

Dear Reader,

I was born in East Ham in London. My dad is Egyptian and my mum's English, so I grew up with a bit of a cross-cultural kind of background, I suppose. My dad came to London when he was probably in his early twenties or mid-twenties I think. But I actually grew up in Essex which is a bit further out. I would say it was a reasonably diverse area. Like, where I went to primary school was a very Indian and Pakistani kind of area. And then when I went to secondary school we moved to a different place not far, maybe half an hour away or something. And that was probably more white, more English and a lot of Jews as well. But at school there was enough of a mixture of cultures that I didn't feel different. They weren't exclusively white schools or anything like that.



Growing up I never lived in Egypt, but there was pretty regular holidays there. I'd spend two or three weeks, at least, every year probably from the age of about 5 to 18 or something. Often I'd go by myself or I'd go with a family friend on the plane and then I'd stay with my Egyptian family. I sort of understand a bit of Arabic but I don't speak any more as I don't really use it. But, yeah, these trips to Egypt were a big part of my life growing up. There was like my uncle and aunt and a couple of cousins that I would spend all my time with regularly and there were certain things we did that I associate with those trips. Like, proper mango juice that you can't get here. My wife Lil, who's Australian, gets very offended when I say the mangoes are no good here compared to Egyptian mangoes. Obviously, you don't drink alcohol in Egypt so they'd have all these juice places dotted around. And you'd get a big mango juice and sugarcane juice that my cousin always used to laugh and say, 'It's like the Egyptian beer' because it had a big head on it. And then all kinds of other juices, it's really fantastic.

We didn't have any Egyptian family in England, just my dad. But whilst there was no family there, there were lots of Egyptian friends. My mum's family are pretty traditional English so it was an interesting mix. There'd be my dad's friends and they'd come over for Eid and they'd be fasting and stuff during Ramadan. There'd be big get-togethers, everybody would bring food over and people would go to each other's houses and all that sort of stuff. Which was a big part of growing up there, I suppose. Yeah.

I feel like maybe when I was younger, I was more connected with the Egyptian side of things. Then as I got older and went to uni and stuff I think maybe it became less so. I went to uni in Nottingham, which is a couple of hours north of London. I suppose I wanted to get that distance. I wanted to break away from just home life really. So that probably added to a sense of removal from that part of my life. And the trips to Egypt became less regular and the time between trips got bigger and now the gap is huge. So I feel like I've lost a bit of connection to that side of me and my life in a way. But it must've still been important to me to maintain some connection because that's where I proposed to my wife. That was the last time I was there, in 2010. I think I was 32? So yeah, a long time ago now.

The reason why I moved to Australia was to be with Lil. When I was at university, I did an exchange in Hong Kong for six months and I met my wife there. She's from Brisbane and we did long distance for ages. She came over to the UK for a while and then I came to Australia for a year in 2007 or 2008. But then I went back to finish off my architect's registration and she came and lived with me for about five years. And then we got engaged over there and then moved here for good in 2012.

It was a difficult decision to move here because it's a long way. And you know with, like my mum's health and stuff, you really feel that distance. But it was made easier because of the year I spent here. I had established some friendships that I've maintained since then. So it wasn't like coming to a place completely new. But I don't have any family here so it was still a big decision. I think it was hard for my parents.

* * * *

My first impressions of Australia... before my first trip here in 2005 I didn't really know anything about Australia to be honest. I watched *Neighbours* growing up so that was literally it. Like *Neighbours* and maybe *Home and Away*. People in Australia are always shocked how popular *Neighbours* was. It was so big. Like everybody was watching *Neighbours* every day. I think that's the only reason the show kept going for so long, because of all the English people watching it.

But yeah, I really just came because I wanted to see Lil. And I hadn't actually thought about what the country would be like. But it was a good trip, that first trip. It's a pretty country. I did a fair bit of traveling around. I went to Straddie for the first time and that was great. That was the only bit of beach that I did. It was so, kind of wild there, but I loved it. I went to Melbourne and Sydney and Brisbane as well. They're all great cities but they're not much different from European cities. Slightly less old.

Now that I've lived here for 12 years, I do like the outdoors kind of life in Australia and it's much more year round here. And I like the light. As in, whilst the days don't get very long they don't get very short either. The winters in England are just grey and dark. And some days it's like the sun never comes out. So yeah, the shortness of the days there and the darkness of the winter days is horrible. But I do like the cold as well and I think I realised I missed that. You know when you get those really crispy cold days and it's frosty and it's sunny but it's freezing. And remembering the types of walks that we would have done in the cold. After I finished studying I worked in London and London is so multicultural. That is the other thing I miss. And I know there are other cultures in Brisbane, but they're often in some other places that you don't necessarily go to on a regular basis. Whereas London is much more the melting pot.

But I don't want to live in the UK anymore. I do miss being there, I suppose because of family and friends. Like I've made some friends here, but not in the same number and not the same long-standing kind of relationships. And I do miss that. And I miss certain other things as well. Food and... you know, there's always going to be things you miss that you can't quite get the same stuff. But at the same time, I don't want to live there either. You see how much space the average person, or even someone doing quite well, has to live in London and it makes you go, 'I'm better off in Brisbane.' Like the places are really tiny. And I love winter here. Winter here is perfect, like a dream. I wish it was winter all year round.

* * * *

Other than the UK, Australia and Hong Kong, I also lived in the Netherlands for six months. And now I'm here, officially Australian, and I'm sort of going through the same thing as my dad and it's something I never thought would happen. My dad's been in London for so long and he always regarded himself as Egyptian. But in Egypt they know that he's sort of not Egyptian because he's been away for so long. And now the same thing is sort of happening to me as well. It's a weird thing. I don't know, maybe it's happening with both my Egyptian and British sides! I'm like, where am I? Where am I from? In a way, I'm a bit of this and a bit of that but am I from any one place? And it's something I'm struggling to come to terms with. I don't know. I don't know where I'm from now. I'm from everywhere and nowhere.

Sometimes I find it an uncomfortable space to be in. Because it is nice in some ways to be from one culture and to be clearly from that place. But then again, I think it makes me have maybe a more interesting outlook on life, by having all these other experiences and things. So I don't know. Sometimes I feel I'm comfortable with that, and other times I'm like, 'Where am I from? I don't know where I'm from.' When people ask me where I'm from I usually say England first. But then I'll add, 'My dad's Egyptian.' That's usually how I answer that. So I do feel English still. But I suppose the longer I'm here, the less that will be. And with the kids as well that sort of changes things again. I think as I grow more connections and more roots in Australia, Australia will become a much bigger part of my life.

I'm interested in this sense of being part of many cultures, but sort of in between them in a way. And I think that's something I've always kind of grappled with a bit and have explored through art in an abstract way. I've done paintings of, sort of in-betweeny type spaces. When I first started, it was like lots of underpasses and bridges. I don't know if people can see any of what I've been talking about in the work so I think I am keen to explore it in a more literal kind of way. But I don't know quite how yet. I think, the last couple of years with the kids and even with my job and stuff, I have devoted less time to art because I just haven't had the time. But I feel like I need to find some new way of looking at things or doing things. I don't really have friends I talk about these things with so my artwork is my way of exploring and understanding it a bit.

My kids don't look quite like me. They look like they've got a nice tan but people just assume they're white Australians. So they're probably not going to get asked those questions, like, 'Where are you from?' But I am keen for them to have a bit of an understanding of me and also of their grandparents and Egypt. You know, all these different parts of their lives, as well as their Australian family of course. I think it's important, and I sometimes think I haven't done enough. Even with myself, like with religion. I'm not strict at all. I used to fast, for a long time and since I was quite young, but since I've been in Australia this has been rare. I'm basically a non-practicing Muslim really. The only thing I do is I still don't eat pork. And if I was in a mosque, I probably would pray. But I don't regularly go to a mosque or anything. My dad was quite good at showing me these things and teaching me these things. But I've never done any of that with my own children. I think a lot of that has to do with family and friends and I don't have those Egyptian or Arab communities here that I have any connection with. I don't, for example, celebrate Eid. That's something that I'm like, 'That's a shame, we should do that. Because Eid is like Christmas and the kids don't really understand anything about that. Well, if I told them there were presents associated with it, they'd be like, 'Yeah, yeah presents. Let's do Eid.' Definitely.

I don't think they're fully aware that they have Egyptian heritage. Like, they call my dad Gedo, which is granddad in Arabic. But they don't even think about that, they think it's just his name. They don't think that's the Arabic word for granddad or anything. I would like them to know more about Egyptian culture even if they don't choose to embrace it. You know, I'm not like my dad where I'm like, 'You have to find a Muslim Egyptian in Brisbane.' But I would like for them to know a bit more so I'm keen to take them to Egypt. I didn't want them to go to Egypt when they were very young because it's pretty full on. Kind of an assault on your senses. But my daughter's nine now and my son's five so I feel like they're at the age where they could cope with it now. Hopefully they can start to get a bit of a sense of this whole other part of our family. I've got a massive family, I don't even know 20% of my family. And Egypt is so completely different to what life is like here and in the UK. It's good for them to know a bit more and see a bit more, and hopefully they will visit some time soon.

Samir