

Dear Reader,

I was born in Rockhampton and grew up in Yeppoon. Mum was born in Nueva Ecija, north of Manila in the Philippines and she has six siblings, one sister and five brothers. Her sister, who is older than her, moved to Japan and married a Japanese man. Mum was thinking of staying in the Philippines but then my dad, who is Australian, got in contact via letter. An Australian man with a Filipino wife had set up a matchmaking business in Rockhampton. Dad visited for a couple of weeks and met Mum's friends and family. He proposed before he went back to Australia but Mum wasn't sure so she stayed in the Philippines and they continued to be pen pals. A few months later, Mum decided she would take the biggest gamble of her life and join Dad, which is a wild concept to me now that I'm older. She came over to Yeppoon in 1989. She was 24.



I think I asked Mum why she moved and she was like, life in the Philippines is really hard. The wages are so low and her sister had gone to Japan so she thought, give Australia a go. Dad organised what was called a Fiance Visa at the time and the conditions were that they were to marry within the first three months of Mum arriving in Australia. So they did. There's a 17 year age gap so that's wild. But quite common in those days. She said the one thing she asked of Dad was to have kids.

In Yeppoon where I grew up there was a small Filipino community then so Mum had a few Filipino friends. Mum said there were less than 10 Filipinos in town when she arrived. And their kids, I would say they'd be like my best friends, like sisters. One of Mum's friends, I remember she had two kids, Shania and Chanelle. They were around my age so we hung out a lot. Our dads are Australian, and our mums are Filipino so I think when we were together, we're like, 'Oh yeah, this is how it is.' Now there's a big Filipino community in Yeppoon. Mum used to say, 'Oh I know that person, I know that person.' Like they used to know everyone who had migrated and moved to Yeppoon or Rockhampton. You all kind of know each other but now the Filipino population has just grown so much. Mum's like, 'There's a lot of young ones now. They've very different.'

I don't remember much at primary school but there probably weren't that many people of different cultures at school. And then definitely in high school there weren't. I went to a state school for my first three years of high school and then to a private school after that. But I remember being like "the Asian kid" but I kind of leaned into it, like, 'Yeah, I'm the Asian one.' But I don't think I ever really identified as Filipino until a few years ago when I was like, 'Oh, it's probably really important.' I used to just think of myself as a white Australian growing up. But then other people were like, 'Oh that's the half Asian kid.' It was kind of my nickname in high school. There was another Filipino girl in my high school class, but yeah, that was about it.

At school, being known as "the Asian girl", I definitely did not want to connect with my Filipino heritage. I just wanted to be like my peers. I was like, 'I'm one of you. We are all the same, I like sport and whatever else is happening.' I did have good friends at school but I think I did feel a bit like an outsider... I don't know. Except for the Asian thing, I didn't really notice much racism at the time. But as I've gotten older, I'm like, there's little things. Like even in my first job in journalism I was going out to interview farmers and stuff. I'd be like, 'Alright, act really Australian.' Because central Queensland is quite racist. Mining is a huge thing out there so a lot of people are very conservative.

Being in regional towns you definitely notice, 'I'm the only different coloured person here.' Even the other night I took Dad to the bowls club at Carina and I was like, 'Oh my god, I'm the only

person who's not white here' and they're all wearing like, Australia Day things. I don't feel safe. Obviously there are good and accepting people, but it just feels like it's more common to have negative experiences.

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Mum never taught us much Tagalog growing up. She always spoke English because she wanted to have better English, she wanted to assimilate into Australian culture. She always told me, 'I didn't want to teach you Tagalog because I wanted to learn English.' But she would always be speaking Tagalog to her Filipino friends, so I picked up a bit from listening to them.

I wish that I learnt Tagalog growing up though. I joined as a volunteer for a Filipino playgroup nearby that meets every fortnight. So that's one way for me to reconnect to the community and learn the language for myself. I was like, surely there's other young Filipinos out there that are half or in the same boat as me where they didn't learn Tagalog or just want to be more connected. Yeah, we'll see how it goes. Mum will be excited.

I also want to learn Tagalog because my aunty who moved to Japan only speaks Japanese and Tagalog and then my grandparents and a lot of my aunts and uncles only speak Tagalog. A few of my uncles, they kind of try and do a little bit of conversational English but it's not like anything deep. A lot of my younger cousins learn English in school so they can communicate with me. It makes me really sad that I don't have that connection with my grandparents and other relatives. When I talk to friends about their experience with their grandparents, they're so close and they always saw each other and did things together and I was like, 'Wow, that sucks.' Because if my relatives were here I'd want to see them all the time and develop a relationship. And even though they're in the Philippines it'd be nice to have a relationship, like a better relationship with them. So yeah, hopefully I learn Tagalog and I can go to the Philippines for a month or something and hang out more with my grandparents and cousins and uncles and aunts and that sort of thing.

I have an older brother who's six years older than me. We don't talk about these things but I don't think he's connected to his Filipino heritage. He has a child as well and the last time I went to the Philippines, my grandparents were like, 'The only thing we want is to meet our grandchild.' And I was like, it's probably not going to happen because I don't know if it matters as much to my brother and his fiancée. So that's sad. It broke my heart.

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Mum took me to the Philippines for the first time when I was 10 months old, but the first memory I have there was when I was maybe like ten or something? And we were driving around through the slums and that sort of thing and I was like, 'Oh my god, this is how people are living?' And we're going to the Mall of Asia, which is like a big American style mall. All very clean and so many shops and restaurants. And that blew my mind as a kid to see that, like the inequality. And we'd be staying in a hotel and you can see the shopping centre from there and also like this barricaded area where all the people are living. That was definitely a huge turning point. I was like, that could have been my life. And I think I've always felt that since then, that Mum moved to Australia for a better life. That easily could have been my life.

It was only in the past couple of years that I started asking Mum about why she came to Australia. We never talked about that growing up. I think she thought there was going to be a lot of opportunities in Australia. Obviously it's a sacrifice to leave your family. I asked my grandparents about that the last time I was in the Philippines in 2022. Mum had been back for a couple months and I decided to meet her there because I thought, 'I don't know how much longer I'm going to

be able to see my grandparents. I've got to take the opportunity.' My grandparents, Mum's mum and dad, are in their mid to late eighties. So I went over for a week and I interviewed them but I obviously don't speak Tagalog, so I kind of asked in English and Mum translated and they answered in Tagalog and she translated back. So I asked them, 'Is it worth the sacrifice of your two daughters living in another country? Like I cannot imagine.' And they're like, 'It's all worth it. Wouldn't have this roof over our heads if they hadn't left.' I'm like, that's crazy, heartbreaking. But that's the reality. There's so many migrants that have to do that, I suppose.

I know Mum said she wanted to go to university when she came here because she was doing accounting in the Philippines. And Dad was like, 'No, you can just work at the resort here.' There was a big resort in Yeppoon that was there for ages. Dad worked there for 30 years and Mum was there like 20 plus years. She did accounting and housekeeping and waitressing. And I resent my dad for not letting Mum study because she could have had, like, you know, whatever career she wanted. And that definitely sticks in my mind. Everything I've done since I can remember, I've always been like, 'You're lucky to be here. You've got this opportunity. Your mum moved here and she wants you to have whatever.'

Growing up in Australia, the positive is definitely the opportunity to get an education and pursue whatever career you want to do. Knowing about Mum's experience and what life is like in the Philippines, I think I'm very like, just grateful for the little things. Because I love the province in the Philippines where mum grew up. Beautiful. But there's no jobs and the wages are so low. I highly doubt I would be a journalist if I was born and went to school in the Philippines. So, yeah, positives, all the opportunities and being able to be independent and move out of home and do whatever.

And I suppose the negatives is also like the same thing. Like I just feel this intense pressure to be grateful for everything. Which I am. But it's like there is an unspoken expectation. I don't think Mum put that on me or like meant that. I think I put that on myself from seeing everything growing up. But yeah, I don't know... I just feel that intense pressure to make the most of life because that could have been my life. Like I could have not had any of these opportunities.

But then I also think it's a positive experience. I think it's given me a lot of empathy because I'm able to put myself in another person's shoes. Like even no matter who it is, a conservative farmer, I'm like, what would it be like in their position? And yeah, empathy is like a huge part of everything I do. And I think that's because of thinking about Mum's experience and where she grew up and why she came here and that sort of thing.

But I'm still kind of finding out this other side of myself that I haven't really explored. I want to call myself Filipino but do I know enough to call myself Filipino? And like, I don't even speak Tagalog. So yeah, I'm trying to have that connection. And then with Australia, I kind of don't want to have that connection anymore. Because I'm like, it's so bad what we've done to First Nations people and yeah... I don't know.

I grew up quite involved with the Filipino community but I definitely drifted away from that as I got older, away from going to the community things. So I lost those connections to my Filipino heritage. But now I think, as much as I could have grown up there having such a hard life and stuff, I want to be proud of also being Filipino. And so I want to celebrate all the different things we have. I remember when I spoke to my grandparents, my grandma said, through translation, 'Filipinos are hard workers and you should be proud of that no matter where we are.' Like, that's the thing that sticks.

## **Erin**