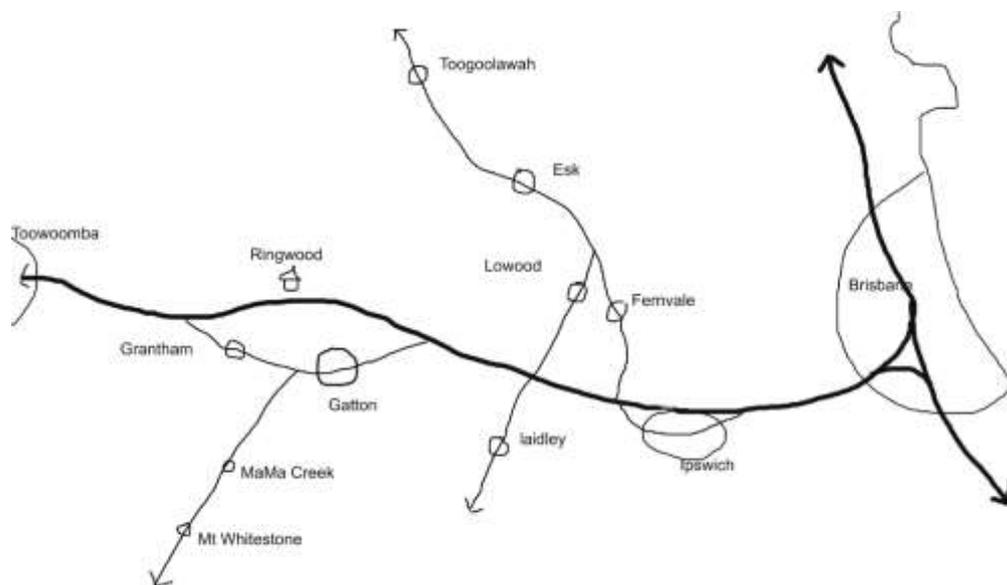




Chapter 2

Connection and Shyness (Early Childhood)

I was born in Gatton. Both my parents were born and grew up in the Lockyer Valley. Mum grew up on a dairy and citrus farm at Grantham. Her father was born in 1903 and lived his whole life on the farm called 'Ringwood'. Her grandfather born in Toowoomba, began farming there around 1900 after moving from Mt Whitestone. His father moving to Queensland from Scotland to help (albeit unsuccessfully) with tuberculosis. Her mother (my grandma) was born in a house at Ma Ma Creek in 1909. My grandma's father came from Poland with his family as a young boy and they settled at Ma Ma Creek.



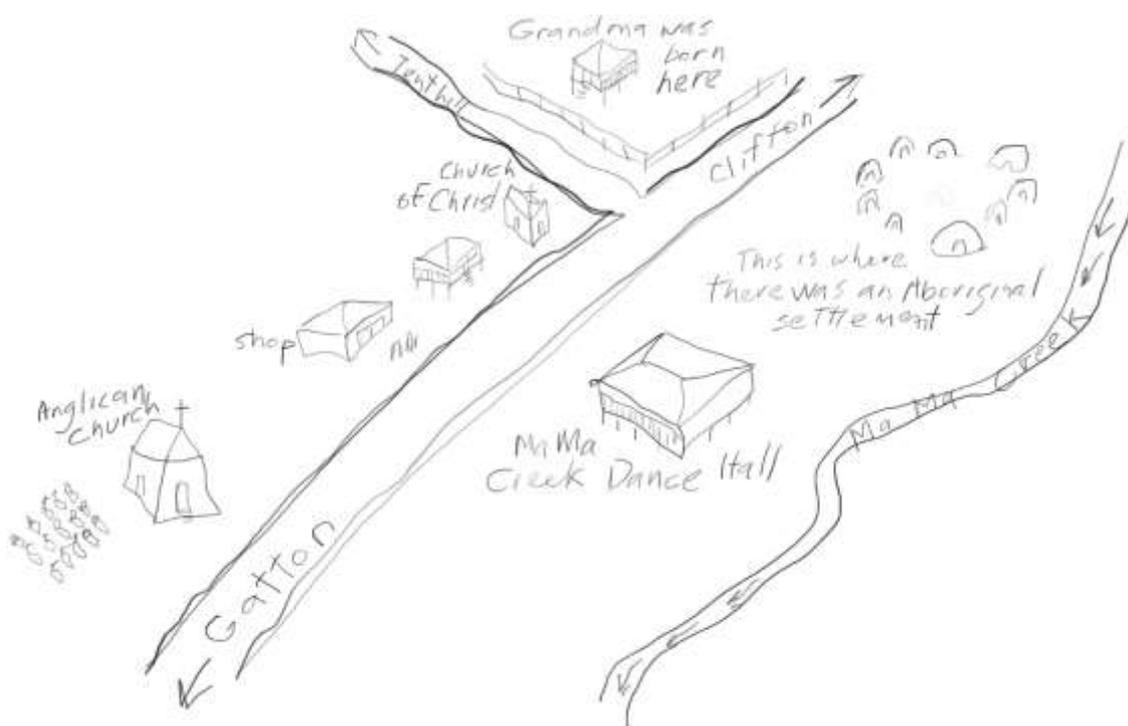
Dad's father came from England as a young boy and he grew up at Toogoolawah. He worked in butter factories in Esk, Lowood, Toogoolawah and Grantham. Mum's three siblings Shirley, May and Robin all continued on with farming in the Lockyer. Eight of eleven of my cousins on Mum's side are still involved on the land in the area.

I have mainly lived in Brisbane, but the Gatton area (especially Grantham) is a special place for me, it is where my origins are and where most of the descendants



of Mum's side of the family still live. As a kid and young adult I can remember thinking how lucky my country relatives were to have ties going way back over a hundred years. In comparison, everything in the city seemed so much more transitory and unstable. I was envious of their ties to the land, community and family. In my 20's I would return to live in this area for five years.

Most of my extended family, uncles, aunts and grandparents on Mum's side are buried in the MaMa creek cemetery. Dad's mother and his sister and brother in law are also laid to rest there. We buried my mother there in September 2018. Just recently I learnt that the name *Ma Ma* is thought to come from the **Aboriginal** *mia mia* meaning *bark huts*. However, *mia mia* is an Aboriginal term from Western Australia, so the actual origin is uncertain. I have also discovered there was an Aboriginal camp across the road from the cemetery and the house where my grandmother grew up as a child. Having an olive complexion she was often teased by family that she was Aboriginal and was often threatened if she misbehaved she would be sent to live with her Aboriginal neighbours across the road.





When I was about 2 we moved from The Lockyer Valley to Brisbane as a result of Dad taking a job with a Brickworks in Brisbane. I don't have any of my own memories from the first 2 years but I have been told a few things. It was a stormy night when I was born, Mum said this to imply there was something special about my arrival. When I was born I did not breathe straight away. The local doctor was at the pub at the time of my arrival. Fortunately for me, the Matron of the hospital was on hand was able to resuscitate me. Six weeks later my Mum had her Appendix out and Aunty Shirley looked after me for a few weeks till mum recovered. Shirley lived at Mt Whitestone just a few kilometres up the creek from the settlement of Ma Ma Creek. This story of my birth made me feel special somehow and lucky but I wonder whether this event or the stories around it impacted on my fears and anxieties.

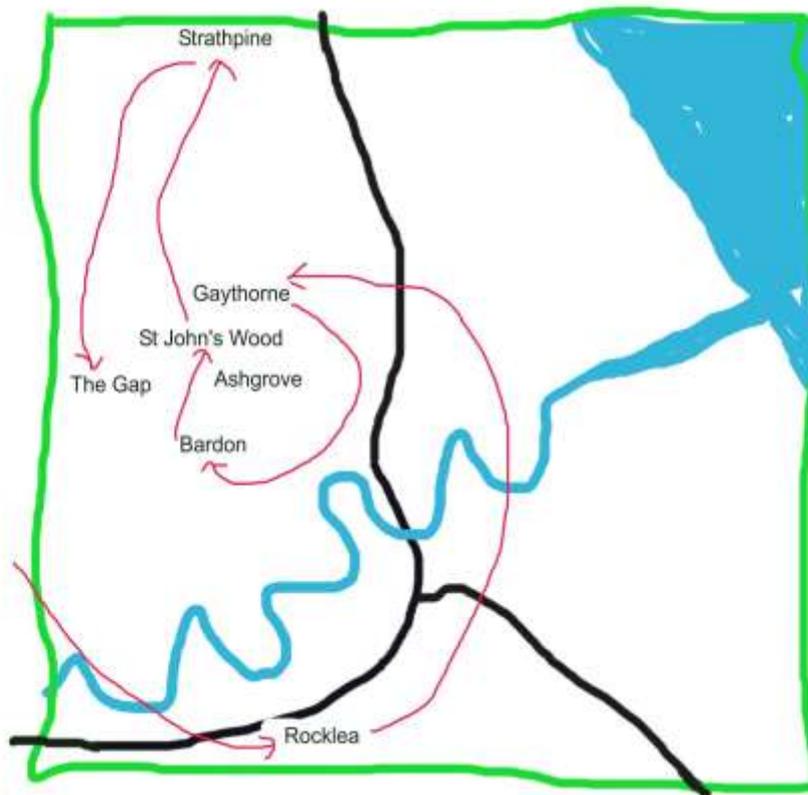
I guess maybe my stressful birth might have created a sense of fear about the world. Perhaps being separated from Mum and Dad and in the care of my aunt might have led to feelings of uncertainty. Maybe these events started a bit of a pattern for me. Maybe also for mum, I can remember the utter fear I felt with the birth of both of my children after hours of normal delivery attempts required emergency caesareans. Perhaps my mum's anxiety about my birth continued on as part of our later interactions. Mum was always protective and concerned about my safety. For Dad it all worked out fine, so he would have quickly put it all behind him. Mum and I however, are both worriers, always thinking about what could go wrong. Whether it is a result of her genes or from these early events there is no doubt I was a scared child and very shy of new people, particularly adults

From the age of 2 to 4 my family lived in 7 different rental homes moving every 6 months as our leases ran out. My earliest memories are my mum taking me to play with another young child in Bardon when I was 3. Another strong memory at Bardon was sleeping with my arm inside a feather pillow. I can remember how comforting the soft feathers were. At St Johns Wood I can remember throwing some small sample bricks over a fence as a game with some older kids next door. I can remember getting hit on the back by my father because I had rolled on all the long grass before he had a chance to mow it. This memory does not really make sense and dad has no recollection but it is a strong memory. I was also told



I fell down the steps at Bardon and that I gave my parent a scare when I went missing at St John's Wood and was found at the edge of a creek behind our place. I can remember playing with some toys my grandma gave me on the very stark cold floor at Strathpine.

I don't think all these moves were a problem for me, but it would have been for my older sisters who had to change schools every 6 months. A concerned and brave teacher bailed up my father at the Ashgrove State School to tell him that he needed to stop changing the kids' schools. According to my dad, my Mum never complained about all the shifts and on one occasions encouraged the move from Rocklea as she was a bit scared of the neighbours. Both sisters did very well at school so perhaps there was no long term impact. Maybe this would have been a different story had we kept moving.



With the Gatton house finally sold, my parents were now in a position to buy a house. We stayed at The Gap in Broadland St for the next 6 years. My family really put down roots here. Mum and dad made some good friends in the street. Betty and Bernie Ryan (who lived directly behind) us would remain lifetime friends. There were lots of other children in the street and we all had friends to



play with. Most of my early memories are about games played with my neighbourhood friends. A couple of other memories I think say something about the person I have now become.



Cheryl would often bring 7 or 8 friends home from school at lunch time which I thought was terrific as one of these friends in particular would push me around in my little peddle car. I knew she was not always keen to do this and I appreciated that she did so anyway.

I built a rocket ship in the backyard out of pieces of wood and a large metal funnel. My family say I was to too scared to go inside it, as they convinced me it might take off (I don't remember that). I can also remember in a detailed way falling out of a fir tree in our front yard. I can still physically feel the thud to my back, and being winded and the terrible fear of being unable to breath and running desperately inside to be comforted by Mum.



A highlight memory for me was waiting for the baker van to arrive in the street each day. Mum would often buy me a cream bun which I would consume watching "Romper Room" on TV while Mum had a cuppa. I was very excited to receive a letter back from Miss Betty (the star of the show) in response to a drawing of mine that Mum sent to her for me. At the end of every episode she would look through her magic mirror to see the children at home naming them. I would sit hoping she would say my name. I think Miss Betty was my first crush. Maybe my idea that insight involves looking to the world, by looking inside or through one's self connects back to Miss Betty and her magic mirror.





Another fond memory was spending time in the dog kennel with a litter of cocker spaniels. I loved to have them cuddle up and walk on top of me. I felt secure and safe in this cave with these loving warm soft creatures.



Before beginning primary school Mr Squiggles was a favourite show for me. He came in a rocket from the moon. He was tentative, warm and very polite, but also a bit cheeky. Young children would send in pages with a few marks on them. He could then make a funny picture of something from these doodles. To my amazement he drew the picture upside down. You had the surprise reveal when it was turned the right way up. I think this was my first explicit demonstration of creativity. He was helped to do all this by lovely Miss Jane, and even a kid I could see there was some sexual chemistry on display. Another character was the very grumpy Mr Blackboard and the very silly Steam Shovel. These gave a strong message that very different people could still be included and be friends.

Mum

During the day my sisters were both at school and dad was at work so my mum was of course the centre of my life. I don't remember mum ever playing with me or even talking to me much. She never read me stories. She never cuddled or kissed me. This sounds like I was neglected by Mum and that she was perhaps a cold person, but the opposite is true. I strongly felt her warmth and concern for me and her strong desire to keep me safe. She was always there if I was hurt to apply Band-Aids and Acraflavine. She protected me from my father's attempts to get me interested in playing rugby league or anything else I did not want to do. I refused to go to kindergarten and Mum did not let others pressure me. She always stuck up for me and tried to moderate my father's anger, if I ever was in



trouble, not that this happened very much. She was ever-present. I cannot remember her ever being angry with me. I know when I had to accompany her on shopping expeditions I could whine and whinge but she was always very patient and calm with me. I remember angrily throwing an orange at her but she just laughed and continued on with the washing. There was no blame or guilt trips something I would fail to achieve as a parent. So while distant physically she was an incredibly loving and warm mum. As an anxious kid I can remember on occasions worrying what things would be like if dad was no longer around. But such a thought about mum never crossed my mind. Subconsciously, I think I just assumed she would always be there, I had complete trust in her.

Mum grew up on the farm “Ringwood” about three km north east from Grantham Township. She loved her rural life riding horses and working on the farm. The Second World War interrupted her schooling and after year 3 she was home schooled by her mother on the farm along with her 2 sisters. Her brother Robin would come along much later. She met dad through mutual friends in Grantham and they would go to Dances at Ma Ma creek hall. Dad would often stay overnight on weekends at Ringwood helping on the farm to impress my grandparents during their romance. After Dad joined the Air Force he was posted to Ballarat. Missing each other, mum travelled there to marry at age 17 at a registry office. So no big wedding for mum. A shy woman I am not sure she really missed the bigger family weddings her other relatives would have. Mum took on nursing in an old people’s home, which she hated, and she swore she would never end up in an old people’s home. It was perhaps from her nursing that she became a bit of a germaphobe, and food would never be kept long in the fridge. It would always smell off to her while no one else could smell anything

I always felt like she would have liked the rural life like her sisters and brother but Mum became a city girl. Sometimes in arguments with dad she would say I should have married the Ford boy. She would often point out his farm which we passed while travelling from Brisbane to Grantham. You could see her imagining an alternative life.

Grantham remained mum’s spiritual home and we would return there for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day while I was a child. The track from our home at The Gap and Ringwood was a well-worn one. Mum and dad



would seem at their happiest sitting around the kitchen table with my grandparents and my uncles and aunts catching up on the latest local gossip. While in Brisbane they still knew what was going on with their country relatives and friends. Being married to dad meant be away from all of that was familiar to her and living in the city with neighbours far too close. My father said Mum never complained about all the shifts and changes in her life as dads career would take them back again to Ballarat and then to Adelaide and then for a long time to Sydney.

Growing up in a tight stable rural community where everyone knew everyone else, meant Mum was not used to making new friends and she never went out of her way to do so and so she did not have a big circle of friends. Her family remained her main social contacts throughout her life. She did have a few friends but they would have to do the work and seek her out rather than the other way around (a trait I have inherited unfortunately). I think it would be fair to say she had social anxiety. I was told recently that mum also had agoraphobia just after my sister Sue was born.

Shyness

If people who knew me as a child were asked to describe me I am very certain they would have said “Colin was a terribly shy child”. I can remember my family telling others I was shy. After a while, I identified with being shy. To me being





shy was more like a description than a criticism. I never felt any pressure from my family not to be shy. My shyness took many forms. I refused to go to kindy. I would freeze up if my uncles asked me a question or made a funny remark about me. I hated being teased but I also hated being made the centre of attention for any reason, even if it was praising me. I liked to hide in the shadows and watch social interactions from a distance. I am the pear on the far right.

I don't remember how I overcame enough of my shyness to start playing with other children from the street, I can only assume my mum organized it, but I think my shyness was always more to do with big people rather than other children my size. I had a few play mates in the street. Scott who lived 4 houses up the street became a great friend. I have been told however, that I would run home from his place if his parents came outside. This shyness I think reflects a lack of trust in others, but mainly big people. It certainly limited my capacity to form friendships and to benefit from the engagement with older people. What it has done however is to allow me to sit back and observe and analyse others behaviour, to be outsider looking from the edge.

I would like to think I am not so shy now, I have learnt to compensate for my shyness by more conscious engagement. For a good while as an adult I would try to get out of social engagements, I now make myself go. Nevertheless, my initial inclination is to avoid social situations especially ones with lots of strangers and I still generally end up talking to people who I already know. I tend to make new relationships through work or projects that I am involved with. I admire people who are good at meeting and developing relationships with new people, and I often tell myself next time I go to a party I will actively move around the room and talk to people who I have not seen for a while or new people. But it never seems to happen, it's a lot easier to stick with the people you know. I find I often gravitate to other shy people, but unfortunately us shy types are not always very good at sustaining a conversation. I often prefer a big group conversation. I can feel part of this without feeling pressure to respond and surprisingly, I often like chiming in to a debate or adding a funny line. A quick engagement and then scurrying back to the periphery.



An alternative to trying to consciously overcome one's shyness is to actively demonize the people who you are afraid of. Any outsiders become scary and need to be put down. My Mum remained mistrusting of Japanese people her whole life, as a result of being a young child during the Second World War. My grandmother certainly raised fears about Aboriginal people. These comments certainly added to my wariness of outsiders.

Our Australian society as a whole has been a bit like this, clearly we have been a very shy country, afraid of strangers and wanting to keep them at a distance. We made the 'White Australia' policy a proud part of our face to the world, shyness became public policy. While we have outgrown some of this shyness, today we still punish refugees who seek asylum here. Our societal shyness has done so much damage to those who could have been good friends. New migrants are still pushed to the margins till they embrace "Australian" values. Our learning from and embracing new cultures is resisted.

Another very destructive consequence of our national shyness was with the first Australians who we first pushed to the boundaries of white settlements and then herded them into missions. This helped white Australia to hang on to the idea of "Terra Nullius" where white Australia pretended they did not exist. Out of sight, out of mind. I was taught as a young child to be shy of Aboriginal people. My grandmother would tell tales of wicked Aboriginal people sneaking up and looking at you through the bathroom windows, "They were not to be trusted and would steal your stuff if you were not careful". An interesting mirror to what white society had done to them.

The dominant European Australian culture discouraged contact and learning from non-Europeans. Movies from America glorified the cowboys and demonized the Native Americans. There was a strong fear of the creep of Communism and of Asians, the 'yellow peril'. Politicians encouraged us to be fearful of outsiders. With increasing international tourism by Australians around the world we are perhaps getting less shy, but we still look for an "us" and a "them" and now the fear of terrorism is being used to create division with our Muslim brothers and sisters. This collective national shyness towards one group or another is hard to escape, and it creeps in to our ways of seeing things directly and indirectly.



Interestingly Capitalism discourages shyness. The White Australia policy came to an end via economic necessity to engage and trade more with our neighbours and the world. Big business likes migration and an increasing population and market. While we increased migration for the economy, our shyness remained and in many ways we still treated new immigrants like we did with First Nation peoples. It was all 'ok' if they kept to themselves or they very quickly adopted our language and culture and dispensed with their own. Shyness really just transformed in to racism, where new people were marginalized until they became enough like us. My personal shyness made me hide at the edge, our national shyness pushed minority groups to the margins.

I think my shyness was more to do with powerful people than different people. I was scared of big people as a kid, not other children. My shyness perhaps was the beginning of my mistrust of people in power. It perhaps led to my dislike of hierarch.

I do have some wariness of strangers, which includes people from other cultures. This is a form of racism, but my most explicit racism has been directed at people from the USA. I have tended through my life to see them in a very stereotypical way, as representatives of a dominating culture and one that has been the flag bearer for unfettered capitalism. I have had to resist my stereotyping tendencies with Americans. It is not a good thing, but it does help me to understand something of about how other peoples' racist attitudes may develop.

While our national and my personal shyness is a problem, it is not all bad. It also has advantages. Shyness has a protective benefit when strangers do want to do us harm. Shyness also allows a person to stand back and observe the interactions of others, perhaps gaining a more wholistic perspective of what is occurring. When you are in the centre of interactions the tendency is to see things from a partisan angle, while from the outside you can more easily see both sides of an argument. Also, it is not generally the shy people or countries that pick fights and start wars. Being shy does not mean we need to demonize the "other". A world full of complete extroverts would not be a nice place either. There would be so much competition for the centre stage, there would no doubt be much pushing and shoving



So my shyness is both good and bad. The more interesting question however is where does shyness come from?

If you have been a shy child you will know there is always someone who will take it upon themselves, often in a well-intentioned way, to try to overcome this shyness through a very direct engagement with you. “Don’t be shy” they will say and via words or physical contact they will try to exorcise the shyness demon. This direct engagement generally frightens us shy types further, increasing our desire to run and hide. Their laughter at our expense further affirms our need to be wary and shy of such people. While a sensitive approach to shyness enable a shy person to slowly engage and trust the situation. An insensitive approach can reinforce and strengthen shyness.

I think what is happening in these interactions is that the non-shy person is really displaying that they do not suffer from the shyness infliction. It affirms their own sense of superiority. They don’t recognize their failings in the situation but rather they see the weakness in the shy person. They contrast themselves to the shy person and feel more socially connected and engaged. This benefit for them can lead them to try even harder to engage the shy person. It provides a sense of social superiority for the shyness buster, while just creating more distrust and fear for the shy person. Shyness and shyness insensitivity can then be seen in a self-reinforcing cycle.¹

This interaction affirms the weakness of the shy person and the strength of everyone else. The laughter of the non-shy people at the shy person’s expense affirms the group’s connection and the shy persons’ disconnection. The shy person becomes a bit of a scape goat to help cement the groups bonds. The group gains strength at the expense of the shy person.

¹ If we assume nationalist and xenophobic groups like One Nation are shy and that the above dynamic holds, then it is perhaps a mistake for our leaders to demonize such groups. This perhaps acts to reinforce their sentiments and even to grow their number. One Nation has certainly benefit from all the free publicity their views gain despite being such a minority position. Maybe a more sensitive approach to the fears of their supporters is required to be less shy of strangers. This is not to in any way validate the views of one nation but just to highlight the path to action and change is not necessarily to just contradict the opposition. There is much more going on with One Nation than just the issue of shyness



Interestingly in this self-reinforcing interaction the insensitive person superiority, can also be challenged by the interaction. If their goal was to help overcome shyness they have failed and the well intentioned person can be left feeling more impotent in the situation. The shy person on the other hand has resisted the attempts of the shy buster to change them. Maybe this was for me the beginning of attempts to resist the system I found myself in. Rather than conforming to the demands of bigger more powerful adults and “not being shy” I resisted and withdrew and watched maintained a guard. It did not feel good but perhaps it was the beginning of being an outsider who identifies with the oppressed rather than the powerful and who wants to resist this power.

I can see here how my Mum’s shyness also provided a form of resistance. Dad would have liked to entertain more of his business friends at home as part of his ambition to progress in his work. Mum would resist such engagements. In doing so, curtailed some of my dad’s ambition. I know mum did not do this for any explicit ideological reason, but implicitly she did have a different mission to dad. Dad was keen to do well in the world and to achieve for himself and his family. Mum’s focus was on her family, I don’t think she cared if dad progressed at work and made more money, she just wanted to make sure we were all safe and happy.

So shyness can be seen as a form of resistance to the demands of others. A political act of defiance. It implicitly says something is not right about the social situation. The situation is not catering for everyone, it is not making everyone feel safe.

Conclusion

These early years are full of good memories for me. My mum was central to making me feel loved and secure and I felt this security very strongly within the family. My sisters would still tease me and make me scared of getting in the rocket I built in the backyard or for liking Miss Betty from Romper room. I hated being teased. Whether genetics or learning, like my mum, I was shy. I liked being the same as my mum. I became proud to be shy, I accepted it as part of me.

I can see how shyness can be a seed for xenophobia but it can also be a seed for a mistrust of power. It does have a particular advantage of allowing a perspective



from outside situations, to understand something of the dynamics of the whole from a safe distance. Maybe we need the perspective of Mr Squiggles “the man from the moon”.

Australia’s geographic separation has perhaps contributed to our racist culture but it could also provide the outsider perspective, so that we can look from a safe distance to learn from the mistakes of other cultures and nations to build a better society here in Australia. A first step, must be however, to look at our own racism and our colonization of First nation people.



Vs



