

Before Anything and Everything

I was born at Ipswich Hospital on 24 April 1996. I arrived four days late with hip sockets that didn't form properly. I had to wear these stirrups that kept my little knees up, as if I was squatting at all times.

I'm told I hated those stirrups, pushing and kicking against them, always trying to get free. Once my hips settled down, I was put in a Jolly Jumper, and apparently that was my first love. If I caught sight of that thing, I'd immediately cry for it. I was

a bouncy little thing, I guess, eager to fly up and see beyond my horizon.

I was raised in a brick house with orange walls, a brown tile roof and beige carpet. We lived in a place called Springfield, half an hour away from Brisbane. There are no big busy roads cutting through it – it is a lush and quiet place filled with jacarandas and palms and spindly gums.

My parents met while playing a social game of golf. My mum, Josie, has always played for fun, but my dad, Robert, took the sport a little more seriously than most. Dad's a country boy from Bowen, in north Queensland, and he was driven hard by his strict father.

As a young man, Dad was set to play golf for the University of Houston, a springboard to a professional career, until his father stepped in: 'There's no way you're going to America.'

The boy who took Dad's place went on to join the international tour. Meanwhile, Dad's dream was

snuffed out before it caught fire. Being the stubborn person he is, Dad barely picked up a golf club for 25 years. He went on to build a career at the State Library of Queensland instead.

Mum is one of six kids of English migrants, and for most of her professional life she was a radiographer working at Ipswich Hospital. She's the emotional member of our family. The one who cries at the drop of a hat. The clumsy one who needs reminders. In our house, when I was growing up, there was a rule: 'If you're five minutes early, you're ten minutes late.' We made fun of Mum, who was the relaxed one – but in truth she never showed up late for anything. She just had no interest in being 15 minutes early like us!

Importantly, she was the person I sat with when I was sad, who would scratch my head and hold me in her arms.

When I wasn't inside watching *The Simpsons* or *The Brady Bunch* or *The Nanny*, or playing Pokémon on my Nintendo Game Boy, I was out in the

garden with Mum. We would go for drives on the weekend and we'd almost always end up at a local nursery, where I could pick out a \$1 flower and then go home and plant it in the garden. We'd garden, play with the dogs, or we would read together in the shade. It was simple and comforting, and sparked my love for finding happiness in small things. Mum used to go for morning walks – she still does – and always with her earphones in. She strolled the streets, humming and softly singing to herself. I would tell her she looked weird, but she would just smile serenely because she knew what worked best in her world.

Compared to Mum, Dad was always the organised one. The structured one. Clean. Efficient.

I have that in me too. I'm the kind of person who gets home from a trip and unpacks everything before doing anything else. All bags emptied – immediately.

Some people call it fussy, others call it obsessive-compulsive. The latter term gets thrown around

loosely, but not with Dad. He told me once that back when he was a teenager, he needed to learn a particular bunker shot. His coach told him to stay in the sand trap practising that one shot until the action was muscle memory. Dad took that too seriously, and kept swinging until his hands bled. He's struggled with that obsessive thinking his whole life, and with depression. We have that in common.

I think Dad saw a lot of himself in me as I grew up. He was a big softie, really, who wanted nothing more than to see me having fun, laughing and smiling and carefree. I guess he was just my best mate.

I suppose my big sisters were my mates too. But I used to annoy Ali and Sara as much as possible. Do you know the game called 'corners'? I would sit in the middle seat in the back of the car, and every time we turned at a roundabout or took a sharp left or right, I would hurl my body in the opposite direction, trying to crush one sister or the other into the car door.

‘Ash, stop it,’ I’d hear.

‘Ash, stop it,’ they’d groan.

‘Ash, STOP IT!’ they’d snap. And that was when I knew I had them.

Here we go, I’d think, practically rubbing my hands together. *Let’s see how far we can take this.*

That was particularly true for Ali, the middle child, who is three years older than me. We grew up sleeping in bunk beds: me on the bottom, her on top. Ali is the kindest, most beautiful, sensitive soul – and I used that against her without mercy. What did we fight over? The breakfast bowl we wanted to use. The first piece of chicken at dinner. The choice of TV show at night. *Whatever you have, I’m going to take it*, I would think. *Because I know you won’t fight for it.*

If it was time to clean up, I would hide under the bed and, when caught, pretend to be cleaning under there. I threw an animal encyclopaedia at Ali once – helicoptered it right at her head – but I missed and put a hole in the wall. We joined forces briefly to

hide the evidence, covering it with a poster. *Job well done. Shake on it, mate.*

Mum immediately identified it as hung in a strange place.

I betrayed my sister instantly. 'Ali did it!'

We went to Woodcrest State College, which was three kilometres away from home. At some point on the walk home most days, I would drop my schoolbag and simply walk away, or run off. I didn't want to carry it, and I knew that Sara, five years older than me, would have to chase after me since I couldn't cross the street myself – meaning Ali would have to carry my bag.

Ali gave up a lot for me. When I started playing tennis, she gave up netball and decided to learn tennis instead, because it would be easier for Mum and Dad. Later, when I needed more coaching, Ali gave up her private lesson so that we could afford it. Ali was the last person in the family to beat me at tennis, when I was eight and she was 11. And

she never played me again. She retired against me with that win – and while that makes me annoyed, if anyone is going to hold victory over me forever, I'm glad it's her. She earned it.

I never clashed with Sara, and not just because she's older. She's simply stronger than me, and smarter than me too. Far smarter, in fact. I never wanted to risk getting on her bad side. We've never had a fight in our lives.

When you're a little kid, your big sister is the one doing everything for the first time. The first to have issues with friends at school. The first to have a boyfriend. The first to go to university. The first to solve every problem. Whenever I met a bumpy road I didn't know how to negotiate, I knew Sara would show me the way. She's the tough one. The pragmatic one.

But our family was far more than just the five of us. My cousins were my mates, and there were dozens of them, and we saw them every weekend.

Family before anything and everything – that’s what we were taught.

We felt that most every spring school holidays on North Stradbroke Island. A trip to Straddie meant camping in tents or staying in caravans and cabins, and scores of children with nothing to do but chill and swim. I would go fishing with the boys – my uncles – from early morning to late afternoon. They would invite me and often not the other young cousins, because they knew I wouldn’t lose interest or bellyache, and that I would bait my own hook and help pump for yabbies on the flats, and reel in the whiting and the bream from the blue water off the white-sand beaches.

I loved my Straddie uniform: long board shorts, no shirt and a backwards cap. When Mum finally forced me into a top, it was one of those ugly long-sleeved fishing ones with bright colours and pictures of big fish.

For ten days every September it was heaven there. We'd be up at dawn, explore all day, then we'd have 'foursies'. Just after three o'clock, we'd sit around and slowly prepare a long snack – maybe a cheese board and crackers – and we would talk and laugh. It signified that 4 pm was approaching and playtime was over. You have your foursies, you have your shower, you eat your dinner, you go to bed. You close your eyes and dream deeply while the water laps at the shore and the Milky Way dances up above and the Earth spins and the sun returns and you do it all again.