

## **Maria**

The day I was born my mother left me. She did the same to my brothers and sisters, six, seven? I have no clue, she couldn't count any further than three. In between she had miscarriages too. Fortunately, the poor ones were maybe better off. She never gave me a single glance. Two rubber gloved hands lifted me and took me to the orphanage of Child Plan. There I waited for the perfect parents.

A childless couple from London sent me postcards with teddy bears and pussy cats on it. 'Mummy and daddy will fetch you soon, dear Maria. We want you to be our daughter,' they wrote. They promised me a happy family and I looked forward to my new father and mother. The nurses were sweet, but always busy. I wanted arms that lifted me with real care and lips that stroked my cheeks with honest love and affection. Now I know, I was quite lucky to be in that orphanage. Most Guatamalan children left by their parents wandered around in streets, poor and ill. There were no doctors to treat them, no nurses to wash them or postcards to receive from their virtual parents.

I waited weeks, months but they never came to collect me. Instead an official letter came. My soon to be parents were divorcing and I had just to wait a little longer for another pair of parents. I was not even a year old and abandoned for the second time. I will get used to this, I thought wryly, it probably becomes a way of life.

After a few weeks I was placed in another family also in London. I became the sister of a Chinese girl, Lian and a Vietnamese boy, Sam. With my South-American background I felt like the ugly duckling in the story our new mother read to us. These new parents adopted three children but I never understood why. They never showed us their love, they were kind to us but with an aloof politeness, like we were the clerks in the local bank they had to deal with.

My elderly brother and sister were constantly fighting. When I became four years old, the three of us were one big battlefield, struggling for a few loving words our parents had to spare. It became worse when our mother became pregnant. With a sibling of her own, our jealousy grew extensively. Now all the love she had to give went to Frankie. She didn't neglect us, but there was no warmheartedness, nor the attention we needed so much, either.

When Sam turned sixteen, dad had to collect him from the police office one night. He had chosen the wrong friends and was caught while they broke into a house. Lian became ill. She ate and vomited, ate and vomited. I often heard her in the bathroom at night. Nobody seemed to notice how ill she was. She died, thin as a thread, only eighteen years old.

And me? I was sad and unhappy. I watched Frankie turning into a fatty little prince, the spoilt brat. When my twelfth birthday was forgotten, I made up my mind.

For the third time in my short life I felt abandoned. I decided to find real love and left the house. I slept in carton boxes, stole apples and lived on leftovers from dustbins behind restaurants.

I soon knew where to go. I met other boys and girls, disregarded like me. The nightly streets of London were crowded with these sort of girls and boys, therefore my loneliness weighed less heavy. I realised this had been my life if I had stayed in Guatamala.

One night, it rained severely, I slept in a porch of a stately house. On the door shined copper plates, with expensive names of sollicitors and notaries. One plate had the name 'Child Plan' on it. That name had been glued in my brain. I waited till the next morning in my sheltered corner. When several women and men in black coats had passed me, I rang the doorbell.

The lady who opened the door was horrified to hear I walked away. She instantly wanted to bring me back home. I sobbed and begged her to listen to my story but she wouldn't; I screamed and shouted and made a real fuss. Finally, one woman in a long woollen dress, with big spectacles on a wrinkled face said, 'go ahead.' I talked, while she leafed through my file. When I was ready, she said, 'wait here' and left the room. I took the file from the table and read my name. I saw an address in Guatamala, I saw the names Nigella and George Hammond and an address in London. I assumed they were the first parents that would have adopted me. I read their address and put the file back, as the door opened behind me. The woman in the woollen dress re-entered. I looked up and saw dad behind her. I shrunk. He feigned niceness. He dissembled as if he was glad to have me back. However, in the car he took of. He was frantic. He yelled at me, 'Who the hell, do you think you are? You've everything you want, but it is never enough. It is the same with the other two creeps.' He couldn't have humiliated me more.

Mum was more agreeable, she bathed me and left me alone. I saw a sort of guilt in her eyes, though she never asked what had happened. Frankie pestered me more than ever. 'Mum and dad say you are a treacherous and ungrateful creature, without respect or ability to give love,' he told me.

When my house arrest was over, I made the phone call. I leafed through the telephone book and found the name Hammond, with the same adress I had seen in my file. I dialled the number but when a male voice answered I put down the receiver, too shy to say anything. I started to practise the conversation several times; I even taped it to teach myself a mature voice.

'Sir, I'm Maria Mc Millan, I'd like to speak to your wife.' I thought it was better to adress the woman.

'We are divorced, twelve years ago. My ex-wife Nigella lives in Spain. You have to deal with me.'

'What a pity, can I have her address?'

'Who are you?'

'Oh, I worked for her years ago. I would love to meet her again.' I bluffed.

'Well, luckily for you she'll be in London next week to visit her aged mother.' He gave me the telephone number and we said good-bye.

A week later, I phoned to make an appointment for Sunday afternoon. I spoke to Nigella's mother but kept my name vague. That Sunday Nigella opened the door and looked at me, astonished.

'You didn't work for me,' she said.

“No,” I said, “it was even better, I was going to be your daughter, Maria. You sent me postcards on which you said you loved me, before you ever saw me.” The expression on her face softened; I saw her think, calculate, remember.

“Are you Maria?” she said, “How in the world is that possible. Well, come in.”

She introduced me to her somewhat demented mother, who didn’t understand at all who I was.

“Did you work for my daughter?” she asked.

“No, no, mum it’s more complicated. She could have been your granddaughter.” The old woman got tears in the corners of her eyes and said, ever so sweet, “My lost granddaughter.” We smiled at each other. It was a rather awkward situation. Then Nigella asked, “How did you find me and why did you want to find me?” I told my story and she truly listened to me. For the first time I could tell someone about the family I lived in.

“Mum always seems to be distracted. She is busy with her own things, work, friends. She never showed real interest in us. Dad often gives us the feeling we’re not his children. Specially after Frankie was born.”

“How could they, how heartless.” The old mother repeatedly said. I went on, “They had no clue about Sam’s secret criminal life. Lian asked for attention all the time, she was very beautiful and sensitive. They ignored her eating problem completely. I do miss her, she died last year. They never even mentioned her name any more.”

“Oh, the poor thing,” the mother exclaimed again.

“Mother, quiet, let Maria carry, on.”

“The viciousness of little fat Frankie, he is eight now, is unbearable. So spoilt he is, I think he’s insane. I simply cannot understand how mum and dad treat him like that. Sometimes I think that too is no real love.”

“You are a wise girl,” Nigella said.

Then she told me what happened twelve years ago to her.

“George and I were not as happy together as we thought. I thought our marriage would improve with a child. I looked forward to have you. But out of the blue, I fell in love with another man. At first, I thought I could have you as a single mother and maybe later with that other man. However, at the time the law forbade single parents to have orphaned children.”

“I never knew that?” the mother said.

“Mum, come on, you knew it, I discussed every single bit with you, then.” She looked at me again and went on, “Anyway we could have postponed the divorce until say, a year after the adoption. But George was wounded so much by my departure, he became very disloyal. He wouldn’t let me have you alone. And went to the police.”

“I never liked the man,” the mother said.

“He’s alright, mum. So, about a month before we were going to collect you, we had to cancel the whole adoption procedure. It cost us a lot of money, but that was nothing in comparison to my grief about losing you, after all these years. It was the most obnoxious period of my life,” she finished her story with a sigh.

'What happened to your new lover?'

'He left me, he wasn't the one after all, I live alone now.'

'Yes, my daughter and her men, she never knew how to deal with them,' the mother said. Nigella gave her mother a mortifying look.

The afternoon went by too fast, it was almost dark and I had to go home.

'So what's next,' Nigella said. I shrugged my shoulders and said, 'I don't know, I have to go home, but I don't want to.' I wished she asked me to come with her to Spain, but of course she didn't. She kissed me and said, 'Maria, I like you. You are a brave girl, let's keep in touch.'

A few weeks later a letter came, from Spain.

"Dear Maria,' Nigella wrote. She informed after my situation at home and my school results, than she chatted about the beautiful weather in Spain and finally she came to the point.

'I would love to have my mother over for a few weeks this summer. However, she is too fragile and muddled to travel alone. She needs a companion during the voyage. Maria, you haven't been out of my mind since you threw yourself into my life, that Sunday afternoon. I would love to get to know you better and invite you too for the summer holiday.' I read the sentences again and again. But it was true, I was invited. An intense happiness crept into my veins, warmed my blood, spread through my bones and my heart jumped up. She wanted me to come. During that holiday my life started to be a happy one.

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