



Natalie Gibson's story of

Mary



My Mother Mary, no, not baby Jesus' mother, but my actual mother, who goes by Mary, told me that when she was born in South Africa, her parents asked the attending nurse to name their baby girl because they only felt confident giving her a Chinese name. So my mother was given the name she has used most in her life...by a stranger. Perhaps, in that moment when my grandparents placed that heavy responsibility upon her, that nurse raised her eyes to the white ceiling or a fluorescent light bulb in that hospital room, and she prayed for Jesus' guidance. And maybe in that nurses' heart, He spoke to her excitedly, in a moment of inspiration, "Hey, how 'bout after MY ma? Mary!"

Mary Lok, born Dec. 13 1938, was the second child of immigrants who had left their poverty stricken villages in Southern China to board boats for a land they knew nothing about. My grandfather Kongy, as we called him, got on that big boat which would take months to journey as a mere teenager with no immediate family with him. My grandmother, my Popo, went a few years later, also by herself, as his mail order bride. Their first born was a boy, then a year and a half later my mother arrived.

Mary lived her early childhood in Sophia Town, an African township, "Where Nelson Mandela was born!" my mother exclaims proudly every time. They lived behind the family business, a general store and butcher, selling just about everything. Not only did my grandparents have to learn English, but in order to serve their customers, they had to learn the rudiments of numerous different African languages like Zulu, Tswana, Sotho, Machunga and Vendak, to name just a few. When I asked ignorantly if they spoke Afrikaans, my mother screwed up her face and looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "No! That's a Dutch language!" Oh yeah right, why would the oppressed forsake their native tongues to speak in the language of the oppressor? Of course, being in apartheid South Africa, where segregation was law, no whites lived in their township.

Mary first attended a school organized by the Chinese community, and although Mary's parents would eventually pay her way into more esteemed white Anglican schools after, she always felt like an outsider and remembers having only one friend- the only other Chinese girl. But school was the least of her concerns.

Life was challenging, to say the least, from a very early age for Mary. Life as merchants was a hard life for my grandparents who started off with nothing. They were stressed and overworked, and my grandmother would stay up all night stocking her store, barely getting any sleep. When Mary was just 6 years old her mother suffered from a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized for three years. For at least one of those years, Mary was sent to live with an auntie. Thankfully, Mary's mother returned after successful shock therapy and the help of a caring Jewish doctor. Mary has other harsh childhood memories, like the terror of getting arrested and put in jail for a few hours for selling contraband ingredients like yeast for liquor to blacks and being nearly killed in a riot.

There were moments of respite from the hardship through social gatherings of the Chinese community, and Mary learned to cling to these experiences like a lifesaver. She loved wearing pretty clothes and shoes; her whole family would wear their best.

At age 16 my mother experienced a tragedy that would forever alter her life. Her beloved brother Douglas was killed playing with gunpowder. She witnessed him holding his hands over his bloody guts with charred face and watched him die in her parents' arms while telling them that everything was going to be all right. Those images have haunted her as long as I've known.

At some point after Mary's brother's death, her father wanted a second wife from China. He needed a son to carry on the family legacy and my grandmother was unable to have any more children. Popo would not have it and he finally gave up. Mary tried hard to fill her brother's shoes as the translator and helper in the business.

In 1956, two years after Douglas died, another blow. Mary's family had to shut down their thriving business and move. The apartheid government declared Sophia Town an exclusive white township and they were forced to leave. They moved to Jeppie, a mixed community and took this opportunity to travel to China and to adopt my grandfather's nephew Kenny as a son. When they returned to S.A., they opened a new store in their new town. Kenny's place in the family business allowed my mother to get a job as a secretary, working for a 'kind Jewish boss'.

It was 1964 when Mary, age 25, would attend a fateful event: her old school friend Queenie's wedding. She was a beautiful bridesmaid. He was a handsome groomsman. His name was Leong, cousin to the groom. It was a painfully shy and formal courtship with attending chaperones, and a year later my father asked my mother to marry. I can't help but compare it to today's dating standards and I realize now that my mother basically agreed to marry a good looking stranger. Mary says of this time, "We were so innocent! I didn't even know he was hard of hearing...he tricked me!" They had a fantasy wedding with almost 1000 guests attending. But it all came crashing down around her the moment she was alone with this stranger, travelling with him on their honeymoon and crying because she missed her parents.

After honeymooning, Mary had a steep learning curve as a married woman. She lived in a new town called Mayfair and she had a husband to really get to know. Leong was the 2nd of 6 kids in his family, huge in comparison to hers. She had a lot of relationships to develop, not all of which were easy for her. She also had to learn the ropes of the restaurant business – his family's business. Oh, and I forgot to mention the real clincher: she got pregnant on their honeymoon. Apparently no one told them a damn thing about birth control, much less sex. Talk about all at once!

It's a boy! Bernard was a healthy baby, and Mary was particularly happy because her father approved heartily of her ability to produce a boy. She proved to be extremely fertile and had three more healthy children, Terrence, Rowena and me, Natalie, before she was 37. As she openly proclaims, my mother was combating the memories of her own childhood loneliness by having lots of children and the ratio was perfect in her eyes: 2 boys and 2 girls. Pride was brimming at this point in her life, her husband was not so broke now, and Mary's parents adored being grandparents.

In the 70's Mary and her husband decided it was time to leave South Africa. Living in a place where your rights and status are based solely on your race and colour was very disturbing, to seriously understate. Mary was almost 40 in 1977 when she emigrated with her family from South Africa to Vancouver, Canada. She missed her warm and beautiful country of birth and of course, her parents. After many cramped months of living with her brother-in-law's family, Mary and Leong found a perfect house for their family and life in Canada began to take hold.

Mary says it took 10 years to adjust to being in such a different country. She no longer saw any black people, just a sea of white people with Canadian accents and a sprinkling of minorities. Servants and nannies were common place in S.A., but not in Canada, so all domestic tasks and cooking had to be done by all members of the family. Cooking was a really unwelcome chore to my mother, and I remember her mounting anxiety as we would near supper time when Dad would come home. With Canadians, she was

wary and cautious at first. I remember there being a shroud of secrecy around home; we were not allowed to invite friends over and were warned not to ‘tell people our business’.

Soon after immigrating, my father opened his own hardware business with another brother, and Mary helped out. Then, Mary’s parents immigrated to Canada and she spent most of her time helping them settle. At home she was blessed with exceptionally responsible children, particularly her eldest son, who took care of much of the household duties and childcare.

As Mary raised her children, the issue of race was always a topic. Because of her own experience living in a racist country it must have been so strange to see her children, particularly the younger girls, socialize so easily with white children. She would ask surreptitious questions about how “they” live, what “they” do, and what “they” eat, and she had strong radar for any signs of discrimination coming from “those people”. She would send strong messages against interracial marriage—it never worked out.

Without a doubt Mary’s main loyalty was to her parents at this time of her life. Their aging needs often took precedence over her own household and family. After my grandfather survived two strokes in the late 1980’s, it was ironically my Popo who passed first from liver cancer. My Kongy passed a year later. Mary told me recently that all her years running around for her parents was to prove that she was ‘as good as a boy’. Mary, 52, was both relieved and devastated with their passing. She didn’t have to dedicate her time and energy to their needs any longer, but now no one needed her. Her children were all enrolled in university and working and although her youngest (me) was still only a teenager, I had a fiercely independent streak and we barely spoke. Mary’s marriage had always been rife with conflict, but now she battled her own grief and depression as well. Menopause didn’t help with this either, I’m sure. She felt like an orphan, as if she had no family of her own without her parents by her side.

Events in her children’s lives helped and challenged her through the next few years. Both her sons got married to nice Chinese girls with elaborate weddings not unlike her own. She was also blessed with grandchildren. Neither of Mary’s boys questioned the family traditions and they seemed to adhere to all current family systems. Her daughters, on the other hand, seemed possessed by strange qualities that were shocking. They were adamant and open about not aligning themselves to her beliefs. They called themselves feminists and artists and expressed interest in all kinds of different people! Mary waffled between being horrified by her daughters and being proud of them for making choices for themselves and not anyone else. She says she has learned a lot from her conflict with her daughters.

I believe that throughout her life, Mary clung to those moments of enjoyment where she could go buy a new outfit and get dressed in her best to face the world. It was a mechanism she used to cope with the never ending uncertainty of life. With all she encountered on her unique journey of life, I believe her ultimate achievement was what I call Stylish Resilience. My mother was, is and will always be a lover of clothes, jewellery and fashion. In an alternate reality filled with a few more of her own free choices, I’m sure she would have dedicated her life in some way to the fashion industry.

Now, at age 72, Mary’s life is decidedly more mellow. Her children are in their 30’s and 40’s with their own families, and she has relaxed into retirement, travelling frequently and getting facials. She merely bickers with her husband now and she is a proud grandmother to 9 robust grandchildren.