

Dear Reader,

I was born in Johannesburg. We lived there for two years and then we moved to Cape Town when I was about 15 months old. We were in Cape Town just for a little while before our visas to Australia came through so I have very few memories from that time. But I do remember being little, coming to Australia and getting introduced to the family that we had here. We came in 2007. And I remember going to school for the first time, at kindy and starting primary school and feeling so abnormal. I struggled a lot with the language barrier. When I was in second grade, like in school properly, it was a bit better.

Another thing that made it hard for me to fit in is my accent. It shifts between a lot of different things. It's not Afrikaans, it's not Australian. It's really weird! And then when I'm around friends, I can sound American. People would often associate me with being American and when I was little I got so offended by that because it was like a culture that I didn't identify with at all. All through primary school and leading into high school, I would watch the videos on YouTube on how to sound either more South African or more Australian. Because I was always picked on by teachers nonstop for my accent. And kids were saying, 'You sound so weird. Why do you sound like this? Sound like one place!' So I would try to teach myself to speak differently and I would cry about it constantly. I would try to force myself to speak a certain way, not to have such hard R's or not to say things in a certain way. And my parents eventually sat me down and said, 'You can't do this anymore, that's actually not good for you. Please stop.' Because I think at that time very few people looked at me and thought, 'There's nothing wrong with how you sound.' Everyone was saying, 'There's a problem you need to fix.'

Eventually I had a teacher that would compliment me. I would come to class and he'd say, 'Lieve, I love your accent!' and I thought, 'Whoa!' And I had another friend, she's one of my closest friends still from high school. She always said, 'Lieve, I like how you sound. I like that you sound a little bit American occasionally. I wish I could sound like that.' And for some reason she's the only one that can actually comment on how I sound and I never get offended. Because it comes from this genuine place of... she just loves me as I am.

Sometimes it still stings a little, for example, if a family member would say, 'Why do you sound like that? Stop sounding like an American.' But I think now that I'm older, I've gotten to a point where I'm just proud of both. Proud to be Australian and I'm proud to be Afrikaans. I'm not either, I'm both. And I think for a lot of immigrants it's difficult because you meet a lot of people that want you in a box. Because they don't understand and it usually comes from a place of ignorance. But once you kind of see that ignorance for what it is, it gets better and you realise that you can be in the in-between and that's fine. And that there are many cultures. I've met people who immigrated three times from, El Salvador to America to Australia and back to America. It's crazy, the sort of stories you hear about people being stuck in between so many different cultures. But it's actually just like an added embellishment on who they are as a person. It just adds a little spice. And I think that's always so much fun.

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For a while I think I was feeling as if I'm not Australian enough to fit in with some of the groups of kids but I'm not Afrikaans enough for them because I grew up in Australia. My mum remembers me struggling and crying, 'I'm not South African but I'm not Australian.' And I think



there were also things that kids would say at school. Even the teachers were really bad. I think it's worse coming from adults. And that didn't just happen when I was in primary school, that continued to high school. And it was especially bad, I think, with high school teachers. Because we got some girls that also immigrated from South Africa in our grade and I remember making friends with them. But they were more recent immigrants, so they were considered more South African than I was, which is silly. And it was really frustrating because the teachers, whenever they had questions about South African culture they would instantly go to them. And I remember they would look at me and be like, 'Oh sorry, Lieze, you don't know enough.' But it was just this assumption. It wasn't that they actually asked me what I knew. They just assumed by looking at them that, 'Oh yeah, they're the South African kids. You're just you.' Which is so weird.

At that time, I was maybe 11 or 12? I just wanted to be South African. Mum remembers me crying, saying, 'Why did you take me away? I don't know my cousins. I don't see my grandparents.' Because we would have Grandparents' Day and I'd see families with grandparents or cousins and they had these big families and we didn't have that. We had our church and that's how we made our family. But that was before Ouma (grandmother) came to Australia. And I remember just feeling as if I was missing out on something. But even with my family in South Africa, because I didn't see them regularly enough it was as if I didn't really know them. So it wasn't even like that was a solution. I miss those relationships a lot, but it's hard because you can't miss something you didn't have. I just looked at how good other kids had it, and thought, 'Come on, I want that too!'

But actually I loved school, and I always did love schooling. It was tough at one period, I think that adjustment into school language-wise was tough at the beginning. And then other problems that was encountered, that made it really difficult for a while. When we came to Australia, I went to a state school. It wasn't for long and then I transferred to a Christian private school. And it was nice because it was a lot smaller so you actually get to know everyone. But the school was good because there were so many people from so many different cultures. And specifically in my school, there was so many South Africans. And so, over time, I wasn't just hearing Afrikaans, similar to our language at home. I began having friends at school that spoke Afrikaans and that was the most exciting thing ever! I remember the first time I heard an Afrikaans student, I was so shocked! And what is so funny is we have nothing else in common, just the fact we speak the same language and it's just this incredible thing! It was like a superpower.

So in that way, I just loved school. And we were taught about different cultures at school, which was really, really cool. And obviously at school you get to pick a language so we learnt Chinese. We always have different foods from different classes. I remember in high school, my literature class, every single one of us is from different cultures. One is Russian, two of the boys are Indian and this other girl was, let's say, Serbian. So we made it a thing, I think it was on every Tuesday, we would bring food in class but we had to make home recipes from family and bring it in. So we went and had a soup day. Everyone had to make a soup from their culture and bring it in in these flasks and that's what we ate. So we had these incredible things. And we had a multicultural day where people would come together and do performances, whether it was dances or spoken words. One of the boys in my grade, he was always the clown of the grade, he did Vietnamese karaoke on stage and it was the best thing ever! The South African girls didn't want to get involved and that broke my heart. I think my parents did a very good job of actually teaching me about our culture, our food, clothing. Because a lot of them, for multicultural day, the only thing that they would represent would be a Springbok jersey for rugby. That was it! And then I would be there with the Shwe Shwe (South African wax fabric). We never did dances and things like that. We talked about it but it was difficult because I think as I got older and got more busy with school, I wasn't able to lead that. I wanted to, but I think it's also difficult to lead something that others don't have an understanding of.

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I was probably in grade six when I started to become more aware of why we came to Australia. I had a South African teacher and she was also our history teacher and we had an assessment... I actually can't remember exactly what it was, but we had to do research and I chose to research our migration story and that was the first time I ever went in-depth. And I asked my parents the questions of why we immigrated to Australia. And I think at that age I didn't fully understand, but I knew it was serious. So even when they were telling me these stories, I didn't understand it until I was a lot older. I guess the level of it. And I think maybe that also came about when I had Afrikaans friends at school that were more recently immigrated. Them telling me stories of, 'Oh, my room got broken into in the middle of the night,' things like that. I think it's different when it's a story of something happening to someone else, but when it's someone that's close in your life that this has happened to, that's when things, I think, changed for me. So I think at the time when I started finding out, I didn't understand. But as I got older, I began putting in Google, 'Stories about South Africa.' And even for myself, I had to stop myself a little because I didn't know how bad it was. And I think my parents did a good job in shielding me a little. Because there's some things you just don't need to know all the details of.

Positive things about our Aussie experience... I don't really have much to compare it to I guess, but I think Australia is very culturally diverse. And so, for instance, I'm an only child, so I don't have siblings or anything like that. But through immigrating, we had so many friends that have become our family. I have so many uncles and aunts and sisters and brothers that I wouldn't have even if I had biological siblings. And so I think that will always be a highlight. For example, my mum's best friend, I call her 'Auntie Kim'. Her family is from Malaysia originally, but I've grown up with her two daughters and her youngest son. We grew up in each other's houses. And so growing up with her, she always gave us food and taught us to cook and I would help her hang up laundry or do the dishes. Growing up with that, I think there's just so many people that are willing to just, I guess, want to be a part of your life. Whereas I think after we immigrated we found a lot of people in South Africa lost contact with us.

So genuinely, the benefits I think are the things that we experienced as loss in South Africa, we were given back in different ways. We have a lot of opportunities here. If you were to tell Mum over ten years ago she was going to get her doctorate, that she would have finished studying at university, that she's a curator... she wouldn't have believed you. Nor, I think I would believe that I'm going to uni and I've had the opportunities I've had. Whereas I think now I've gotten older, hearing some of the stuff about South Africa, I realise that it's been a big blessing because that wouldn't have been our life if we stayed. And so I think in that way, I look at my parents and I'm just so grateful for them and what they did.

Lieze