

# The Last of the Lazaroffs

What's in a name? For **Tamara Lazaroff**, it promises history, identity, family...and lentils.

**I** wasn't at all surprised when the other last Lazaroff in my city found me. A name is, after all, one of the ways we recognise kin – especially when that name is uncommon.

A name is repository for our histories.

It's the story of who we are.

And who we are not.

And so, on the phone, we arranged to meet the next month – after COVID restrictions are over, or so we thought – for a coffee and cake with his wife.

Before saying goodbye, my namesake sketched out quickly, almost in one breath, how his name had been carried from Russia to the US, to Great Britain and then Australia, through the First to after the Second World War. There was something important, too, about a fire and a great house, and later a bomb. But now he is older, retired. He has two grown daughters – married, and they've each hyphenated their surname with their husband's – and so unfortunately, regrettably, sadly, he is the very last Lazaroff in his line.

Of course, he would have loved to hear more about my line – and I knew he meant it – but his wife was unwell and he had to go. Which meant I didn't have the chance to explain that I'm not a real Lazaroff. Not a real Lazaroff at all.

When we meet, I tell myself, I'll have to break the news. Tell him how when my paternal grandfather got off the ship in Sydney, as a refugee, the official scribe heard “ff” instead of “v”, and my grandfather, who was just happy to be there, didn't correct or argue. As a guest, he probably didn't feel he could.

And that is how I came to be a Lazaroff, and not a Lazarov. Or, in fact, Lazarova: the daughter of Lazar.

Back in the village, though, in North Macedonia, from what I've been told, the name Lazarov is only a few generations old. Who we were before that, I don't know. But I do know, from my relatives, that colloquially we are known as the Vrlshtas – the Lentil-boilers – because as far back as anyone can remember, every time someone walks past our ancestral house, one of us is outside stirring a big pot of brown legumes, which honestly, I don't doubt. Boiling brown lentils – this is what I do over my stove in suburban Brisbane all the time!

Tamara Lentil-boiler.

I've had other names, too.

I was christened Tammy Lazaroff, but after my mother married an Anglo-Saxon Australian man I changed my name, from Fourth to Sixth Grade, to Tammy Williamson. Not because, I admit, I was so bent on family unity – which is the story my mother told when my biological father took her to court – but because I didn't want to be called a wog at my new school where everyone was blonde. But that was only until high school, when I went back to the old: Tammy Lazaroff.

When I turned 18, however, my mother told me that she had originally wanted to call me Tamara – not Tammy – but hadn't been allowed. In a patrilineal line a mother must not name a child in any way after herself, so Tammy was the compromise. My father's father's name was Tom – Tommy – Tammy. Close enough.

It goes without saying, I changed my name not long after by deed poll.

Tamara: daughter of Mara.

But I didn't start using the new name until a decade later, after she died. And when I did it was like putting on a coat or a pair of shoes, perfectly cut, perfectly sized, which I had been waiting to grow into all my life.

And now I, too, am the last Lazaroff in my line.

I will tell the other last Lazaroffs this when we finally meet.

And also that I have no children – something I chose – and anyway, even if I changed my mind, I'm now perimenopausal, and my cat Lila – Lila Lazaroff – is desexed, too.

On Lila's birth certificate, which I keep, I find it curious that, unlike me but perhaps like other real Lazaroffs, it seems Lila has descended from czars and czarinas, feline kings and queens. Barishka Tomashevski – paternal grandfather. Prinz Kostenka – father. Mother – simply Freya, like some wild ring-in.

Together, however, with our checkered genealogical histories, Lila and I will not stop at the end of the track. We will go on – as we all must. We'll blast through and blaze trails into the what-next, into the what-cannot-be-imagined-yet, into the new, the after, the soon, soon, soon. ■

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