

Out West

I tell people '*I grew up out West*' - where west could be Footscray, or anywhere west of the Indian Ocean.

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Dad spends my birth typing away on a laptop in the hallway. Men aren't allowed into the birthing ward, this is Pakistan in the 1980s. The nurse comes out to tell Dad that I'm on my way. He springs into action, demanding he be allowed in to take an active role in my birth. The nurse relents if he agrees to put on scrubs, gloves and a hair net. By the time he's fully dressed and inside the ward I've arrived.

A panicked room as a little blue baby lies in the doctor's arms. My dad frantic looking on, yells for help as nurses scurry down hallways. An oxygen tank sits in the corner but there is no way to pump it into this tiny human, until nurses appear trailing tubes and an infant sized facemask. Lucky for me they arrive before the serious brain damage stage of oxygen deprivation, but slightly after the extreme stress response from my parents.

Over my first hours the blue fades and everyone in the maternity ward puzzle over this canary child born to white parents. It turns out I have high levels of bilirubin and a hefty case of jaundice. I spend my first week of life blindfolded inside a box that blasts me with blue light to turn my skin white.

I learn from a young age that my outward appearance doesn't always match how I feel inside.

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When we live in Yemen the young boys in our neighbourhood call out '*shoof shoof, Amreeki!*' - *look look, Americans*, as my brother and I walk down the street. Sometimes the calls are accompanied by hails of stones, brandished sticks, occasional bags of rubbish plucked from the piles that lined the roads where we live.

I learn early on to yell back '*la la, Ustraali!*' - *no, no, Australian*. The boys puzzle over this response. For them my outer whiteness is a signal of the Western world, and the Western world is America. I call out '*Ustraali, kanga kanga!*' and mimic a kangaroo hopping. Smiles on all sides as boys both brown and white hop up and down the street yelling '*kanga kanga!*'

I learn that sometimes a pantomime can break a language barrier.

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In Kenya at age fourteen I feign a love of rugby to solidify my link with Australia, the country I've lived in the least. I wear my Wallabies jersey with pride and spend my afternoons on dodgy dial-up to Wikipedia, learning the rules of the game. My hope is that with enough theoretical knowledge I can make my boarding school's junior varsity team without having to actually tackle anyone.

In the first training session prior to tryouts I get kicked in the shin by Andrew Kimber and spend the rest of the afternoon sitting on the sidelines. I neglect to ice my shin until dinner when one of my friends notices the tennis ball sized lump of blue flesh swelling below my short shorts. The doctor x-rays me and tells me I'm not allowed to run for the next six months. I'm just relieved I never had to tackle anyone.

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The rugby team go on to win the premiership that year, but our school is thoroughly trounced at track and field. This is the last year our predominantly white school enters in the track and field.

I learn that us *wazungu* cannot compete against East Africa's running dominance.

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I arrive 'home' to Australia when I finish high school. I spend the first couple of months as a sandwich artist at the Subway in Melbourne Central where my white skin rubs against my foreign accent. The negative space between the two spawns a million questions.

The most common refrains are '*so where are you from?*' and '*are you South African?*', arriving daily from workmates, customers, the travellers scrumming their way down the Melbourne Central escalators. It takes me less than three months to shift my accent to an Australian drawl so absurdly exaggerated that the wider Australian population accepts me as one of their own.

I grow skilled at answering questions on my past:

I was born in Pakistan – '*no I don't have a Pakistani passport.*' Mum and Dad took us to Jordan – '*yes my parents are Australian.*' On we moved to Oman – '*I speak a little Arabic, a little Swahili.*' I went to boarding school in Kenya – '*no good schools in Yemen.*'

With time I get sick of always answering and instead start to deflect. My mantra becomes '*I grew up out West.*'

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I learn to drink beer, listen to Triple J and date Australian girls in a rush, squeezing what I assume were everyone else's formative teen years in to a single one of my own.

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In my twenties I move from Footscray to Sunbury for TAFE, from Sunbury to Mount Waverley for Uni, from Mount Waverley to Northcote for work, from Northcote to Preston for housing affordability. Each step echoes one of the cross-continental moves my family undertook as a child, but at least here I'm not leaving behind entire friendship groups when I go. Each step makes it a little easier to hide away the past, or at least obscure the parts of it that I'm done talking about.

I work my way through a handful of romantic relationships, a heap of shit jobs, a thousand days of uni and a million social experiences, each time carving myself out a space to belong in, a new hollow that suits the current me. Folk singers, Don Delilo and lentil lasagna become my new talking points. I complete an honours thesis on the drumming of Jorge Rossy. I reinvent myself from hip-hop beat-maker to blues musician to singer-songwriter. I take up running, not to fight off my *mzungu* tag, but because I love the way it clears my mind.

My childhood occasionally comes out: my parents still say *masakeen* – *you poor thing* when something bad happens, my partner learns to call me *habeebi* – *my darling* when she wants something from me, and the family photo books, stocked full of pictures of a white family's eighteen years of cross-cultural travel, make an appearance every Christmas.

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I learn to frame my identity around my interests instead of my history.

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I have an ornate trunk at home, a vast red metal box inscribed with a hand-drawn painting of Yemen's Al-Saleh mosque. It is adorned with airline stickers from a dozen countries – Kenya Airways, Emirates, Yemenia, Ethiopian Air, Qantas. This trunk has travelled more of the world than most people I know, and at age eighteen when I first don my regulation black skinny jeans and op-shop jumper, I use the trunk to hide away my childhood clothes – my grey cotton *shalwar kamees* for Pakistani summer, the *meshedda* that conjures up Yassir Arafat, the *thawb* that my girlfriend assumes is a dress.

For many years this trunk was tucked away in my parents attic, but in my new house it lives at a place of pride in the middle of the living room.

If you wander farther into my house you'll find a Kenyan gourd sitting on top of the drinks bureau, and on the bookshelf a photo of a diverse bunch of teenage kids, including one lanky youngster in a Wallabies jersey. Upstairs in my office my *meshedda* is used to cover up my desk and a curved *jambiya*, blunted years ago by airport security, sits in my drawer.

Last year I found a local artisanal coffee roaster who had somehow brought in a shipment of Yemeni coffee. I ordered a bag delivered to my mum and then ordered myself another four kilos on a whim. Each morning I smile to myself as I taste my childhood.

Sitting here in this house full of my history I learn to let my heart settle.