

What We Leave We Carry

Tamara Zimet

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— Tamara

Zimet

[Music]

Presenter: Tamara Zimet arrived in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic and feared she'd made a terrible mistake. This is *WritersMosaic, What We Leave We Carry*, the series that tells the true-life stories of migration to the UK.

[Music]

Tamara Zimet: My name is Tamara Zimet. I am originally from Melbourne, Australia, but I also lived in Sydney, Australia, for a long time before I came here. I was born in Melbourne in 1988. Both of my dad's parents survived the war, so I think that they were luckier than everybody else that didn't or so many people that they knew. They started a new life in Australia. They all thought that Australia—they were so lucky to be there. Just the fact that they were there and had community, and they had family in a new place. They were always optimistic that you could make another life, and I think that that was definitely passed down to my dad and then to us.

So my grandfather was Polish, so he's from Kraków. And my grandmother, Lily, who just died a couple of weeks ago, was from Antwerp, in Belgium. And they met after the war. They both had very different wartime experiences. And they ended up meeting outside of a synagogue, either on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, so one of the High Holidays. And he ended up coming out to Australia and then going back to Europe and marrying her, and they went out there together. They were convicts on my mum's side, but my dad's side, the first generation European. More than 95% of people who I knew at that time would have been the grandkids of Holocaust survivors.

[Music]

I was really into reading [laughs]. I used to carry around my dad's—my dad had this beautiful green clothbound edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, and I used to carry that around with me. I couldn't even read it, and to be honest, I still haven't read *Huckleberry Finn*, so—

[Music]

I came to Scotland from Melbourne and from Sydney. And yes, I went to university, and I studied professional communications, which was a mix of journalism—I majored in journalism and PR. And yeah, that's what I did for a little while. And then one day, when I was about 20, 21, I always—I still—I loved reading. I always went to Melbourne Writers Festival. I went to bookshop events. And I remember I was at home because my boyfriend at the time, Steve, had broken up with me, and I was devastated. And I was at home, and I saw that this place called the Wheeler Centre for Books, Writing and Ideas was looking for a new publicist. And through my tears, I applied, and I got the job. And it changed the trajectory of everything.

[Music]

I was there for three years. And so I started as Program Coordinator and ultimately left as Associate Director and founded a festival called Broadside, which is a feminist ideas festival, which we ran in Melbourne at the end of 2019. It was over two days of 12 events at Melbourne Town Hall. By the time that finished, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do next, and then I found a job. I saw a job on Instagram at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. And I had never been to Edinburgh. I'd never been to Scotland. The only place I'd been in the UK was London.

[Music]

I think that the Book Festival had always loomed pretty large in, I guess, my professional and cultural imagination because it was considered to be one of the biggest or—and best. And I wanted something that was going to feel like a big leap and a big challenge. And I was so happy in Sydney. A lot of our friends lived in a one kilometre radius. We were having a really good time, and I was like, *I could do this forever*. And I remember talking to my boyfriend at the time and saying that, and he was like, ‘I think it means we need to do something else.’ So I applied for the job in January 2020 and got it a couple of weeks later after the interview process on Zoom. And I just remember being—yeah, trying to read up as much as I could on contemporary Scottish literature. I remember being like, *is it Ma-kar or Makar? Fuck*. [Laughs] So there was a lot of that.

[Music]

So I got the job, and I sent 10 boxes of my stuff. And I was going to leave, and then my partner was going to follow me, and then obviously, the world turned upside down really quickly, and so I wasn't reunited with any of my things for nearly a year. And it was really hilarious because it was opening this time capsule of what I thought my life would look like. And by the time I opened the boxes, it was winter in Edinburgh. We were in lockdown. I was there alone. And so I pulled out this red sequined dress, which I had sent because I'd worn it to Mardi Gras just before I packed the boxes, and I was like, *this might come in handy*. And the only time I've worn it was to unpack my boxes, while smoking inside, wearing the red sequined dress.

[Music]

There were so many times I thought I'd made a mistake. The difference between March, when everyone was like, 'Oh, you'll be able to go in a month', to, I don't know, July, September, and then getting towards the end of the year, there were variants. I couldn't go see my family because they were in the next state in Australia, and the borders were closed. Multiple people said to me, 'We love you. You don't have to go. What are you proving?' And I was like, 'I said I was going to go, so I'm going to go.' And I think it was just before I ended up leaving, I had to apply to the Department of Foreign Affairs to leave the country because I had a job offer. I think they were like, *this is one less economic burden*, maybe on the Australian government, whatever they were thinking, so they let me go. And the news coming out of Europe and out of the UK was so bad at the end of 2020. And it's, in some ways, hard to remember. It was just lots of things on the news, it was winter, and it was, yeah, everything was terrible, and it was scary. And I remember getting into the Uber with my boyfriend, with Scott, my boyfriend at the time, and the Uber driver—and saying that we're going to the airport, and the Uber driver telling me that he hadn't been to Sydney airport since March, and this was now December. And he said, 'Where are you going?' And I said, 'I'm going to the UK.' And he said, 'Are you a doctor?' I said, 'No.' And by this point, Scott and I had both laughed-crying through it with our masks. And he said, 'Are you an essential worker?' And then I just said, 'Literature is essential.' And then we just laughed maniacally. It's like, *oh, this doesn't seem like a good idea.*

[Music]

I had never been to Scotland before, and so the only people that I knew here were my colleagues. So we had spent a lot of time together, but only on the internet. But a colleague, who has since become a dear friend and who is still a colleague, Noel, came and picked me up from the airport. And this was at a time, again, it was the end of 2020, it was before Christmas, so things were still open. We were about to go into lockdown again, and everybody knew that the UK government was giving everybody Christmas, and then that was gonna happen. And the people were really fearful. So she came and got me from the airport, and I remember giving what I sometimes describe as a British hug, which is no body contact. I still call it a British hug because it's very popular here. She drove me to my Airbnb with the window down. And she was like, 'I'll help you take your stuff upstairs.' I was like, 'No, no, it's fine.' And she insisted. I remember her saying, 'Do you want to come—do you want to go for a walk?' And I just said, 'Oh no, thank you so much. I'm really tired. I think I'm just going to unpack.' And then I just sat on the couch and sobbed, watching the sunset at 3.30 in the afternoon because I'd left my boyfriend of five years, I'd left my family and all my friends, everybody I knew in the support network, and also because things were scary. I was heartbroken. I was excited to be here but also terrified I'd made a huge mistake. And really early, in the first couple of days, somebody said to me, in front of my then boss, they said to me, 'What percentage of you didn't want to come?' And I just remember being like, in my head, 95. But I couldn't say that in front of my then boss, and so I thought that—I think I said, 'Oh, about 30, 35', because I thought that was the gentle woman's 95 [laughs]. Because I was like, *lady, all of me didn't want to come*. But I'm so glad that I did.

[Music]

I'm so glad that I came to Scotland. There is something about being here. And I think that—and this is, obviously, it's a reflection of the people I've been lucky enough to surround myself with, but there is that idea about like Scottish by birth or sensibility. And I've found people to be really welcoming. Once they get past—I have this same conversation with people all the time because they're like, 'Why would you leave Australia for here?' which is to do with the darkness and the, yeah, just the [inaudible]. But I found it to be a very welcoming place in many ways. And then it's in the same way that I talk about the ease of travel that I had as an Australian who wanted to move here. I'm white, I'm female, I'm able-bodied, I'm in my mid-30s, I'm Australian. So that is not—yeah, when I talk about my experience here, I'm very specific about my personal experience as an immigrant here versus the—there is no, obviously, there is no immigrant experience; that is a tapestry of everybody's individual experiences.

[Music]

I think if I had been asked about Scotland and what I thought, it probably would have been that incredibly—where you can now very easily recognise as a lazy erasure of the rich tapestry that is this country and any country. I think you can just get bogged down—even bogged down, perfect Scottish—in this pernicious stuff about rain and tartan and crime fiction and Walter Scott and blah blah blah blah. There are definitely elements of that, and there is a sense of pride in a lot of that, particularly pride about how shit the weather is and being—weathering that, I guess. And there are times where you're walking around Old Town, and I'll be on the phone to

somebody in another country, and they'll be like, 'Are they bagpipes?' And you're like, 'Oh yeah. [Laughs] Yeah, [missing word] bagpipes. Oh yeah, that's the One O'clock Cannon.' But it's so much more than that. And the more you get out of, particularly Edinburgh, because that's a very specific Scottish experience, and my life in Edinburgh is a very specific Scottish experience, as soon as you get out, it changes. Actually, even in Edinburgh, it changes suburb to suburb.

[Music]

I have never been somewhere that I my first impressions were that it was so contentedly middle class, and there is a sense of—I don't know if it's pride in that. But it was really interesting when I moved here, somebody took me on their personal walking and history tour of Edinburgh, which was amaz—it was so, so, so fun. It was really early in the pandemic. It was the middle of winter. And I remember standing on the top of—just outside the castle, looking over Edinburgh, and asking why it had been designed that way. Just the idea that there was a very specific, deliberate reason. Obviously, there's the topography of Edinburgh and all the hills, but just that there was the clear division between rich and poor, and it was purposeful. But even now, in 2024, I think it's rare to have a European capital city that the centre feels incredibly white. It feels incredibly white and middle class. And for an urban centre, I think that's quite unique. And when I say unique, I don't mean [laughs] particularly in a positive sense. Just strange. I think strange.

[Music]

I find Glasgow—it's so funny, whenever I say this to any friend in Glasgow, they're just, yeah—I think it's exciting. I [laughs] love—this is so funny—I love getting off at Queen Street Station. And I remember the first time going there when we were able to go city to city. I remember meeting a friend, and we were going to a gig at Barrowlands, and I remember saying to him, 'Oh my God, I feel like we're in New York', because it was bright lights, big city. And I think his response was, 'Chill out. That's a Holiday Inn.' [Laughs]

[Music]

I think, to be honest, it probably just reminds me of Melbourne. It reminds me of home. And it feels like—I think even just the fact that, and I know this is changing, that it's slightly cheaper, more stuff feels possible for different people, I think, due to [inaudible]. And also there's different waves of immigration, different industry. Yeah, all that stuff. I just—I think it's cool. And it feels bulky. I loved the Clyde. Yeah, and I also just think the south side of Glasgow on a sunny day might be the best place in the world. I think it's, yeah, it's just in my brain.

[Music]

Some of it feels familiar in really strange ways. I remember the first time I went to Mull, Tobermory, the architecture looks like Tasmania, looks like parts of port—like of Hobart, which is port. And that is because of convicts. That is that kind of exchange. In terms of cultural exchange, there's very limited, I guess, Australian things that I can identify here, but the cultural imperialism the other way is very strong. I wasn't

aware, again, because I hadn't been to Scotland before I moved here, how many place names in Australia are named after places in Scotland or in just generally in the United Kingdom, and like Perth, St Kilda, Laurieston.

[Music]

Edinburgh feels very international to me. And I also think that statistically, it's quite high for how many people who are born in places other than Scotland, and that could be wherever. Edinburgh is a town of 550,000 people, so—and if I had known what that felt like before I moved here, I'm not sure I would have moved here because I like crowds and mass and crush of humanity. The more people for me, the better. I can't believe in a small-ish place how many extraordinary people I have met. And none of these relationships feel—they don't feel transactional or transient, they feel like these are lifelong friendships, lifelong relationships. And I can't, yeah, every once in a while, if I'm reflecting on it, and particularly—it'll be four years just before Christmas that I've been here, and to think about the amount of people who are so central to my life now, that they didn't exist for me such a short period of time ago, really, in the scheme of things, yeah, is mind-blowing.

[Music]

I was with my partner, my ex-partner, Scott, for five years before I moved here. And when I made the decision to move here, it was in a completely different world. It was pre-pandemic. So we had always assumed that he was going to follow quite quickly. And then everything happened that we now know happened, and so I decided that I

would only do—we really decided that I'd do one year. And so when I said goodbye to him, there was no possibility of being able to go back to Australia once I was here, and he couldn't come and visit, so there was really that finality to it. And for the first couple of months, I think we did an extraordinary job. Looking back on it, yeah, just the way we cared for each other and stayed in touch and found creative ways to do that, yeah, it's pretty amazing. And then I guess, as things started to open here probably, your priorities shift because there's always a nine hour or 11 hour time difference with Australia, which, yeah, a short way of saying that is it's never a good time. And really quickly when I was able to do things and live a little bit more freely about five or six months in—four, five, six months in, I had to prioritise in-person life building more than I could FaceTime with my partner. And I guess simultaneously, he had his own life going on. And so we entered this—we went from this period of—I remember at the beginning, waking up, and we had lived together for a long time in Sydney, and I remember waking up in the middle of the night and with this panic. And the only panic that I can liken it to is getting to the train station and remembering you've left the stove on, we've left the oven. It is that [gasps] And then, *what is it? Oh, it's that my partner's not here.* And it was that really visceral, almost limb cutting of a missing of somebody. And then one of the scary things is you get used to it. It just dulls. It just does. And I think that that is like your brain and body looking after itself and also probably just the natural flow of a relationship. But the first time, the first year, and remember I said that it was going to be one year, the first year, it was 10 months, and we picked things up again as—but just before I was kind of going home, and I was going to hotel quarantine. And he did a very romantic thing when I was in hotel quarantine. I was on the 20th floor of a hotel in the Sydney CBD, and he set up a camping chair on the footpath outside with a big 'I Love You' sign. And

we did newspaper quizzes, and he would just sit there for a couple hours, we would chat at my window. And so that was the first year. But then, I guess, the getting used to it happens so quickly again when you're going into round two. And I guess neither of us were particularly honest about what we—it's just not true. I think we both just thought we were going to be able to survive it. That we were big enough and we loved each other enough to survive it, and there was an end period. And maybe he would come, maybe he wouldn't, but we would work it out. And you just can't. And some people can, but we couldn't. And it's really interesting because I've since met a lot of people who are doing long distance, but they might be doing it from, I don't know, Lewes to Edinburgh or wherever, or Edinburgh to Berlin. And they always make the comment that it's not as bad because it's not as far, but actually, if the person isn't there, then they're not there. It doesn't really—yes, you get to see them more often, but just that daily stuff, the daily—we talked about the nextness and nearness, you don't have that. So yeah, to us, to me, it definitely didn't matter.

[Music]

It was after the first year that we decided that—that was the other part, funny not to mention until now, that like we had decided to have an open relationship because we were like, *we love each other, again, we can withstand this, and neither of us believe in virginity or like that has anything to do with our relationship. You can go and be with other people, and we'll still love each other, and we'll make that work.* Yeah, and interestingly, people often say to me like, 'Oh, do you think it's because of the open relationship that it didn't work?' And I think being in an open relationship meant that we probably stayed together for longer, but that wasn't the reason. But yeah, the one

at home is much harder, and because even if they're not, I think there's always the niggling feeling that you feel like you're waiting, that you're the one waiting, and that's hard.

But in terms of friends, I think WhatsApp is—what a trap and what a godsend. And because of the time difference, it means that someone I love somewhere will always be awake. So when I wake up in the morning in Scotland, my phone is full of Australia. And that can be really hard because—I call it correspondence. I'll say to my partner now, 'I just need to do some correspondence.' And that is in, yeah, I don't mean that even remotely in a begrudging sense, but those relationships are really important to me. One of my favorite things to do is put my headphones in and go for a long walk and talk to my friend Georgie or whatever for three hours.

[Music]

There are definitely aspects of Scottishness that I feel in my bloodstream now. And then I also—there are some days where I'm like, *I feel so Australian*. I can't believe I know who fucking, like, Ant and Dec are. [Laughs] I can't—why is that now in my brain? And I have seen *Love Actually* probably as many times as anybody else, and it was last Christmas when I was watching it on the plane on the way back home, I was like, *oh, it's Ant and Dec*. I never made that connection. [Laughs] Now I know who they are, and I wish I didn't. But I also know stuff about the SNP. Some of it I wish I didn't, but that's okay.

[Music]

I think that people think that Australians are outgoing, loud, probably like to drink and party, and maybe work hard depending on what industry you're in. So yeah, that is very specific to my whiteness, my middle-classness, my Australianness, with this accent as well, which is Australian but doesn't fall anywhere. And that, I think, is the other important thing is that the class with the accents, the intersection of class and your accent, it's very different in Australia than it is in the UK.

[Music]

I'm much better identifying accents now, and including your Glaswegian to Edinburgh to North to Highlands and Islands. But for England, I've got your North, I've got East London, and then other than that, everyone just sounds broadly posh to me [laughs]. They all just sound like a BBC drama, it doesn't actually matter. I would have no real idea other than those couple. But yeah, being able to—there's a chameleon-like aspect that people I think here are not afforded.

[Music]

There are so many people here that I genuinely—when I first moved here, and now I can identify again as a very middle-class Edinburgh accent, I thought they were English. Yeah. It's—now it is distinguishable, discernible for me, but only if I listen really hard. Yeah. And that's a purposeful loss of a Scottish accent. That's so interesting. During the pandemic, a friend's husband, who has a very East London accent, went and did a bunch of—I've been thinking of them as like elocution

lessons, like in *My Fair Lady*, but to get rid of the, 'I fink', and 'free', all of those beautiful things. He just wanted to flatten his accent, and he wanted to do it his whole life to fit in better. And it just—it made me sad.

[Music]

Part of my convincing people, and I still feel like I have to do this, I don't know if it's about being—I don't think it's about being Australian, I think it's just about what they assume I know or I don't. And so particularly in my first couple of years, I felt like sometimes scrambling to prove myself, which yeah, is really true. It was just about working incredibly hard, yeah, just to be, *I also deserve to be here, even though I don't know as much as you about, I don't know, historical Scottish literature, I know other things, and those other things are worthy as well.* And I think that comes back to it, that idea about Australian culture and Australian stories and Australian ideas, that they are lesser. And that's a distance thing but also just straight up snobbery.

[Music]

I am Australian. I'm not even remotely nationalistic about the project that is Australia, but it will always be people for me. If I've transferred this community to, I don't know, Leeds, I would probably feel the same about Leeds or Belfast or wherever in this, I guess, corner. Yeah, it's not tartan and castles and rain or—was never enamoured with that sense of like the romance of Scotland. As a country, I appreciate the drama and the beauty of it and being outside so much, but I also love the south side of

Glasgow. Yeah. And so, no, I don't think it's about place and it's, yeah, certainly not about Country with a capital C.

[Music]

When I moved, I was so adamant that I wanted to have—I didn't want all of my friends to be work friends. I didn't want to just be friends with my colleagues because I wanted to make a life here. My friend—this is a bit of a side note, but my friend, Conrad, was watching, before I moved here, and I think about this all the time, he was watching one of those survivalist shows. And it was like a couple of men and a woman, they'd all get dropped independently in the middle of nowhere. And the men really struggled, and the woman made a clearing and then built herself a chair that looked incredibly uncomfortable, it was made out of sticks. But she just sat down, and she's like, 'This is great. I love this chair. I live here now.' [Laughs] That's what Conrad and I used to say to each other all the time. He'd be like, 'How's your chair of sticks?' I was like, 'It's great. I live here now. It's working.' And it was just trying to build something.

[Music]

Our WhatsApp group is called The Zim Dawgs; dogs spelled D-A-W-G-S. And there's a side chat, which is me and my siblings, called The A Team. They are all really supportive. They would all love me to go home. The flip side of that is they would never—there are so many levers they could pull to make me feel guilty, and they'll never—they have not so far pulled them. But I'm really conscious that my

parents are getting older. My parents are 72, and touch wood, in great nick and very happy and very healthy, and so is everybody else in my family. But there are so many things in my—that I miss being a part of. And I was walking to see a friend and meet her new boyfriend last week, and before they were meeting her family for a Sunday roast. And I was like, *oh, I miss family obligations.*

[Music]

My mum would never say, but my dad has inferred—actually, there wasn't even an inference, he was actually much more explicit about it. But one of his worries is that I have a baby here and then I never go home. And he's like, 'If that's what happens then—', my dad says fabulous a lot, 'fabulous, we'll visit all the time, and you can always come back.' But I know that would be really hard. And that's, yeah, that's the fear for them.

[Music]

The only other part that I thought about a lot moving here, immigrating here, was when I had to apply for pre-settled status and downloading all the various apps and having to pay small [music] but irritating fees to various helplines and just being so hyper-conscious that I was employed, I had dual nationality, English was my first language, I was safe, and it was really hard. And just being so conscious that that is a deliberate move and a deliberate choice. That's not even on the spectrum of what a hostile environment policy looks like, but just the fact that it isn't, yet how lucky I was to feel welcome when so many people don't.

[Music]

Presenter: Tamara Zimet was talking to Marjorie Lotfi.

[Music]

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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