

Dear Reader,

I was born in 1983 in Harare, Zimbabwe and lived there pretty much most of my life. Most of my family lives in the UK by default because of what's happened politically in Zimbabwe. There was a time when people found a loophole of sorts involving nursing where you could go to the UK without having to apply for a visa and you'd automatically get in. A lot of people went and became nurses. You did your five years and you'd get citizenship.



So even my parents were like, "Hey, look, this is simple. You go do nursing. You'll become a citizen. And once you're a citizen, then you can decide what you want to do with your life." Get the valuable thing, which is the citizenship. I guess when I was that young, I didn't have the foresight to figure out that it was possible to go and do something you didn't want to do so that you could get a piece of paper that you needed to change your life. But at the time I was very against that. I did go to the UK, but I was deported and I was sent back to Zimbabwe because my story of going to some college to study nursing wasn't airtight.

Between 18 and 24 - I was doing all sorts of things, just trying to figure out what I wanted to do. The things I wanted to do, my family couldn't afford. So in trying to figure out what I wanted to do, I came across photography, and later on I got an opportunity to get a scholarship - because I knew my dad wasn't going to pay for photography. I got the scholarship and I said to him, "I've gotten the scholarship. It's in South Africa. I just need your blessing to go, and you don't have to pay for anything." But the year before, my brother who was a doctor in the UK died in a car accident. I was going to study photojournalism and South Africa historically is known as a very violent country. So for weeks on end, my dad said, "You're not going because we don't want another child in a body bag. We can't afford to lose another child." I remember even the night before I left, my dad kept saying, "Are you sure you're going?" He asked me maybe like 30 times and I said yes. Because they still wanted me, on some level, to try and figure out a way to get to the UK - even up until now. I think the conversation has slightly changed in the last five years, but for as long as I can recall, there's always a "but" - "It's great that you're doing that, but why don't you, for example, do nursing?"

Anyway that's how I ended up in South Africa. I thought I'd stay there. I never even thought I would leave Zimbabwe. When I moved to South Africa, you kind of say to yourself, this is it, I've chosen to move somewhere else. I've got no intention of going anywhere else. This is home. I can't keep moving further and further away from the thing that I know. But now, as life happened, we've ended up in Brisbane and it's a completely different kettle of fish. You're so far removed from what we think is our everything. And I'm always quite shocked when you talk to people in Australia and they don't know what's happening globally in terms of news. In Australia it's like we're in this extremely sheltered bubble.

I think it took about five years to come around to the idea of moving to Australia because what a lot of people don't actually realise is that the reputation that Australia has elsewhere isn't great. Even within the context of South Africa as a black person, when people speak or think about Australia, the first thing that people talk about is racism.

It's strange thinking about the difference in racism between Australia and America. The US is definitely problematic on a lot of levels, but, strangely, somehow, I don't think that's the first thing that comes to people's mind when you say America, at least not for me. I know how problematic it is but I guess maybe the difference is that these issues are actually talked about and engaged

with. And I feel like in Australia we don't talk about race at the level that it's being engaged with elsewhere.

It's difficult to answer whether my preconception of Australia has been different or confirmed after being here because I'm also fully aware that I live a privileged life. We stay in a specific neighbourhood in Brisbane's south which seems very diverse so there's some sort of tolerance I guess. So living on the southside could potentially play a great factor in us not directly experiencing things. From the little that I've experienced, it hasn't been as bad as I thought it would be, but I still think there's more I haven't experienced yet. And I think you live with this as someone who isn't white or someone who understands that they're an outsider. Sometimes you're just like, hmm, this is too good to be true. You're waiting for that person to actually reveal their true colours or to actually start talking about their real opinions. And sometimes it happens. And I'm in a situation now where I'm asking myself, are you actually going to be okay with confronting people when they say things?

We had a scenario at the park where one of the kids called our son Mandla the N-word. A kid, around nine or ten. One of the little girls that Mandla plays with approached me and said, "Hey, this kid has said this." I wasn't in earshot but thankfully she made me aware that this kid's dad was around. In that moment, I'm like, what do I do? Is this a situation where you actually confront the parent? And I did confront the dad and he confronted his son. And it turned out that kid and his friends at school say this word. So he thought it was okay to say. And I think the challenge that the dad had is that his son kept insisting, "because Charlie says this, that's why I say it, and because Charlie says it, I'm not going to stop saying this word." So the dad was having a wrestling moment with the son where he was trying to say, actually, you can't. But his dad had no power over the decision the son was making. And then I just had to say to him, "If you don't mind, I'm actually going to speak to your son." And I said to the kid, "I think you actually need to listen to what your dad's saying. Just because someone says this word to you doesn't mean that it's okay." And I also mentioned to him that the word's very hurtful, and also that he could find himself in a situation where if he uses harmful words, he could find himself harmed as well. But it was so weird because in my head, I'm like, why am I telling a grown man that his child should not be using this word? Like, it's not my job to educate him.

Sisi suggested that we put up a post in our community group about the incident. But a part of me also felt like, why should I be educating our neighbourhood to tell them that it's not okay for their kids to be using derogatory words to other people?

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Even your own people are unkind to differences that you display yourself. I haven't been back to Africa yet, but there's subtle things that people will say to you that make you aware that you live a different life. And a lot of it's got to do with the fact that there's a lot of hardship in Zimbabwe. If you happen to meet your friend you haven't seen in 15 years, and you're moisturised, you smell good, and you're chewing gum, they're like, "Oh, wow, you can afford gum?" So it's simple things like that that start highlighting that, oh, his life's probably really good. It's also gotten to a point that, depending on who you're talking to, simple basics of life then sometimes even mean that maybe you're living a corrupt life, because they think, how can you afford those things? People are like, "I stuck it out here during the tough times, and you saw a tough time and you ran." So these things are complex.

I think belonging is being in a place where you're accepted and wanted, and it can take shape with anyone. I'm not saying, oh, I only want to belong if black people will accept me. I want to belong by being accepted by the people around me.

I still feel like I'm trying to find what else will connect me to being here, beyond my family. I think for a long time Sisi probably didn't take this seriously enough when I said to her, "I actually need friends. I need to make friends." It seems especially hard to make friends in Australia. People are friendly on the surface but they won't let you into their circle. There has to be a lot of alcohol consumed and a lot of, I don't know, camping trips or whatever before people will let you in. And I'm all for understanding people's worlds so that bonds can be made. But it feels like it's a national requirement. If you want to know an Australian, you've got to be interested in sports. You have to be interested in their culture, but they're not necessarily interested in your culture. So, yeah, the belonging bit is hard because I find that even now I spend more time on the phone with people I grew up with and my friends who are in South Africa and anyone else from my childhood, and those people aren't here. There's still so much more energy that's being given towards relationships where people are elsewhere. I don't feel like I've been able to use that same energy here.

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I think what I'm learning is that your state of mind can be of a different country or home, and your heart can actually be somewhere else. So it's actually possible to think Australian, but your heart is elsewhere. And for our kids a lot of that will be determined by a range of things: how often we can afford to go back home; by the experiences they have when they go home. They could either have positive or negative experiences that could make them decide what they prefer home to be. It also could be based on how much of our community or people we have around for them in Australia to determine whether this part of who we are is something that they want or not.

We grew up in the same environment that the kids are now, even though Australia's very different right now. In the 80s in Zimbabwe because of either the resources or the wealth that was in the country, you had almost every single country represented - either they had a consulate or an embassy in the country. And what that meant is that even though the country was predominantly black, I grew up with friends from all over the world. We were in environments where you have friends from different countries, who looked different, who spoke different languages to you, who came with food that was different to yours. And I think that's potentially also helped me coming to Australia because I grew up in it. It's not uncommon to experience or know people who've lived or gone through different things. I think it made me more adaptable.

Masimba