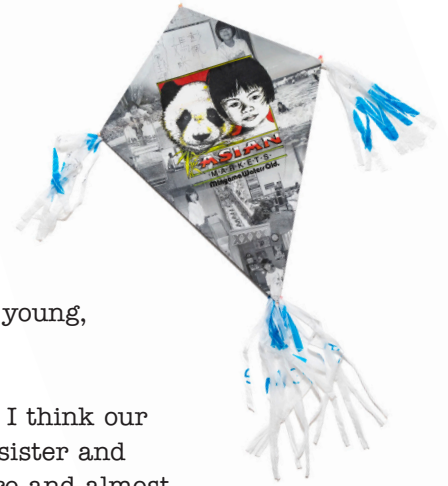


Dear Reader,

I was born on the Sunny Coast in 1986 and grew up when it was pretty turbulent politically, especially on the Sunshine Coast. It was Pauline Hanson era. From the late 80s to, I'd say, the mid-90s is when racial tension was brewing. Pauline was from Ipswich at the time but her party had a very large and boisterous presence on the Sunny Coast. There were a lot of supporters. But I think, when I was young, I didn't actually know the extent of it.



I think I was protected. I had three siblings that came before me, and I think our parents protected us by putting us into a Lutheran school. My eldest sister and eldest brother started out in state school and my cousin was also there and almost abducted, so I think my parents had that as a kind of platform to understand and realise that's probably not the safest option for kids that look different on the Sunny Coast in that period. The kids in my grade, at least, weren't racially bullying me. I never felt as though I was singled out because of race. We would have stuck out like a sore thumb, visually. But I never felt different until I moved, because I didn't know any different.

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My dad came to Australia by himself on a boat. He was working on a boat and he was in his, I think, mid to late 20s. Then he went back to Hong Kong to look for a wife. I think his aim was to stay in Australia and to move over for opportunity because he realised when he was working on the ships that there was a lot of opportunity to earn money and an easier kind of lifestyle here. Especially because there was a lot of empty land and ideas were brewing in his mind. He was a man of opportunity, because his dad passed away when he was nine, so he always had that kind of entrepreneurial spirit where he had to find money somewhere to help his mum and him survive. So I think that was his aim, to find somewhere that was easy enough to slot into and make a buck.

His bestie was my mum's sister's husband, or maybe they were dating at the time? So he met my mum through her older sister's partner. Mum said he was really charismatic, really good with his words and she just fell in love with him when she met him, like, immediately. I've asked her, "What did you think you were going to marry into?" because she had no family, no friends here, no idea of what Australia was, what it looked like, what it meant and just blindly followed my dad.

Mum grew up in Malaysia, so she spoke English and I think that's what my dad was looking for - someone who could speak English and bring up the kids and fit into Australian life. Dad would've been late 20s, and Mum was 20, turning 21 and she was just so in love with him, so she was like, "This man's going to take me to a new land and we'll live happily ever after." She tells me that's seriously what she thought. So she went with him blindly and arrived here. I'm pretty sure they arrived together in '74, on the Sunny Coast.

Mum was the first of her family to arrive, and then my dad and my mum sponsored my uncle - so my mum's sister's husband - to come over. They started a restaurant, so my aunty was able to come, and then that was my mum's only family here. My dad brought a lot of his family here. He was the only child, but he had a lot of cousins, and I think they became pretty established, because, growing up, I just remember them always being here.

I remember Dad saying, "There was so much land and it was so vast, and there was nothing built." It was just sugarcane fields and he had like, dollar signs in his eyes. It was like he struck gold. He was like, "I can build an empire," and in a way, he did. He opened up restaurants all around the coast. Chinese restaurants to begin with and then eventually he started dabbling in

Thai restaurants because that was popular. And he bought and sold and developed buildings on the coast.

We had an Asian grocery store as well. All four of us older siblings worked in all of the businesses. The two eldest, started young in the restaurants when Dad and Mum were establishing themselves. And then later my other brother Ben and myself worked in the restaurants and the supermarket as well. We were just thrown into it, primary school, high school and parts of university. I remember going back to the coast on the weekend and helping out at Dad's Thai restaurants. And I couldn't get away because he paid us so well.

I think the Asian supermarket was probably the worst investment that my dad made because there weren't many Asians on the Sunshine Coast at that time. It would've been late 90s, before it was popular in any way, shape or form and before Asians lived on the coast.

Dad's comprehension of English is not great even though he'd run all these businesses and bought all this land. It's so impressive, the amount of bravado that you'd need and the sacrifices – especially my mum – that they would have made in order to give us better lives or better opportunities. I couldn't imagine how our lives would have turned out if my parents stayed in Hong Kong. Well, I wouldn't have been born as we wouldn't have been able to afford five children in Hong Kong.

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At our school, people excelled in sport, and even though I was terrible at swimming, I was good at other sports. So looking back I think that's how I kind of got through school - maybe they didn't pick on me because I was okay at sports. I don't think I really was aware of the racial difference, to be honest. One of my older brothers Ben, was directly above me at school, he was really popular, and I think having that was another buffer. I could kind of find a foothold. Whereas my younger sister Michelle, she wasn't very good at sport and she's very well read so I think maybe she was more aware of it. And being the youngest kid, everyone else had left to go to Brisbane or other parts of the world so she didn't really have anyone to protect her.

I remember occasions outside of school where people would hurl abuse from cars on the street and Ben would just arc up. He would get so angry on behalf of me and I was kind of like, "Oh, dude simmer down." He would get very, very angry and I think perhaps that even made me retreat a little bit from even thinking about race or have internal dialogues about that sort of thing. Trying to remove myself from, I guess, identity and who we were as a family in that space. It was my mum that would have those conversations with us. But they were never blatant discussions. They were always just like, "Oh, this woman at school was being racist to me because I said something that sounded funny in Malaysian accent and she corrected me." But that would be it and we wouldn't delve in, it wasn't a bigger conversation about race. And I guess Mum just didn't have time. Like, there were five of us kids, nobody got time for a conversation about race. Just move on, just take it, take the hit.

I'm pretty sure it was only after I moved that I realised how monoculture the Sunshine Coast was. Like, every time we'd go to visit, you'd pull up at the main intersection and there'd be a ute with the most bogan person ever just staring at you as if you're an alien, about to yell some sort of slur at you. I remember a distinct visit back home after living in Brisbane, and we were at a McDonald's as a family in Nambour. And I remember this bunch of teenagers were whispering in the corner, looking at us and snickering. After we went outside, they were like, "Go back to where you came from." And we were just like, "Ah, welcome home. Welcome back."

And that's the thing. I think those slurs occurred, but they weren't as prominent when I was

growing up. And I wonder if it's because of having Ben around being my kind of guard dog. I do think he took the brunt of that, and then he would have intellectualised it. But I think for me it was more of an avoidance thing. I do remember being angry, but I remember repressing it because I didn't want to cause a scene. And because I was a really anxious kid, I kind of retreated into myself and I think maybe it was part of my anxiety. I didn't want to go outside, didn't want to go to school. I think I didn't really absorb those experiences properly until I was out of that anxious phase.

I think it's because when I was growing up, I never found my people. I never felt like the people at school were people I could have long relationships with. And I think partly that's because of race or cultural differences. Like going to a friend's house and looking for room temperature water that was boiled, and them just getting it out of the tap and being like, "Here you go." Differences like that I think made me feel like I'm not connected to these people. And I think I only felt that connection really late in life. Even when I moved to Brisbane for uni, I didn't really have that. Maybe in my honours year and then much later, like late 20s then I felt like I'd started meeting people that had similar experiences and backgrounds that I could connect with on a deeper level. I think that came with meeting people in community who I could trust to have conversations with because I guess I never felt as though I was comfortable enough to have that conversation until a lot later in my life and to actually unpack it. It took me a long time to find those connections and relationships.

And I think having Michelle as such a fierce advocate for people from different walks of life and cultures and who look different, I think that really ignites not just conversations within the family but within myself and beyond. It's like, you're right, why aren't these conversations being had in public? And why haven't I ever felt comfortable having those conversations in public? And then unpacking things from there.

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Ben recently asked me, "Why are you proud to be Australian? If there are things you're proud about, what are they? And what are you not proud of when it comes to being Australian?" And I found it really difficult to answer. He was like, "When you see the flag, how do you feel?" and I'm like, well, I'm kind of scared when I see it in a southern suburb and it's outside someone's house. Are they going to yell slurs at me if I walk past their garden or set their dog on me or something? I was thinking for a long time and I said to him, "I don't know." I guess our passport. When you're travelling and you whip out an Australian passport, there's a sense of pride. But maybe that's more a sense of privilege than pride. I also remember when I was travelling and hearing the Australian accent in an airport and being a bit grossed out but also being like, oh, is that what we all sound like? It's this strange, comforting thing. So I reflected on that, and I was like, oh, that's kind of nice, when you hear the Australian accent out of a group of people.

Even though I was born here and I can very easily adapt to my different cultures, at the same time, I'm very aware of my differences. And they were really highlighted when I went back to China and I was like, okay, these are definitely not my people, and then came back to Australia, and there was comfort in the culture here. But then those same comforts are what kind of irk me about about the place. But I think it's comfortable because family and friends are here. But in terms of the place, it's not really anyone's, unless you're First Nations. It's always a contentious thing - if you're proud to be Australian, what does that mean? And what does belonging to Australia actually mean? And I've had people say, "Well, it's not your fault. You didn't do anything." But then it's like, well, we're all reaping the rewards from what happened, so in some ways it is still on our hands, right?

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I guess bringing up my son, I want to give him the tools to be able to investigate and uncover where he feels he fits, because I feel as though our parents didn't have the time to do that. Also it's definitely a privilege to be able to have these conversations because our generation, we're so privileged, comparatively to our parents' generation. Then on top of that, my son's generation will have exponential amount of privilege compared to his grandparents' generation. I don't know if he'll have issues with class and race and how they kind of work in society. I want to make him conscious of issues and aware of his privilege but then also not be that parent that's just like constantly shoving it down his throat. It's really hard to strike that balance.

I remember my parents saying "You don't know what we've done, where we've come from." Hearing the stories from your parents, you're like, "How did you even survive?" I have one child versus the five they had. And then they were running a restaurant and basically financing their family members to come and live here and then getting into strife, bailing them out. It's like, how did you do it? It's nuts.

Tammy