nothing to do with politics, was the nucleus of a great bunch of lifelong friends. So, out to clubs with the girls to see the swooners of the day; Frank Ifield, Tom Jones, Englebert Humperdink and the like.

In September 1963, Marcia had her second daughter, Tracie.

Three years later, Marcia, Ted and the girls said farewell to their friends and headed back down south to Upminster, in the north-eastern suburbs of London where Ted had found another new job.

Marcia had inherited some of her Dad's artistic flair, which manifested itself in a love of flowers and a talent for arranging them. She began providing floral arrangements for local companies. Within no time, she built up a thriving business which she organised around the family.

Marcia and Ted, through the sixties and early seventies had both worked hard to improve their lot. They now had a comfortable house in a leafy suburb and two cars on the drive, but all was not well. Their relationship was on rocky ground and they were drifting apart. Both their attentions went elsewhere and after a traumatic and messy time, they parted company.

Enter Andy.

Andy had been a family friend for some years. Suave, witty and a bit of a man about town, I believe he had been quietly in love with Marcia for a long time.

Now Marcia has always been rather gullible, and Andy has always been a romantic. In the springtime of 1977, he decided he would take her on a surprise trip to Paris to propose. Marcia believed they were going

on a business trip to Manchester. Andy managed to transport her all the way to Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, distracting her attention from the airport and plane announcements, before she realised she was NOT in Manchester! He proposed. She said YES!

And in September that year, dressed in a flowing, china blue gown, this beautiful, radiant, and somewhat dippy woman, looking ten years younger than she should, walked down the aisle.

Marcia was in her mid forties when she and her second husband decided to have a family of their own. After one very sad miscarriage, and twenty four years after her first, Marcia had her third child, Andrew. In spite of the obvious pleasures children bring, having a lively, young son at her age proved to be more exhausting than she had expected. She never regretted it and Andrew has definitely helped to keep her young and active.

In the early nineties, economic recession hit the UK hard, and Andy's engineering business was forced into liquidation. Andy and Marcia were trying to look after long-term, loyal employees as well as themselves. By the skin of their teeth, they managed to retain their home. Now in their fifties, with the business gone and no money coming in, and in an era of high unemployment, the chances of finding a job were pretty slim.

Andy managed to find work as a driver for a chauffeur service and Marcia became a domestic cleaner. Gradually, the economy improved and they got back on their feet. Soon, Andy had set up his own chauffer service business. Marcia gave up her cleaning job to help run it.

Time goes by. Marcia has watched her three children and five grandchildren grow. She has loved, nurtured, worried and fussed over us all, and continues to do so!

Outside her front door is a plaque which reads 'Mum's Hotel'. Marcia and Andy's home is a warm and welcoming place, which is reflected in the fact that it is always full of visitors. There is always a pot of curry or something tasty gurgling in the kitchen, just in case a passing army needs sustenance! Family members have a key to the front door, and randomly pop in and out.

Now 76, Marcia looks and behaves like someone of far lesser years. She is often mistaken for her granddaughter's mother. Always busy and involved with family and friends, Marcia continues to generously spread love, humour, warmth and affection.

Marcia is a giver; throughout her life she has always given to everyone around her. Growing up we had very little money, but I was always a millionaire in the economy of love and affection.

Of course, she also continues to be as dippy as ever. As for me, I wouldn't want her any other way.

Marcia Penfold was born on the 19th of November, 1935. I'm very proud she is my Mum.