

Dear Reader,

I was born in 1998 on the Gold Coast. My mum is Chinese and my dad is Korean. My mum came over to Australia in the eighties. She was working as a physics teacher in China. She was really young and she heard a colleague raving about Australia. That it was a great place and beautiful, a land of opportunity. And it piqued if she could go. At first he was very adamant that she stay and said, 'Why would you want to go over there?' Then after a while, he sort of changed his mind and then gave her the money and she ended up on a plane to Sydney. She enrolled into an English language school to learn to speak English. And during that time she was working part time jobs, like cleaning, seamstressing, things like that. She lived above a KFC shop and still remembers the smell, I think the KFC is still there to this day.



And then with my dad, he said that he had no aspirations or goals when he was younger, so was just flying by the seat of his pants. He had a friend who asked him, 'Oh Joe, do you wanna come to Australia with me?' And so my dad went, 'Oh, okay, I'll go with you.' He told me he was pretty reluctant to go, but because his friend was really hyping him up, so he relented and thought, 'Okay, alright, I'll go.' So they bought tickets to Sydney, but then his friend actually got tuberculosis. And during that time, if you had TB you couldn't go to Australia and so my dad ended up going by himself. And on the plane he told me he freaked out because he had no plan. Because the friend had planned everything. So he went, 'Oh no, I've got no place to stay.' But then he met an older Korean woman on the plane who was like, 'Oh, you're coming to Australia? I've got a room that you can stay in.' So he ended up staying with this woman. During that time, he was also working odd jobs, starting as a janitor and other cleaning jobs to support himself while he was studying at the same English language school as my mum. That was where they met.

So, yeah, they met in Sydney and got married there. And then they had their first three kids. So my oldest brother, then my older sister and then my other older brother. They told me that Sydney was getting more expensive to live in, their family was growing and it was getting harder to rent places and so finally they moved to the Gold Coast. They then had me and my little sister and are still living there now.

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When I was in primary school on the Gold Coast there were quite a few Asian kids but not a huge mix of different cultures. But then in high school it was pretty diverse, actually. So I have a lot of Asian friends mixed with my white and like, indigenous friends too. So I didn't feel isolated or felt culturally different. But actually thinking back now, I do remember asking my mum not to pack me Asian food for my school lunches because I felt embarrassed because it was different. But that was when I was really young, in primary school. When I got older, because I had more mixed friends, they were interested in what I was eating saying things like, 'Oh this looks so good, it smells so good.' But when you're a kid, you really do want to fit in and not be singled out in a bad way.

For the most part school was a positive experience. I think the hardest thing was navigating the difference between being at home and being out in Australian society. For instance, you'd be out in school and be bringing all these new ideas back to parents who are still ingrained in their culture. My dad grew up very traditional and I think back then, women's roles were a bit more strict and traditional in Korean society. Whereas in China, I think because of communism, the women's role was getting more modernised and they had more rights. So it definitely did show sometimes. But

other than that, I think both cultures share the same base Confucian values. So the only difference was about the whole women's roles thing. But actually my mum believes in letting the man run the household since she is also religious, well Christian. So she kind of let my dad bring us up.

Mum was a child during the Cultural Revolution. She remembers being handed that red book and watching the kids smash things, going through people's houses. And then my dad, he grew up after the Korean War so he grew up with starvation and lots and lots of hardship. He'd tell me stories and I just go, that's crazy. And then, he found it hard to relate to us and understand us. Because, given the vastly different cultures and time periods, how can you? We're so different, we grew up so differently. How can we ever understand each other? And so, yeah, at home it was just really hard. It was kind of like living in two different worlds. I didn't notice it so much when we were little kids, but more when we became teenagers and with hormones and becoming adults on our own. It was just stuff like, Dad expecting you to be home all the time. And especially with us girls. He definitely did not let us go out as often as our brothers and we couldn't go to sleepovers or stay very long at friends' houses. And so we kind of fought back on that because it was very unfair for me and my sisters. And then it was just kind of expected that we do the housework all the time. Even now, they always call us girls to do things around the house rather than our brothers. And our brothers would just be lying around doing nothing. We'd be all the time, 'Why don't you get them to do something? Like come on, they're not doing anything.' Me and my sisters just wanted us to be equal and share the burden. So yeah, I know they're a product of their time and everything. We try to make it work.

At home we speak mostly English and a bit of Chinese. With name calling for sure we use English but for everyday stuff Mum made sure to teach us a bit of conversational Chinese. My mum is a Chinese teacher at a school so she tried really hard to get us to learn it, like running her own Chinese school for us kids at home. Sadly, none of us really took it on board, which really sucks. I wish my mum forced us to because now I'm really regretting it. I'm like, this would have been so useful. Every so often I do find that I really miss speaking Mandarin. So whenever I go home, I'll talk to Mum in Mandarin and she'll talk back to me. It kind of makes me feel closer to her, you know? Dad tried to teach all five of us siblings Korean and after one lesson, he was like, 'No, too much chaos. I can't do this.' No patience. So we never learnt Korean.

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Growing up, my whole family would make a trip to China and Korea about every 5 years. During these trips I felt a weird sense of belonging. Actually it felt kind of freeing because it felt like I fit in with these people. I blended in visually and so I loved the freedom of the anonymity. But I also felt completely like in a different world where we look similar but I've no idea what anyone is saying and our lives are so different. I can understand a little bit of Mandarin but with Korean, I had no idea. So if I didn't speak they didn't give me a second glance, but when I spoke they could tell I was from overseas. But when I'm with relatives, that's when I feel really out of place because I can't understand them. And then, they kind of get disappointed in me and my family because they're like, 'Why don't you teach these kids how to properly speak it?' And then, like, they're trying to speak to me and we're trying to understand each other but we can't. I try to find other ways to connect to my family, like through my art. My relatives love my cartoons and drawings, and so I often gift it to them whenever we go on these trips.

But I think that's the only time I really do feel a bit out of place. Walking down the streets and everything, it's not so much fitting in, but kind of like, 'Oh, this is what my life could have been if I wasn't living in Australia?' It's just such a different world. When I walk the streets in Australia I don't really feel like I stand out. Until I walk past a mirror or like one of those reflective windows and I'm like, 'Oh, right.' Like the other day, I used a film camera and I got some film back and it

shocked me a bit when I looked at the pictures. I was with a group of Caucasian friends and I saw me and I was like, 'Oh, that's what I look like. I look different.' On the very, very rare occasions when my family went out to eat when I was younger, and if it was like a predominantly white restaurant, I'd be like, 'Oh I feel so different, like everyone's looking at us.' I think realising that you are different, that was quite jarring. It didn't really happen all the time, but when it did, it really, kind of made me want to withdraw when I was younger, but now, definitely not.

I never really thought about my cultural identity when I was at school because I didn't really feel different. I never felt like I needed to fit in because I did have friends from different backgrounds. So I never really had to think about it too hard until I got older and then it became like this identity crisis. When you're young you do want to fit in but when you get older you're like, what sets me apart? Especially in the arts. You're like, 'I have to find a niche'. When I was at art school I did, like go through an identity crisis and I wanted to explore my cultural identity. Because I never did, at all. I was out of touch with my Asian background and I did feel really ashamed by that. And so I kind of used art to work through that, especially printmaking because it has such a rich cultural history in China. Through printmaking I felt this tie with my Chinese heritage.

And I hate to say it, but I feel more closely connected with my Chinese side because of that whole gender thing in Korea. I really detest that kind of attitude. And in Korean society it's so pronounced and there's a lot of stuff that I don't agree with when it comes to Korean culture and society. So I kind of distanced myself from that. But I've been trying to get back and connect with it.

So now I'm still navigating my cultural identity through my art and trying to find different ways to discover myself. Because since then I'm starting to rethink things about culture, like, culture's great, but sometimes it means being born into like a set of values and ideas. And I'm thinking, 'Is culture really limiting or is it really good for, like, belonging to something? Does belonging mean conforming to similar beliefs and experiences?' So it's very ambivalent, my relationship with my cultural identity. I feel like it's a process that's going to be an ongoing thing till the day I die, right?

Australia can feel like home, but then other people are constantly reminding you all the time that you're an outsider. Like when they ask where you're from, it kind of feels like you have to justify your existence here. Can you explain why you're here? I do feel a sense of belonging here in terms of, like lifestyle, work life and friends and everything. Does Australia feel like home? As opposed to the alternatives? Yeah, I think it does. Maybe I'm still figuring it out. It feels like home for now. But I don't know. I was thinking I would love to travel later on in my life, maybe live in China or Korea for a period of time. I don't know, maybe one of those will feel more like home.

My parents don't pressure us about maintaining our cultural heritage. They don't really expect it but it would make them happy. And I think it would be important to them as well. And important to me too. I'd love to continue it. I think I will ask my parents way more questions. Because it's only a few years ago that I got really interested in their immigration story. Like it just dawned on me... It's huge, leaving a place that you're comfortable with. Like your family's there and you wanted to have such a big radical change in your life. And just taking this big leap of faith. Like, I can't imagine myself doing that. I was just lying in bed being like, 'Oh my gosh, that's crazy!'

The last time I was home, I sat my parents down over a cup of tea and we just talked a lot about them migrating. And the way they talked, I think they were just so happy that someone asked them. Especially one of their kids. We never really talked about these stories growing up. I think it's because of us too. Whenever they try to talk to us we'd be like, 'Oh my gosh, not this story again.' I don't think there were that many opportunities and they were just like 'Eh.' So when I did talk to them about it they were so happy to talk about it, recounting these different things. And my dad, who's usually like, very stoic and doesn't really show emotion that much... he was like, laughing and jumping up pretending to be like when he was younger when he used to work as a

janitor at a Chinese restaurant or something. Yeah, so it was really good. I really want to ask them again and make a proper book about their immigration story so it's like a record of how they came here. We could record it for our descendants.

Ruth