

Extracted from TOP END GIRL by Miranda Tapsell. Publishing May 2020

As a kid I had picture books of Dreaming stories. I was given an African-American Cabbage Patch doll – called Sasha – who was the same colour as my mum. I nursed, cuddled and held her on my hip the same way my Nana and Aunties would hold babies in the family. All of this helped me understand myself. Understand that I was complicated and that there is beauty in that complexity. Stories helped me separate valuable life wisdom from something thoughtless that came out of someone's mouth.

I learned way back at a primary school disco – when my obsession with the Spice Girls forced me to recognise that people impose expectations because of skin colour (No, I don't want to wear the leopard print and stick my tongue out and be Scary Spice, I want a pink flowery dress and glitter hairspray, just like Baby) – that I was not going to conform to other people's limitations or expectations.

I grew up with hard-working, self-assured parents. My dad worked in local Government and my mum worked at ATSIC, a Government department related to Aboriginal affairs, before becoming an Aboriginal Education Officer at both my primary and high schools. While they might not have chosen a creative path, they always appreciated art and it was because of them that I enjoyed stories.

When I was young my dad read to me before bed, often with funny voices and one especially bad French accent so that he would know I was paying attention to the words. He didn't need the voices, because I would be quick to correct him when he went off script

because, even though I couldn't yet read, I knew my favourite books off by heart. He would pretend to fall asleep, snoring loudly until I squealed with delight, 'Wake up, Dad!' and he would wake up in mock-surprise. He would chuckle when I told him off for sleeping on the job. Bless him, he was a terrible actor. This was well before Jeff from The Wiggles pretended to have narcolepsy. Quite often my unimpressed mum would burst into the room and remind Dad that his already lively and opinionated daughter didn't need to be more riled up before bed.

I lived in a traditional household, and it was expected of my parents by their families that while both my parents worked, the main raising of the child was done by Mum. That was just the time it was. This doesn't mean I didn't have a great relationship with my dad (and still have). But because he worked so much, reading before bed was our time together.

I think I'm a little bit like my dad when it comes to work. I'm really in my element when I am busy. When I'm working I know exactly what I need to do. Anything outside of that, I need prompting and help.

When I wanted to know who I was and better understand the people around me, I turned to books, movies and television. I've always struggled to brush off what others thought of me. I just cared too much. I remember when I was twelve and I realised I didn't have the same growth spurt as the other girls. My mother is not a petite woman by any means. I knew I wouldn't be an Amazonian, but as a kid, I had imagined being at least average height. But as Alicia and most of the other girls in my class began to stretch out, I knew it wasn't going to happen for me. Thankfully there were a few other kids who were in the same position as

me, but it was still something I was deeply insecure about. One of the more popular girls in the class had said to me, 'You know, if you were just a little taller, guys would really go for you.' For the record, there was no malice in the way she said this. But rather than taking the comment with a grain of salt, I believed it to be true – that I would be taken more seriously or seen as beautiful if I were taller. What didn't help was that relatives would always make me go back-to-back with my cousins and then say, 'Miranda, you haven't grown at all!' And I hadn't. Boys in my class knew that it would get to me, so they would tease me about it. My parents had both come from huge families, so they were better at letting things like this slide. Neither of them could understand why I would take all of this to heart.

Dad was one of twelve, Mum the eldest of eight. With such a big extended family, you'd think I'd have a thicker skin. My cousins were so used to taunting one another, naturally I was always the next target. I was an only child so, even though I was told not to react, I didn't always handle it well, and I have an awful poker face, so everyone knew exactly how I felt. I had to learn how to deal with those taunts, share my toys and my parents' attention. They weren't easy lessons.

Still, I'm grateful to have so many cousins. I remember at age five asking my mum when I was going to get a little brother or sister, and her sitting me on her lap and saying, 'I'm really sorry, but Mummy can't give you that.'

I later found out it had been a long road for her to fall pregnant with me. There were many complications during labour, and she had almost died. My friend Benjamin Law (who wrote the wonderful book *The Family Law* that is now a television series) calls up his mother every

birthday to thank her for all the pain she went through to give birth to him. I really need to take up this tradition. My mother is an incredibly generous mother and Aunty. It's clear that her sometimes stern ways come from a place of love. That said, I was envious of the way my friends and cousins could distract their parents from their own disobedience by saying, 'But what about [insert sibling's name here]? They did [insert offence here]!' I had no one to deflect to. I could never get away with skipping school or not handing in homework, because my mother would be on my back straightaway. No mercy.

But because of the home I grew up in, one that gave me the safety to be myself, I was also empowered to stand up for myself. My parents kept a diary of all the funny things I said to them as a kid. My dad told me that one day when I was four years old I walked into the dining room and he said to me, 'Good morning, my golden girl,' and I told him straight out, 'I'm not a golden girl, I'm a black girl.' So, that was that.

Poor bloke never got a break. Here's an extract from his journal from another day:

**16.11.1992**

***At breakfast, Miranda wanted to know the name of the box she was sitting on (she sits on a box to give her height at the table so she can eat easily). I said, 'That's Tupperware, my sugar plum,' to which she replied in an abrasive tone, 'Not Sugar Plum! Am I a fruit?' I said no, she wasn't a fruit, so that settled that; but I couldn't stop laughing at myself. She rebutted a sexist remark very well, even if I meant it as a form of affection.***

Not a sugar plum. Not a golden girl. A black woman from day dot.

Not only does it feel completely normal for me to say I'm Aboriginal, it is something I like about myself and is something that can never be separated from who I fundamentally am.