

LIFE IN A NORTHERN TOWN

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I imagine my dad at all of 17, looking pretty much like the Brylcreemed slick bloke in the photo on my fridge, nervously packing his life into a trunk aware that he is leaving his home for what will likely be the term of his natural life. What did he feel? What did he expect? What did he dream for his life? Not that I, his eldest, would pack her life into a trunk and head right back to Europe I'm sure.

Dad left the family farm on the tiny Island of Gozo nearly 40 years ago when he was 17 and therefore not quite old enough to leave legally. When it came to getting his application papers signed he persuaded a blind uncle to because his father flatly refused to admit yet another son wanted to leave the island forever. Somehow Dad managed to pull it off and began a new life in Australia.

Mum came over with her parents, 3 brothers, 4 sisters and her grandmother. They were one of the largest family groups to immigrate to Melbourne at that time and their picture appeared in *The Argus*. My great grandmother (Dad: "*the woman with the forked tongue*") was all for immigrating to Australia. Until my grandfather brought home the 12 one-way sea tickets to Australia when she calmly announced that she was not going by boat. My long-suffering grandfather headed back out the door to work for another 12 months in order to save up the £10 per ticket required to fly his entire family (recalcitrant mother-in-law in tow) to the new world. I would probably have left her behind.

My parents met and married in Melbourne. Mum had only been in Australia for about a year and the following year I was born. Mum always explained the timing of it all to me in a very slow, deliberate way. "We got married in April and you were born in May. *The next year*". My mother's catholic sensibilities would not allow her to even infer that I may have been born anything other than "legitimately".

When I announced at the beginning of 1999 that I had applied for a job in the UK my father's horror was immediate. At that point I was not sure it would even happen but I wanted them to be prepared for whatever outcome. My father spluttered his disgust saying that he could not comprehend why anyone would want to leave Australia (Dad: "*The Lucky Country*") for the cold, dark, damp island that is the United Kingdom. When Dad left his Mediterranean island, he left without so much as a backward glance. He was heading for the big island in the Indian Ocean. So to him my departure was almost an offence and it took him some months to come around to the idea of my leaving. He actually didn't speak to me for 6 weeks.

In the almost 4 years that have passed I have learned more about my father and what I mean to him. Kahlil Gibran says “*For that which you love most in him may be clearer in his absence, as the mountain to the climber is clearer from the plain.*” From the plain I now stand on my Dad’s heart is in the right place and his love for me evident. It is just his self-deluded, pig headed sense of absolute rightness that has not changed for he still thinks I am bloody bonkers.

My life in the UK came about after what I have come to recognise as an historic meeting one day in April 1999. I was working for a large accounting firm and not long after I started, I bumped into a woman who was our accountant at a previous company I worked at. We had a rather excited conversation to establish how we happened to both end up working in the same place. Apparently she had come over on a secondment from London with this current firm but left it a couple of years later. When we collided in the hallway that day she was on her way to a presentation by the manager of the secondments department in our London office and she insisted I go along. Knowing full well that only professional staff were ever seconded I relented to keep her quiet because frankly, she would not shut-up until I agreed.

So I found myself in a boardroom in Collins Street, exhilarated as I found that my long held dream of a life in London had yawned and woke up, terrified to discover that a loaf of bread cost more than my weekly caffeine habit, and disappointed too, for deep down I knew I that there was no way on earth I would get there anyway. After the presentation I had a meeting with Mr London Manager that my pushy friend insisted I arrange. This consisted of a stilted, awkward conversation that I blustered my way through, the flash of a Polaroid camera followed closely by the sound of a door closing behind me that I never imagined would ever open.

Apparently someone else had other plans for open it did and for reasons that still escape me, when Mr London Manager was restructuring his department 3 months down the track he asked me to apply for a job there. I do not think I have ever been as staggered as when I received the email on the morning of October 7, 1999 advising me that I was being offered a one-year secondment to London. When I eventually arrived in the UK, Mr London Manager’s assistant gushed at what a great impression I made on him in our meeting in Melbourne, for when he returned to London he immediately tagged me for the job. Little did she know the meeting lasted all of 7 minutes and *great* was hardly the adjective I would have used (my ego still whispers that it was that Polaroid that clinched it).

The firm paid my airfares, put me up for a month in studio apartment so close to Trafalgar Square I could smell the pigeon excrement when the wind blew my way. They even paid me a tidy relocation allowance for the privilege. So to my utter

amazement and, as my father did some 30 years before, I packed my trunk with what was then the sum total of my life and left Melbourne the first of many times.

At that point it was hard to understand my father's reluctance to accept my wish to leave Australia and see the world when that is exactly what he had done. Once I had booked my flights however, I suddenly realised that I did not quite understand why I wanted to leave either. Everything about Australia was suddenly dear to me, wonderful and wholly irreplaceable. I spent hours looking at what I have come to know as the *big sky*. I bought eucalyptus oil for my oil burner (Apparently, *La Minogue Minor* does this too) and, on the advice of a colleague, herself a returned ex-pat, I bought a Paul Kelly "Best of" CD. She said that when you are far from Australia, nothing like The Great Man brings her close again. I have spent every Christmas in Manchester crying over *How to Make Gravy* and singing along with feeling as Paul croons '*...I give you all of Sydney Harbour, all that land and all that water, for that one sweet promenade*' morosely picturing the sun setting over St Kilda Esplanade as I perch myself on a radiator to ward off the cold.

Interestingly, all my life up until I left Australia, if someone asked me what nationality I was I always answered that my parents are Maltese but I was born in Australia. It is not that I am not proud of my homeland. Of course I am, how can one not be? It is just that I have never felt that I could really claim *ownership* of Australia in that personal way as I have always felt like a visitor, a transient and a tenant. I feel strongly about Australia's indigenous people and I guess my feeling stems partly from their plight. Perversely, I guess not having a lineage I could trace back to a convict did not help either. Whatever it was, my perception of who I am and where I locate myself has altered since living away.

People in the UK do not need ask me where I am from: my accent immediately gives me away. Their reaction to my country of birth is usually either; a: they ask me what the hell I am doing here (this question is particularly pertinent in mid-January when the entire country is hunkered down against the dark and bitter cold) or b: they mutter something about the cricket/swimming/football (again, this is seasonally dependent, and the words *bloody Aussies* generally follow). The latter reaction is typically from young success-starved, pint-toting, football-maniac, not-even-born-when-England-last-won-the-World-cup thirtyish males who perceive Australians as arrogant, bronzed show offs who need bringing down a peg or two. Tall poppy syndrome in the Motherland? Let me just say the Sydney Olympics and the Manchester Commonwealth Games were a *lot of fun*.

In common with the natives who have taken me to their hearts I confess I initially wore the rosier sunglasses when observing Australia. Through them the weather was always great, the beaches always clean and snakes, spiders and sharks

were patently harmless. Many things over the years have altered my perception. From the embarrassing; John Howard winning a second term as Prime Minister. To the distressing; John Howard winning a second term Prime Minister. To the absolutely hilarious; John Howard winning a second term as Prime Minister. Even in light of all this country-awareness is the undeniable fact that I seem to have evolved into an *Australian*.

So what does being an Australian in a foreign country mean to me? I could recount loads of instances where my down to earth Aussie sensibilities have been shaken, challenged and sometimes even blown away. Like finding that most British households use a plastic bowl in a perfectly good kitchen sink to wash the dishes. No, I do not know why. Yes, I have asked, countless people, inestimable times but have yet to secure an answer that makes sense. To me at least.

Or when I discovered to my horror that if I lived in the UK I would have to pack my own groceries. Lets just say the first time I did this I realised how spoilt and stupid I was. Yes, I packed tins of baked beans on my eggs and even folded a baguette in half to fit it in the carrier bag. I also learned that here, the expression 'customer service' is the original oxymoron.

No, those things are incidental really and not at all life changing. You adapt, you learn, you fruitlessly argue for change and you sometimes even eat the bloody mushy peas and shut up, because lets be honest; nobody is going to understand that \$2 minimum chips, a flake and 2 potato cakes are where fish and chips are really at. My English husband watched in horror as I ordered half the blackboard at the Hurstbridge *Chippery* (a word that brings a grin to Ian's face every time) only to find that after my second potato cake I could not finish the dim sim that had seemed so desirable yet unattainable at Andy's Chippy in South Manchester only weeks before.

However the one issue that has impacted me most since leaving Australia is the class system people say no longer exists. I guess as the daughter of very hard working Maltese immigrants I had a fairly good life growing up in Melbourne in the 70s and 80s. We never went without, poverty hardly entered my radar (unless you count the World Vision ads) and the landscape of my childhood still seems like one long summer. So when I moved up to Manchester from London and began my married life, living on my wage and Ian's student grant, I suddenly found that the manner in which I was accustomed to living i.e. nice restaurants, girly lunches and feeding a multitude at a Friday night barbie was no longer affordable.

This should hardly have been a surprise, given we were effectively living on one salary so I knew we would have to tighten our proverbial belts in a few areas. This may sound a little inconsequential, as forgoing perhaps a meal out a week is no great loss, surely? But it was not the food *per se*, nor was it even the going out. Its

was the fact that I became uneasily aware of the rather large chasm between the class of eateries here that sadly mirrors the defined socio economic class system.

There are very, very expensive restaurants in the United Kingdom where, even on two good salaries, I would not be prepared to spend money in. This is not because they are not good restaurants. On the contrary, they are some of the best in the world. However they are heinously overpriced, unbelievably pretentious and if you happen to let your working class roots show, it can be a very unpleasant experience for all. Especially if you strike the waiter who makes it his job to make you feel like you just do not belong there.

There also seems to be a lack of good places to eat that suit those on lower budgets. There are some great mid range mid priced restaurants but even they were not places we could afford to go to frequently. My girly lunches with friends were often subsidised by them for they could afford to eat in nice places so why go somewhere cheaper and therefore substandard? I was just not prepared for the feelings of resentment, jealousy and ultimately anger at a system that seemed to purposefully create a gulf between the rich and the poor.

I would never in my entire life up until this point have considered myself *poor*. But as I sized up our entertainment options I became increasingly mindful of where we seemed to fit in the grand scheme of things. We could not afford to eat at the sort of restaurant that in Australia, we could without doubt have done.

The issue for me as someone who was used to a lifestyle that was pretty much the same whether you laid bricks, worked in an office, drove a taxi or owned a large company was simple – the playing field was not equal anymore. In Australia anyone can throw together a barbie on the beach on a summers day or eat at a fabulous Greek tavern or take the family down the coast for the school holidays without breaking the bank. People who are rich do not necessarily move in invisible circles above the rest of us. We see these people in the restaurants, bars, beaches and theatres of our cities – we rub shoulders with them every day. This is not how it is here.

Billy Connolly, during the Melbourne leg of his *World Tour of Australia* says that some of the best restaurants he knows are in Australia. They are not just good, they are accessible to all which is not the case in the United Kingdom. I felt vindicated when I heard this for it was my point too; unless you have shed loads of disposable income you do not have access to that sort of entertainment and diversion and for the first time in my entire life I felt like I was being forced into a *class* structure I did not want to be in but could not change. And it absolutely terrified me. Over time however the issue for me ran deeper that just where we could and could not eat. I uncovered a mindset in folks on both sides of the chasm that seemed

determined to maintain the *status quo*. This food/class chasm, it seems, is British life in microcosm.

I may be naïve or I may be a snob. But it bears noting that it was only when I actually *studied* sociology in my late 20s that I was amazed to realise that I came from working class stock. My father was a wharfie and we lived in the western suburbs of Melbourne: it did not get any more blue-collar than that in those days. The thing is I never really felt that I was excluded from anything because of my background or my financial status. And I always believed I could do absolutely anything I wanted to.

This seemed completely at odds with the mindset of the people I worked with and met in my everyday life. I started to see that people believe that they cannot change their position in life. People who struggle to make ends meet, who do not have the means to improve their state of affairs, actually believe this is how it will always be. They do not believe that life could be better for them or that they have the power to change it.

Some may argue that this is all because of the extortionate cost of living here. Maybe. However I believe it only compounds the existing belief system that the rich are very rich and the poorer do not ever seem to be able to work their way up. Of course some do. They aim for something, they get a break and they climb up the pile. This is the exception rather than the rule. For the general population who are not in professional, high earning positions, never make enough to get ahead let alone leave anything for their children as a hand up. The cycle therefore continues.

I have come to see that my ability to believe that it was possible for me to get ahead in life (not just affording to eating in fancy restaurants) was an essential component of what made me Australian. I was born in the *Lucky Country* and I truly believe that my optimistic outlook on life is not just a result of my personality but the sum total of the landscape and culture I drew on growing up in Australia. And no matter how long I lived in England, I would never be English.

I thank my Dad every day for having the gumption to take his papers to blind uncle to sign, pack his trunk and get on a boat to spend 8 weeks reaching a country he had only ever heard of. He chose a life for us where we were not deprived of the opportunity to choose to make something of our lives. It has taken some time for me to see clearly the plain that I now stand on but I can look back on Australia with a kind of fond objectivity that sustains me. Especially when I just want to be walking along that sweet promenade without a care in the world, instead of staring out the window of a bus into the darkness of a cold winter afternoon at people who just do not seem to like where they are.



Claudine Berrisford was born in Melbourne and has lived in the United Kingdom since early 2000. She spent a year in London working as International Assignment Coordinator where she cheerfully sent hapless British accountants to overseas offices. In early 2001 Claudine married her soul mate Ian after colliding with him in cyberspace before even leaving Australia. She now lives with Ian in leafy South Manchester where they travel as much as they can while holding down jobs as a Personal Assistant and a Mental Health Nurse respectively.

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