

I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which I live and work, the Turrbal and Jagera people. I also pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge that this land was never ceded.

Dear Reader,

I was born in Cape Town, South Africa, pre the dismantling of the divisive apartheid. I applied for permanent residency with the Australian High Commission in Cape Town and through a rigorous process I was granted a visa and arrived in Melbourne in April of 1980. At the time I was 24. I was that confident about living in Australia permanently that I actually bought myself a one-way ticket! If you want to make your dreams a reality then you have to manifest it.

I left because of apartheid and being a person of colour in a country that never valued who and what I was. I was very clear as to why I wanted to leave and I think that was taken into consideration at the time of my interview. I was also a single female and Australia had sanctions in place against South Africa which also worked in my favour. My parents were devastated about my decision but they also understood my reasons.

In the seventies, many South Africans decided to migrate. Particularly people of colour. Canada was their preferred choice because it was accepting of taking in migrants under the skilled labour category. What people found unsettling about Canada was the contrasting weather. So the other choices were New Zealand or Australia.

At the time that I applied for my visa, Australia had certain visa categories in place. I would say that I fell under the skilled migration category. I was working in IT and I was at the top of my game. So when I went for my interview, I made sure that I had actually contacted at least 20 employment agencies. Employment agencies worked differently back then, platforms like Seek were not yet invented. It was 1979 and I had already received several positive replies from employment agencies saying, 'We don't see any issue with finding you a job.'

I applied to migrate in 1979. At first, I wanted to go to Canada because I had relatives living there. But Canada said I had to wait three months. So I applied for Australia instead. I would say that my school friend influenced my decision. She had always written good things about this country and the living conditions, and that I should join her and give it a go. So, I'd say that her positive experience influenced my decision to come here. I received a reply for an interview within six weeks after my application and soon after I was granted my PR.

I feel that those who knew of apartheid did not really understand how deeply divisive it was to the people of colour who lived there. The apartheid laws impacted on our careers. It impacted our lifestyle and it was a way to keep us within the cycle of poverty. That is what the apartheid government saw as being fit for all non-whites, black and brown alike. Segregation between whites and non-whites, aka people of colour, was strictly enforced and you could get arrested for defying these severe laws. When I was going to school, we had double decker buses. The bottom section of the bus was 'reserved' for white people only. The top section was meant for 'non-white' people only. Brown people and black people were allowed to mix socially but we weren't allowed to live in the same areas. Similarly, the 'immorality act' forbade relationships between whites and non-whites.



I went to a school that was meant for 'non-white' people only. So during my growing up years I got to mix with children from different ethnic backgrounds. When Australians refer to bullying, they often talk about lunchboxes. Well, we never got that in our schoolyard. You know, someone could bring samosas or a boring cheese and tomato sandwich and we would trade. So my lunchbox experience was memorable in many ways.

My school experience was really positive. I would say that bullying actually came from teachers. When I went to high school I was very fortunate to go to one of the top schools in Cape Town. And again, there was a huge ethnic background there. We did have white teachers in this school and that's where I encountered bullying. They used their white privilege to remind you how stupid you were. But they were the minority in a school majority of different ethnic races and predominantly people of colour.

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When I came to Australia, the trauma of living under apartheid forced me to seek out people from different ethnic backgrounds. I befriended migrants who, like myself, had moved to Australia due to political upheaval and trauma in their very own lives. So the question was never asked: did you come by boat or did you come by plane? That was not the issue. The issue was that we had all come through some type of trauma and it was that connection that actually was the glue holding us together.

I found it easy to bond with other migrants because I felt that we had something in common. I would say that I felt accepted because I chose my circle. We had similar traditions, similar taste in music, similar foods. Besides those migrants I befriended I also had my two South African friends who had come from similar backgrounds. And because we shared a house together, we created a home that felt very similar to the ones that we were raised in. So that helped with settling in. We didn't come here with our family so we created our own little family. I would say that coming here on my own has forced me to step out of my comfort zone. To get to know people from other demographics who have come out here under similar circumstances, but also to get to know the Australian lifestyle. And that's one of the things that I want to say about coming here. The choice was mine and I got to choose my friends. In South Africa choice and control was up to the apartheid government and you just had to suck it up.

I feel the word assimilation can create some angst in a migrant's life. When you are expected or told that you should assimilate. What does that mean? Does that mean that I'm expected to live the lifestyle that Australians do? Or does it mean that I get to pick and choose what is good and what is bad? I exercise my freedom to choose the former.

Yes, I do have an Australian passport, but my ethnic background still defines how I navigate my life especially when I'm with my community or my people or my tribe. This is where I feel the most happiest. But I can also be happy going to a barbie, hanging out on the beach and whatever. No, I don't indulge in alcohol and get off my face because back in South Africa we had a huge drinking problem. It was also one of the reasons why people were kept in that situational poverty. Alcohol and drugs were used as a reason to just anaesthetise yourself to what the reality is.

Australia has got a lot to offer. It has. Yes, it's known as the lucky country, but my interpretation of why it's the lucky country is a bit different. The fact that I have access to a library. To public spaces. To Medicare, a robust healthcare system. For the most part, I'm treated with dignity and respect. The fact that we can talk to each other and agree to disagree. Well, some of the time anyway. The genuine generosity plus the 'G'day mate. How're you doing?' In South Africa if I wanted to go to the beach, I would have to make sure that it was the beach that had the sign that

said I was welcome there, aka 'non-whites only'. I can go to any beach here. Yeah, I might be looked and stared at but it's my space just as much as everyone else's. And if they have an issue then that's their problem not mine.

I know that when I came here, I needed to heal. And so I never chose to acknowledge racism. By socialising with various ethnic groups, it was a healing process, but it also was a bit of naivete on my part. I can honestly say that I did experience racism in the workplace. When I got my first job with an IT company here, one of my female colleagues never failed to show her distaste towards me. Always she tried to get me into a toxic conversation to belittle me. But she didn't know that coming from South Africa, I was well-equipped to deal with small minded white people like herself. I chose not to engage with her petty bourgeois attitude towards me.

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My ex-husband is from Malaysia so I moved to Asia for a while, along with my children. My daughter was nearly seven and my son was nine going on ten. We moved there for a while to establish a business. My ex-husband also wanted the children to connect to their Malay roots. What we encountered during our time living in Malaysia was racism. My children were always reminded that they looked different and felt like they never belonged because of their mixed heritage (Malay and South African). Looking back on that time, I can say that Malaysia was a lesson on how to deal with racism. My children were forced very quickly to get to know who they are as human beings first before the colour of their skin and for what they looked like defined them. I'm fiercely proud of the principles and values I've passed onto my children because it's reflected in the way they now choose to navigate life. And that includes having a mum who became disabled while living in Malaysia.

I officially moved back to Australia in 2007 and I chose Meeanjin. The reason that I came to Meeanjin was because both of my children chose to study here. At the time, QUT and UQ were the only two universities that offered double degrees in what they wanted to study. I remember watching the television back in Naarm in the eighties and seeing Queensland, the beaches, the weather. It reminded me so much of Cape Town and I was overcome with nostalgia. But during Joh Bjelke's time it reminded me even more of apartheid. I saw Queensland as 'No! I would never want to live up there. This is like exchanging one apartheid for another.' But, here I am, living in Meeanjin. So I can honestly say that since my children were born here, went to school and university here, it has given me another perspective of what the Australian lifestyle is about.

There is a poem called *Desiderata*. My dad, because he knew how terrible apartheid was, put it up on the fridge in our house. I printed that poem when we lived in Malaysia and put it up on the fridge in our house as well. And when I made an album for each of my children, before they left with all the baby photos and whatever, I pasted *Desiderata* in there and there's a part in the poem that says:

*You are a child of the universe;
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.*

And that's the part that still resonates with me.

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What are my earliest memories of being in Australia? I have a few fond ones. The unpredictable weather in Naarm. After work on a Friday, just sitting in the city square on Swanston Street

to 'people watch' and to marvel at the different ethnicities. Watching the Rocky Horror Picture Show for the first time with everyone dressed up like a character from the movie. And joining in to do the Time Warp dance in sync with the characters on the screen. It was a top thing! Eating pancakes at the Pancake Parlour. Swimming until 9 p.m. at Elwood Beach because of daylight saving. No signs to remind me of where to sit, to eat, who to love, etc. And using public transport that was not segregated. Experiencing Yothu Yindi live for the first time. Attending a performance of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, an all Black American dance company that I would have never gotten to see in South Africa. Educating myself about the traumatic history of the First Nations and feeling overwhelmed by the coloniser's cruelty yet again. Then voting for the very first time. Because in South Africa, people of colour never could vote.

In 1994, while living in Malaysia, I was attacked and stabbed in the back. The knife severed my spinal cord resulting in paraplegia. This has been another learning curve for me and for my children. My disability does not define who I am as a woman, a parent, a disability advocate, an entrepreneur, an arts writer, a volunteer because I continue to contribute to society in a meaningful and valuable way.

I look upon these memories as being sweet, not bitter. I feel a sense of buoyancy about my 44 years in Australia because it has been 44 years of growth, regeneration and empowerment. Staying connected to my roots. Reconnecting with myself. Claiming and owning my place as a woman of colour with a disability.

Charmaine

Charmaine's kite concept

Design:	A book to tell my story because I love reading.
Colours:	The colours represent both the South African and Australian flags.
Images:	On the left, images from my life in South Africa while on the right, images from Australia.
Left page:	An explanation of the identity number system which was used during apartheid South Africa.
Right page:	<i>Desiderata</i> , a 1927 prose poem by the American writer Max Ehrmann.
Spine:	A quote from Nelson Mandela, the first black president of South Africa which reads "It always seems impossible until it's done."
Tail:	Ankara fabric featuring bold, intricate designs that reflect the culture and traditions of people from the African diaspora.
466/64:	Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island for the second time in 1964. Tata (isiXhosa word meaning father) Mandela was the 466th prisoner that year. His prison number remained 466/64.