

Dear Reader,

I'm from Barcelona in Catalonia and my first husband and I decided to come to Australia because of the political situation in Spain. We had a military junta, and it was there for 40 years almost, and nothing was changing. I got married with my first husband in 1971 when I was 21, and we decided to come to – or to go any country.

We put in applications for Canada, for Germany and Australia, and Australia was the first country that said they will accept us. I was 22. In 1972, we were admitted to this country with permanent residence from the beginning, and they paid for our trip as well. So the only condition was to stay two years in this country.

We were young, so we thought, okay, two years goes really fast and we'll learn the language. So we decided to come and the first place we arrived was in Brisbane, to a facility in Wacol. Wacol was like a reserve for new migrants, and it looked like a military camp with all the cabins. The cabins, they don't have a kitchen or toilet. You had to go to the public ones that was for everybody. And also they cook the meals for us, for everybody that was there. We had to pay for the meals when you started to work. If you didn't work, the meals were free.

We thought, what a country that is giving all that for free. It was like a holiday and we were thinking, if we like the country, of course we can stay. But one of the things that you realise when you leave your country is that you leave your family, your friends, and the language – we didn't speak English. That was the hardest part because we thought that in six months we will learn the language, but it took much longer.

They gave us English classes free of charge. And the married couples that came here with children, they had the kindergarten free as well – everything. And we were free to go out so it wasn't bad. But coming from a city like Barcelona that is so cosmopolitan, it was a shock because Queensland was, I think, so countryside. It shocked me when I saw the trains. We thought, oh, this is the far west, because they were these wooden trains with many, many doors and all these seats. And also surprised us the way the people were dressed. The men, almost everybody was dressed with shorts and long socks that went just under the knee. And the ladies, very old-fashioned compared with Europe, with all these hats. On Wednesdays they will go out and they will go to the cinema, and that surprised us again because they will all wear long dresses like you go to a party.

It wasn't bad staying in Wacol, but we started to see the discrimination. At the beginning, we didn't become aware, because there was a lot of people from Yugoslavia, some Spanish and other parts of Europe, probably some Italian. But for those migrants that were English or South African that they speak English, they went to another facility but with better conditions, with apartments.

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In January 1974, we had our first child – the only child with my first husband. My oldest son was born here, and maybe when he was about a year old, my husband started to feel that he was coughing a lot. And so we went for a check-up, and he didn't come out from the hospital. They told us that he had a form of cancer, that he was going to die and no medication, nothing was going to help him. He was not going to get anything. The only thing they were going to do is an operation. So we found ourselves in a situation that we were able to speak some English by then, but with a little child. At first we decided to stay here because we wanted to get the Australian citizenship because for us this was an insurance.



After three years in Australia, you could get the citizenship, so we did that, and in the meantime my husband had the operation. My husband was really scared about dying – not dying himself – but dying, leaving us here. He said, “I think we should go to Spain. At least you will have your family.”

But knowing how Spain is, I first sent a letter to the Spanish consulate, and I said, look, this is my situation. My husband is going to need a hospital when I arrive there and assistance because he’s dying. And the man send me a letter saying, “Spain is your country. You’ll be protected. Don’t worry. We love our Spaniards,” and blah, blah, blah. Sounded a really fascist way of saying things, very, like, military.

Anyway, I thought, okay, we’ll go because I always can come back. At least he will feel, in a way, safer for us. So we went to Spain, and the first thing I encounter – because he needed 24-hour oxygen – it was denied to us. At the hospital, I said, I was told that I will have admission in hospital if I needed any help. And she said, “No, you’ve been to Australia. You’re not poor”.

I ended up just asking for charity. It was very humiliating, I don’t know how I survive all this. We tried to come back but no airline will accept him. So we were stuck there. And he told me before he died, take the child and go back to Australia, because he knew being in Spain was hell.

After 6 months in Spain, my husband died. I managed to get a job, and I work in a hospital, actually, in the hospital that my husband died. They gave me a job as a receptionist there, and because I was able to speak English, it was good because then very few people speak English. So I was there for four or five years. During this time that I was a widow, that was hell. It was hell.

Three years later a friend that I met in Australia six months before we left, came back to Barcelona to see his father and also came to visit me. And through this friend is how I met Tomas. They were brothers and Tomas was driving him.

After Tomas’s brother went away and Tomas called me and said, “It’s okay if we go out?” I said, “Well, I have a child. We go out, we have to –” “Yeah, yes. No problem.” So we went several times to restaurants and other places. Our lives somehow have a lot of connections in many ways so we decided to get married.

At this stage I still had my job at the hospital, and I was on quite good money, and Tomas had a job. During this time, Franco had died and we had this so-called democracy. But in 1981, there was an attempted coup d’état and then we thought, oh my goodness, if we don’t leave this country – because Tomas had been a political prisoner – they’ll capture him. I was an Australian citizen, so we decided to ask for refugee status for him to come here with me. And it was accepted very quick because we were expecting a baby then. So I said, “Look, I’m pregnant. I just want to have the child in Australia. And you know what’s going on here and he’s a political prisoner.” But, anyway, they went through and they were really trusting people – because he’s a terrorist. He’s still on record as a terrorist.

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When I first came there were very few migrants. Later on people from Vietnam came, but when we arrived only Italians, Greeks and a few Spaniards. There has never been a very big Spanish community, but straightaway we wanted to integrate. We don’t really wanted to go to a Spanish club or anything like that. We just really wanted to learn English, integrate and so on. And there we encountered a few problems, we could see the police corruption very quickly.

When we had my first child, we were living in New Farm in a house that was divided into four units. The neighbours from the right, they were two young girls, and we arrived with a newborn and they started to put the radio on high volume. And I went to do them and I said, "Please, I have a baby. Can you put the music a bit lower?" The next day the police were waiting at our house. Straightaway, we saw what was going on. They tried to make a mockery of ourselves, how bad our English was, and what do we want and laughing. I said to my husband, don't even dare to say anything. Just play stupid, because with experience of the police and the junta, we knew that they were looking for us to provoke them.

After a while they got tired because we couldn't understand what they were saying. They were saying things like, "These stupid people don't speak English," or whatever and laughing. So they left. Nothing happened. But we could see that, for just to go and asking please put the music down this could happen.

We had other instances of racism, especially with neighbours telling us, "We are here for seven generations. What are you doing here? You go home," and things like that. We have a lot of patience because I really think that racism comes from ignorance and also from this need to protect their own clan. If someone unknown is coming, we have to find refuge and defend ourselves. So I always preferred not to stir anything.

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When I arrive the second time in Australia, I worked as a cleaner until I was able to find a better job. But what I noticed is, when I was a cleaner, everybody was very nice. Once I started university and I started to learn – I become a teacher, I suffered racism to the point that they will insult me – even the other teachers.

I went once to the office to get some photocopies, and I was working there in that school for a year. A man said, "Oh, are you the cleaning lady?" And I said, "No, I'm not. I'm the Spanish teacher. But, you know, with all my respects for the cleaning lady – it's okay if you say I am, but I'm a teacher." Anyway, I try all the time not to argue because it was worse.

Anyway, things went worse and worse, and I suffer bullying by some of the teachers and I was just in a mess when I was there working. The Department of Education gave me a grant because I put a proposal to teach the students Spanish through making a radio program. It was an exercise that will take a few months, and if the department could help me to hire a radio caravan I could teach the kids there and we all can do programs and the kids will learn how to use the equipment, put the records and everything. It was really fun.

The caravan was there for more than two months. The principal didn't go in once, not even once. Nobody came inside to see the caravan, nobody asked me anything. They totally ignored me. But also they started to call inspectors, saying that people have complaints. They would come into the room and they video me when I was doing the class. At the end I decided to leave. And that moment, it was really beautiful because I entered the staff room, and I said to everybody, "That's it, I'm resigning. I cannot cope any more with the racism here, is terrible and I can't." And suddenly the drama teacher, the sports teacher, another teacher said, "Oh, no, you're not. You're not going." And they said, "We've been seeing what they are doing to you. For six months you've been really bullied here, and you're not going; we're going to go with you to see the principal."

So they really were with me. They complained and even the principal said, "Oh, please don't go and complain. Please don't do anything." But it was too late. By then, I was just burnt out and I

left the school. This is just one incident. But what I observed, that while you're just working in jobs that is considered lower, you're okay. But don't try to be the same as them, don't try to move up. Even though I experienced a lot of racism from one side, there's also wonderful people that help you. I assume that is everywhere the same. It's the humankind, you know.

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Things are different now. I think the younger generation is much better. And I think is because probably they have gone overseas and have experiences, and maybe they even are more educated. We have Australian friends and from other countries too. We also do our best to socialise with people, it's a giving thing. And I feel very comfortable here, to the point that we both think that is the best thing that we've done, is to come to Australia. Apart from all these things – racism and so – this country has provided me with an education. I went to university; I become an artist. So many positive things.

I do feel like I belong in Australia now. It happened when I left teaching. I went to UQ and had a part-time job, and I was there for almost 20 years. To survive in another country, you have to be in peace with yourself. If it's problems all the time with social problems, it's an anguish. It's a peace of mind that helps you to belong to another country because I have two nationalities. I'm still from Spain and the traditions. And my work reflects all my experience there, that it wasn't pleasant. It was probably worse than here. But it's when you can breathe and you say I'm in my castle with my family, with my friends. If I was in Spain, I wouldn't be friends with everybody. So here I have what I need, my friends, my family, and my house. I have everything.

**Anna**