

Dear Reader,

I was born in Malaysia and I arrived in Australia in 1988. I've been here for almost 40 years. I turned 50 recently. I did high school in Malaysia up to year seven and I came here when I was 14 and started year nine in Melbourne. I went to university in Melbourne, then I went overseas to Canada to work for a year. Then after that I went to New Zealand for four years, where I met my husband; came back to Darwin, had my daughter in Darwin; and then from Darwin moved to Brisbane. I've been in Brisbane now for nine years.



When my family arrived in Melbourne, we were in Richmond which was an area that was predominantly Vietnamese. There weren't many Malaysians. There was a small Fijian family there and I made friends with their children. Their children, a pair of Fijian twins, were my closest friends. They were new refugees and we went to the local school together. My brother and sister already did high school here so they sent for myself and my parents. I was born much later on when my parents, my dad was 60 and mum was 48, so my siblings were much older than me. They were already studying here, they had lives here. My parents and I came to Australia after the removal of the white Australia policy.

Dad was the only one in our family and family back in Malaysia to actually be that open minded, to send children away. It cost a lot in those days. I think it was very forward thinking at that time. Even though there were three races in Malaysia, predominantly Malay, Chinese and Indian, there wasn't a lot of opportunities for Chinese or Indian unless you had businesses. And going to university, it was mainly for Malays. So it either depended if you had money to go and study, say in the closest country Singapore. Or you would academically achieve by scholarships. Because my parents were elderly, they thought it's best that we move and join my siblings. And it worked out well. I wouldn't be where I am today otherwise. My parents have passed away now. And my brother too. So it's just my sister and I remaining.

Dad chose to be naturalised very early as well, surprisingly. He didn't have to. He was in his 70s when he came over. He didn't need to in his old age, it was just better that we all became Australians. Also, it was a time when Australia threatened, it did so finalise it later on, that all students who were permanent residents at university were considered foreigners/ and had to pay HECS as an international if you didn't convert to citizenship. So a group of my friends and I converted and a group of us didn't. Once you give up your Malaysian-ship you don't get it back. Some friends said, 'I'll wait and see.' But Dad was like, 'No, we'll do it. We'll do it. I mean, are we really going to go back? Are we really going to? We'll do it.'

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My parents spoke Cantonese and I can speak a bit but I don't write it so I'm kind of illiterate. And I tried to learn Chinese as an adult. So I went to Chinese school here and when I was living in New Zealand. When I tried to learn the language I felt a little bit ostracized because you had left your home and decided a foreign environment was your new home. And so coming back to learn your language, you're not well received. You're not accepted if you show more Australian qualities.

I guess, in the early days I didn't feel as Australian. Because though you go to school, when you try to speak there's still an accent and all that. I still remember when I lived in Melbourne, you either were with the migrant community, meaning working for the restaurants, that maybe your

parents or relatives or extended family own. Or that you still practice, call it cultural behaviours. I still have a strong group of friends who were migrants, but we're the ones that didn't really stay "Asian".

Only now that we have our own children, you tend to promote cultural practices more. Like Lunar New Year. It's the dragon/lion dance and the red packet, meanings and that kind of thing. But when we were here as the first generation, not so much. We kind of still ate the food, but not really adopted other practices. And it was probably because we were trying to assimilate into white society. And there wasn't this kind of inclusivity at the time.

Funny now being a mother, I was just reflecting on it with my family. I told my daughter, you know, I could have been the tiger mum and forced you to do piano and all those things. But I didn't, and I don't know if I regret that. I thought, "Should I have become like that? Work on things until they are perfect. Ensure that my daughter knows her place and works hard". This is what our Asian identity says we need to be, because of competition. But in the Australian lifestyle you can be whoever you want to be at a time that suits you!

I did feel pressure from my father to work hard and to achieve. We have three children in our family, I'm the youngest. My sister did arts and social work, and my parents were critical of her choice. My brother was to be an accountant, but it didn't work. So he set up his own business— as you do, an Asian restaurant. Both my siblings had non-Asian spouses whom they met in Australia. So that left me. Dad's hopes were on me. I guess I achieved all that he wanted me to achieve before he passed away, apart from marrying my own kind. When my dad was alive, I was going out with someone who spoke our same dialect from Hong Kong. And I still remember when we broke up, Dad saying, 'Well what did you do wrong? Because you guys broke up' and I'm like, but you're my dad, aren't you supposed to be on my side?

And I did try to raise my daughter so she is more culturally aware. I had good intentions before she was born. I thought we would, you know, go to Chinese language classes. But I didn't want to force it. I was more, I guess, conscious that it's a fine line between making her hate that or regret not embracing your own culture. I'd rather she showed interest independently, which I'm very pleased she is doing now, by becoming the cultural ambassador at school. I was like, 'Really?!'

It's funny because her words to me were 'Am I cultural enough to be a cultural ambassador? Like, you know, I'm not like these other kids at school who eat maybe Japanese food for lunch.' She has sandwiches, the usual. 'I don't speak another language. Do you think I'm enough?' I said, 'Well, it's up to you, right?' As long as you have an appreciation of knowledge of other cultures, it doesn't mean you have to suddenly be like that.

So I do find the kids make you more aware of where you're from because they ask you more questions as they grow up. Like, 'So what is it being Malaysian? Is it just eating savoury food in the morning so you don't have cereal?'

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I think in my early days here there was more of a minimisation of being Asian. Why I rejected or found it hard to be Australian was when I started university. My sister and my family moved up to Queensland and my dad was in a nursing home. And it was Hervey Bay and I'd go home for Christmas, people in public would shout out, "Go back to where you are from". At that time it was VERY white so it was hard to feel like I belonged.

But as more generations grow up here maybe the sense of belonging gets watered down. Or

it might get, I don't know, a little bit more streamline. Because I'm thinking more back to my nephews, who are older than my daughter, who were born here. Initially there was a big shun against being anything Asian because you'd be, you know, teased at school. So the only thing Asian they did was probably have yum cha. But I think the environment in today's time, like with my daughter, with early education, so forth, there's more of an acceptance and more of a curiosity of where I belong.

Now I feel like I belong more but you know, it's been a long process. I'm 50 now. And I think foreign acceptance of Australians being not blond-haired, blue-eyed, not a cowboy, not a surfer, it is changing. But in some ways it hasn't changed much at all.

Queensland has changed quite a lot, even since the time I started living here, compared to when I initially just came and visited when my sister worked here and my dad lived here during my university days. Queensland has always been a big country town, and the more remote you are, the worse it is. It's generally not very inclusive. It may have that perception that it's multicultural, it isn't at its roots. The First Nations referendum and a number of things showed that. In Queensland it's the highest 'No' referendum vote. And if it's 'no' for certain things, then it's going to be a 'no' for other things. Same for LGBTIQ+. It's the strongest 'no' again in Queensland. It's up to the next generation to change this and continue momentum.. The children can stand up for their cultures and truly believe in these policies, act upon them.

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Usually people can't work out where I am from. I guess you can call some of us migrants good chameleons. We can integrate well. Hence wherever we go, we kind of pick up a little bit. I don't know if that's bad, does that mean I fully lost who I am?

What makes me feel Australian? Maybe it's the years passed. You always try harder to be "whiter" but there's only so much one can do. I have made many contributions to this country, like representing Australia through my work overseas. And now I've created new life in Australia adding to the Australian population, my daughter. I am more confident as an Australian but "I am still Malaysian". It's okay if I'm not totally white, that's okay.

At my daughter's school, people have said to me, 'Are you really her mother because your skin's different?' Like they would accept her father being who he is because their skins were similar. I've been mistaken for the nanny or the au pair. And I also don't say I'm Malaysian when I go back to my country of birth. I'm not totally Malaysian anymore.

Recently I've been more focused on my daughter, and making sure she identifies as to what is now Australian. And I've now become more aware about ensuring, I guess, more passing the legacy to her, that she's more aware that the feeling of belonging comes from you and your choice and it's up to you with your choice of who you want to be. Is it affiliated with language? Sure, that's up to you. Is it the particular food you eat? The ways by which you do things culturally? Embrace your cultural identity and you choose what you want to choose or to embrace and it does not make you any less Australian.

Isabelle