THE WRONG NOTE

A racist message left on her windscreen was unexpected, but the sentiment came as no surprise to Alice Pung.

When you are seven months pregnant, you and your husband go to a local hardware store. When you return 20 minutes later to the car park, someone has put a folded piece of paper on your windscreen, held down by the wiper. You think it's just an advertisement, but when Nick unfolds it to take a look, he grows very agitated. "I'm going to see if anyone else got this on their cars," he says, and returns a few moments later. No one has anything except you.

You take the paper from him. It seems like a badly photocopied advert: a picture of a black boy and a white girl, both around 10 years old, well dressed, as if in a promotional shot for an '80s American sitcom. The children are inside a circle, which you think is the frame of the picture, until you realise that the image inside is cut into quarters by a large thin cross. In large capital letters are the words: STOP RACISM MIXING. Then you realise that the kids are targets inside the sights of a gun.

"Don't worry," you say to your husband, "I bet that STOP RACISM MIXING person has a whole collection of posters he carries around, so when he sees men holding hands he probably pulls out STOP GAY MARRIAGE and when he sees redheads eating bagels he takes out the STOP GINGER JEWIS one."
You find the incident harmless enough. Some coward is probably sitting in their car, waiting to see your reaction, thinking, “Ha! That’ll teach those misguided fornicators a lesson.”

When you tell your friends at the university college where you live and work, they are incredulously horrified and outraged. “Crazily mentally ill,” they say. Or, a little self-righteously, “Who are these people? They don’t represent the community.”

But you know who these people are. Oh yes, STOP RACE MIXING and you go back a long way. When you are a 16-year-old sales assistant at your dad’s electrical appliance store, old ladies come in and say, “Can I have an Australian salesman, thank you.” And you dutifully go and find Joe the Italian or Jim the Macedonian.

When you are 16, your mum walks you home from school and sees a man mowing a lawn. “Go ask him how much he charges to cut grass,” she tells you. Mum speaks no English. You go back to the lawn mower. He has a face like beef jerky left out of the packet for too long, holsters at you: “I don’t do your!”

You report to Mum, “He doesn’t cut grass.”

“But of course he does. I’ve seen him doing the other lawns around here. Go back. He can’t bear you through the lawnmower noise.”

You go back. He yells at you again. “But I don’t do your!” You are mortified and ashamed, and at that moment you hate Beef Jerky, but you also hate your mum for making you ask.

You grow up with grandparents who survived the Chinese famine, uncles who survived the Cultural Revolution, a father who survived the killing fields of Cambodia, and a mother who lived through the aftermath of the fall of Saigon, and you learn that to survive means to blend in.

When you are eight, someone chucks a rock through your window. But your parents never get it repaired. Your mum just permanently lowers the blinds and quietly goes about her work in the garage.

You grow up in a factory town that never recovered from the ‘80s recession. Vacant housing commission properties become a common sight along the streets of Braybrook, like a row of teeth sitting at an alarming rate.

But the old families in Braybrook barely see their Asian neighbours enough to know whether they cook family pets or not. Then, a decade later, they notice that those “chinas” have a new Toyota Camry in their driveway. How come the government is helping refugees and not them? The next day, after work, your dad notices that someone has made a deep angry scratch across the silver paint of his car boot.

One day in 2006, you are in line at a shop in your home suburb. “Here you go, sweetie,” says the sandy-haired shop assistant with the dangly triangle earrings, handing you your change and towels in a bag. You are still littering at the store, looking at discounted socks, when you notice the next man at the counter. Dressed in the diguised two-decades-out-of-season suit of newly arrived migrants, he very politely asks for a bag. He’s bought polyester bedshirts in a slippery, clear plastic package.

“Nope,” says the woman definitively, “we don’t have any bags.” What she could have said was “we don’t have any big enough”. What she could do, as other sales assistants have done, was offer to wrap two large bags together, or use string. But she doesn’t.

And there it is — the moment you know that you are safe, that you have blended in so completely because there is a black Sudanese man behind you. The relief you feel, but also the guilt and pity — which is not a word we like using these days — towards the new arrival is enormous. You are now an invisible watcher, and your invisibility has come at the expense of someone else.

The man lowers his eyes and head, and then tries again. “Sorry, I have to take this on the train. I cannot carry it like this. Please can you help?” This tall, regal man reduced to begging for two plastic bags. You cannot bear it.

The shop assistant throws them across the counter at him, and turns away to tidy up the till.

Years later, you are out of Braybrook and you have a job where the most dangerous workplace hazard is getting a paper cut or scalding yourself with tea, not losing your forearm to a careless forienner in a factory. You get to write about your childhood and talk about race in public forums, and because you are in a position of comfort and respect, none of it seems so bad any more.

You can even laugh at STOP RACE MIXING while you are on stage with a barrier and a broadcaster at a writers festival, discussing Australia’s national identity. The barrier says it has nothing to do with the Australian people, who are, largely, decent: “It is as if we live our lives simultaneously to these lives that the media project.”

The broadcaster announces: “Racism in Australia has a lot to do with class, and unless we address class difference, or our perceptions of the working class, xenophobia and racism will not change.”

During the Q&A at the end of the panel everyone agrees: “We need to have those conversations about the shape of national identity.” You know that back in Braybrook, no one is starting these sorts of conversations.

There is a Burmese saying about not wasting your time playing a violin to a buffalo. But to the people with whom you grew up — these working class men and women from every culture, colour and creed — who has time to play a violin when the fields need ploughing?

You and your husband do not talk about STOP RACE MIXING except as a funny anecdote to share with others. These days, STOP RACE MIXING rarely has any effect on you, because you are insulated by the kindness and decency of your new friends, many of whom have never even heard of Braybrook.

Woe to the poor sod who was dumb enough to put such crap on a writer’s windscreen, you think.

This piece is going to be published. Meanwhile, STOP RACE MIXING may never get out of stooid suburbs. And you never have a voice beyond their self-funded poster campaign.

Joke’s on them, suckers!

But in a way you know that you’re also cowardly — that this STOP RACE MIXING and you are both fighting a paper war. The only difference is that, at the moment, you have wider distribution. •

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