

Voices of Identity

A First Nations Anthology

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Political Days

Lisa Fuller



Collapsing on my bed, I stare up at the ceiling and ponder just how messed up things can get in a day. First day back at school in ages, thanks to a worldwide pandemic. I'd been so excited, and a little terrified. Right up until social studies.

Flipping over onto my stomach, I grab my pillow and hug it close. I'd fretted all weekend about my hair, and my clothes. Would I be acceptable? None of it mattered when I walked into class at school. It felt like we'd been separated by screens for so long, no one even looked at or talked about what others were doing. Just too glad to see each other, I guess.

I sat, ready for the last subject of the day, feeling happy and a little buzzed from being able to talk and interact away from my desk at home. My teacher, Mr Klein, is new to the school. His classroom is like

any other. White walls, whiteboards, brown desks and chairs. Nothing especially stood out. Most of the classrooms today felt exactly like this. Maybe now that school was back face-to-face, Mr Klein would slowly start filling up the walls with projects, topics and colour.

We spread out to our desks, mine off to the side and not too near the front or the back. Because me and my friends weren't cool enough to sit at the back, and no one liked the front. Not that it bothers me, I've never liked going to the back of anything. Mum and Dad tell me and my brother all those stories about being forced there – Blaks to the Back – on buses, in picture theatres (as Mum and Dad call them) or any other public place. They had no choice, but we do now, and I refuse to ever put myself where others once forced us.

Mr Klein did the usual first day introductions, telling us more about himself and how the subject would go down. No rumours were going around about him, so he likely wasn't a tyrant, but not a favourite either. Then he outlined our assignments for the term.

"I'm going to expect you all to hit the ground running." He clapped his hands together as he

stepped between the desks. “Your first assignment is an oral presentation and it’s due by the end of the month.”

Groans spread throughout the room, and he chortled, walking amongst us. “Don’t worry, it’s not that hard. It’s more about getting to know you. I’d like you to talk about Australia Day, and what it means to you.”

He stopped beside me, his eyes darting down for a moment. I saw him register my darker skin, the curly hair. With a flick of his eyes, I became different, other. To him.

He cleared his throat, his eyes shifting away. “Of course, I don’t want this to get too political. I want to know about your personal experiences, how it relates to you and your family, how you celebrate the day, that sort of thing. Give me your social and cultural perspectives. I’ll be randomly assigning your times to present, so make sure you’re prepared.”

Walking back to his desk, he never once looked in my direction again. I spent the rest of class watching him not seeing me. This burning sensation started in my chest, making me want to tap my heel on the floor, shaking my leg constantly.

Or maybe jump up and sprint around the oval a few times to burn it away.

The weight of it stayed on the bus ride home, making me clumsy and unfocused. There was no happy buzz, as I stepped down the bus steps and went home.

Trudging into the house, I walked into the kitchen, dumping my bag on the floor as I hunted for chocolate. Mum always had something stashed.

Speaking of, I could hear her coming in now. “Tayah, don’t leave the door open like that,” she scolded from the door. I heard it shut but just rolled my eyes, still intent on a sugar fix.

“Ah, Mum, chill out,” I called back.

I heard a huff, but she was coming closer now. “How was the first day of school? Are you all set with your assignments?”

I tried not to let her pressure hit my shoulders, but it always seems to find its way there. There! My favourite chocolate biscuits. Score!

“Yep,” I said, pulling out two biscuits from the packet as Mum rounded the corner into the kitchen.

“Good, anything that you need help –” Mum yelled, and I came out of the pantry cupboard to find her picking up my bag. That she’d just tripped over.

“Tayah, you’re too old for this. I nearly broke my neck!”

All that dark heaviness inside me bubbled up, like her anger was a match to its oily blackness.

“It was one second,” I snapped back. “Maybe look where you’re going.”

Silence reigned as our equally angry gazes clashed.

“What did you just say to me?” She whispered it in a dangerous tone I rarely hear, but my brother gets a lot.

A small slice of guilt tried to work its way out of my mouth, but I shoved it back.

“I literally just put it there. I’ll grab a snack and get straight to my homework.”

I didn’t even pause to make the cup of tea I’d been planning. I snatched my bag from her hands and stomped towards my room. Every step felt like I was going to get cut down any minute by her scathing tongue.

Somehow, I made it into the hall without Mum saying a word. Not even calling me back. I slammed my bedroom door shut, the anger still buzzing away. But it was mingling with that splash of guilt, and a lot of shock that I’d gotten away with speaking to her like that. I cringed at the thought of what would happen once *her* shock wore off.

Now here I lie. Questioning myself because no one else seemed as affected by the assignment as I was. None of my friends said anything about how Mr Klein had looked at me. Had I even seen it? Maybe it was just me making it up in my head?

Sitting up, I yank my bag to me and rummage for my laptop. Mum and Dad were so proud when I got my scholarship to this posh inner-city school. They went out and splurged, certain I'd need the tech to keep up with my classes. Its silver and black case is a daily reminder of their hopes. Their expectations.

I try to shake off the pressure, like I always do, but this time it sticks like superglue, rubbing against the inside of my skull.

Opening the class webpage, I don't need to dig for the assignment sheet. It's first up, right on top. My first assignment, and the list of who is presenting when. My name is at the top, down to present next week. Guess that gives me no choice.

I go over the sheet again and again. "*Australia Day*" – *perspectives, celebration, interactions*. Yeah, right. My family don't even go out on that day, Mum had too many bad experiences, so we just stay home. How do you explain parental trauma and protectiveness? You don't.