



Growing up Greek

What's it like when your family culture makes you feel different from other kids? Eleni Kyriacou explains

Popular culture has never been kind to Greeks. The French have Catherine Deneuve, the Italians Sophia Loren. We get Demis Roussos and Harry Enfield's Stavros.

I was eight years old when I realised being born to Cypriot parents wasn't the glamour ticket I'd hoped it would be. One morning at school I was teased by classmates because the night before, they'd watched a singer called Nana Mouskouri on TV. Nana had worn a hideous floral maxi dress and thick, square, black-rimmed spectacles, God bless her. I argued that, with my parents originating from Cyprus, I was Greek Cypriot rather than just Greek, so Nana's wardrobe choices were not a reflection on me. But the nuances were lost on Class 3H. From that moment, being Greek was officially uncool.

This was compounded days later in the playground when, after a history lesson about the Trojan War, a re-enactment of the soldiers storming out of the wooden horse took place, with yells of 'Never trust a Greek!' as kids bundled on top of me.

But many of my memories of growing up Greek are lovely. The way a new teacher would pause before tackling my name, and the whole class would correct her if she got it wrong. The foil-wrapped

slabs of halloumi in my packed lunch, which I'd swap with my best friend Jackie for her exotic Dairylea Triangles.

The best thing was the secret language. My parents didn't speak much English so we spoke a mix of Greek and English – Gringlish – at home. When my sister and I were out and about, we could talk about anyone and not be understood. It felt like a superpower.

The most difficult aspect of my teen years was accepting how strict my parents were. While my English friends could go anywhere (or so it seemed), I was a Greek girl and things didn't work that way. With only a handful of going-out credits a year, I had to ask myself if I really wanted to go to a party or film. If the event was unmissable, I'd start negotiations days before, mentioning it a few times to get my parents on board and throwing in the name of a friend who'd

attend. This needed to be someone Cypriot or with equally strict parents – but not the friend they saw smoking St Moritz cigarettes in the local cafe on school days.

A big part of my childhood was the euphoria of Greek

weddings. Often held in the town hall – or a hotel if you were fancy – these events were free-for-all parties, with heaps of food made by the family served on buckling paper plates. Cratefuls of alcohol were shared out and nobody cared how much anyone else drank. Yes, you might be 16 and on your third Metaxa brandy 'n' Coke, but as long as you were having the time of your life, all was well.

Our parents recounted stories of arriving in the 1950s in a city of strangers where they couldn't speak the language, and didn't know the customs. Years later, after decades of wanting to write a novel but not knowing what it would be about, I realised it had to be about that experience.

Turns out I'm a proper Greek girl, after all. The aspect of myself I most wanted to shrug off is now central to who I am.

✦ *She Came to Stay* by Eleni Kyriacou (£18.99, Hodder & Stoughton) is out now.

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Eleni with her mother (middle) and members of her extended family in Cyprus

