

## Jenny

Jenny\*, 66, is a Romany Gypsy who has a daughter and three grandchildren. She lives a 'settled life' with her partner. Jenny was born in the back bedroom of her grandmother's house, Red Roofs in Christchurch. The family – a big Dorset Romany family – all lived together in the house many years ago. After her parents divorced and her father remarried, Jenny moved to Weymouth to live with her father and step-mother, but when she was about 8 years old her father died in a car accident. Jenny was unaware of her roots until she was a teenager. She was also unaware that her maternal mother and husband had visited her stepmother after her father's death, asking if Jenny could live with them. Jenny's stepmother (who by then had a son, Jenny's half-brother) was not willing to let the little girl she loved as her own go with strangers.

Jenny says, 'I thought my step-mother was my real mother. I wasn't told until my teenage years.' Then when she was 24, she had a phone call from her step-mum who told her that her natural mother had turned up wanting to know if she could get in touch with Jenny. 'I didn't know what to do. I felt I should be loyal to my parents but was intrigued.' Jenny's mother lived in Italy. When she had a heart attack in her 50s she decided to come to the UK and 'put her house in order.' She wanted to find Jenny.

Jenny went to Italy several times after they met, and her mother wrote her nice letters and they spoke on the phone. 'We were very similar to look at. I knew who she was the minute I saw her.' It's a Gypsy tradition, Jenny says, if you really like someone, to swap rings. Jenny gave her mother her silver ring, and her mother gave her a small gold enamelled one. 'My lucky ring.'

There were little things Jenny did – idiosyncrasies, movements – that made her think, God I'm like her. 'It was weird, and nice. You always go back to your Romany roots. I'm nothing like my step-mum. She taught me English, I was well educated, but in certain things I'd do, I was nothing like her.' Finding out about her real mother was traumatic, but 'I have so much to thank her for. She gave birth to me – I was 11 pounds! – and she gave me knowledge, instinct, and being street-wise.' Jenny's mother was an international clairvoyant, who worked for Scotland Yard at one point, helping them to trace missing people. 'She was clever, and beautiful when she was young.'

In spite of not knowing the truth Jenny had a 'wonderful childhood' growing up in a gorja lifestyle. She always had 'a Romany attitude' towards life: the way she dressed, liking colour, her craft (crochet and needlework), her love for art. 'I loved horses and would go riding as a kid. I fancied the outdoor life – always wanted a caravan.' Jenny has always loved cooking – Tunisian, Italian and Moroccan – and used to love dancing before an accident prevented her from doing it. She also loves singing.

When she was little she'd thought she'd had a dream, which turned out to be an actual memory. 'My mother and her family went hop-picking in Worcester. My "dream" was of being a little girl outside at night under the wagons. I heard lovely music – the Irish drum, banjos, (typical Gypsy music). My cousin told me it was true, it wasn't a dream.'

When her grandmother was dying in hospital her mother went to see her one day and she said, 'go to my bag, get my purse out, and get sixpence out.' When her mother asked why, her grandmother replied, 'do as I say. Go outside and throw it as far as you can.' So Jenny's mother did as she was asked. On returning to her mother's bed she asked why again. Jenny's grandmother said, 'I've just bought my way into heaven.'

Since finding out about her roots Jenny says she is 'part of it all.' Although her mother died 28 years ago, the family has remained close. 'Romany people are very close, and loyal. You know if you have a problem you can pick up the phone and someone will be down straight away.' They are also spotlessly clean and old fashioned. The boys are taught to be respectful to girls, and are smart and polite, and younger people have respect for their elders. They are creative and can make something out of nothing.

Family get-togethers are 'fantastic' with lots of eating, drinking and singing. Although life has had its ups and downs, Jenny, who has been a Christian all her life, feels very privileged and very proud of her roots. 'God's been good to me. I pray. I know that behind every dark cloud is a silver lining.'

\*Name has been changed

\*Gorja (or gawjie) is the term for a non-travelling person