

I wrote a vow in thick black pen: go to Madeira. No caveats, no second-guessing, no tidy timeline. Tie the laces, run. It read like a dare and felt like a confession, because the truth is that I didn't know whether I was chasing a place or a person or a version of myself that had been standing just out of frame for years, waiting for me to turn.

Madeira—the speck in the Atlantic, the island that turned up in family stories like an extra heartbeat—was an image long before it was coordinates. My dad's parents left it before he was born, and somewhere between Enmore Road and the green corridors of Sydney, the thread snapped. Or frayed. Or maybe it was tucked into a cupboard nobody opened. I grew up with an ache, more like a gentle pull, and an odd certainty that a place I'd never been to knew my name.

Let me say it plain, because the notebook version is too polite: I didn't understand why so much of my father's past felt out of reach. Avó, my Grandma, was the bright exception. She ate baked sweet potato with her hands, winked at me when Mum tutted, and warmed the house with a laugh that made rules sit down. She died in 2012, leaving behind a grief that rearranged furniture, even when nothing moves.

The delicatessen on Enmore Road is where my dad called home for most of his childhood. My dad hated olives, hated pickles, hated marinated anything, which felt comic. As a kid I told him I was jealous he got to eat olives whenever he liked—until I learned the way repetition can sandpaper joy. He didn't speak Portuguese. As a kid he wanted Aussie mates and footy and a life that didn't require translation. His parents backed that, because assimilation was the ticket they'd been told to buy, and who am I to judge the currency of survival? But the cost shows up somewhere. Sometimes it shows up as a daughter whose features aren't quite in the same palette as her siblings—me, the brown-eyed kid in a family of pastel eyes and soft blonde hair, the one who gets asked “where are you from?” by substitute teachers and school parents who want a geography lesson instead of an introduction.

Being Portuguese, to me, was a charm I wore around my neck, half talisman, half well I actually didn't know. I was told my habit of singing in the street—sad songs, silly songs, songs that understood the weather—was like the way they sing fado in Portugal. I didn't know the word then; I knew the feeling. But pride, in my father's world, was delicate. It didn't get displayed. It got kept. So I did what kids do: I filled the gaps with myth, and then, later, with questions.

At uni, I interviewed my aunt, Veronica, for an assessment and got a history more honest than any textbook I'd met. She talked about the split life of being a child of migrants, how the outside world asked for an “Australian way” and the inside world held a Portuguese one, how boys and girls occupied different lanes marked by old customs and new anxieties, how “wog” was both the shorthand for community and the bruise you learn to hide with humour. She talked about her father's substance abuse—she felt more sadness for him than anger; he was confused by the world. She talked about being a stranger to both worlds: at home she wasn't the perfect Portuguese girl, and at school she was made to feel grateful for entry into spaces that should have been porous, human. And then she said the quiet thing out loud: she regrets not holding culture with both hands sooner.

We sat for an hour. What was meant to be an intersectionality assignment turned into an unravelling of truths that both took my breath away and finally mosaicked the gaps. We cried, we laughed, and I made a promise. I said, "When you're ready to go to Madeira, tell me. I'm coming." It felt like sealing a letter with wax. Late in 2024, around Christmas, she messaged: I'm going next year. I replied: and I'm coming. August 2025, we were on our way. It'd been six months of planning, soothing the apprehension, the nerves, and the feeling we were about to embark on something bigger than the two of us. Every action felt like placing a stone in a path only we could walk. We were light on guarantees. Veronica had lost contact with most relatives; we had fragments, cousins-of-cousins, land that belonged to everyone and no one, a family branch that had veered off to Venezuela, and a strong suspicion that the island would either open like a book or stay politely closed. I told myself I could be brave and still be scared. Perhaps I had the doubts of how Australia treated my family—would Madeira do the same?

On the plane, I kept looking at my aunt as if admiration might stabilise altitude. The cabin hummed, the kind of electrical lullaby that tries to pass for calm. The map drifted across pixels: ocean, then a thumbnail of land. The internet showed me that, but images rarely contain the arrangement of air. What do you do with anticipation that makes sleep look like betrayal? You inventory your reasons.

Mine weren't tidy. I'd been struggling through family chaos: my parents' recent divorce, losing my hearing at 22, and battling the trauma of a car crash by myself, holding pieces that didn't fit back together. I'd broken things I meant to strengthen. I told myself this trip wasn't an escape—I'm admittedly a bit too proud at times. Now it appears clearer: I was looking for something. I wanted to feel a little more whole again.

We landed. The tarmac heat was a handshake from the island. The sky had cut itself into clean shapes, the kind that make you suspect someone upstairs is a stylist, and the mountains muscled up behind the city like old men guarding a secret. Our Airbnb perched above Funchal, a balcony opening onto terracotta roofs and the harbour below, details arranged with a gentle, playful precision. We bought sangria that tilted towards joy, ate linguine that tasted more like arrival than pasta, walked through narrow streets that remembered every footstep, and I kept pinching myself like a cliché who knows it's a cliché. I thought of Dad. I thought of Avo. I thought of how belonging isn't a switch but a tide, and how, sometimes, life gently holds your hand even when you're trying to pretend you can walk without one. But these first steps felt right, even balanced. I could walk round and round with nowhere to be but exactly where I needed to be.

The next morning, I went to the beach. "Beach" is generous—it was cliff, and a body of water that had auditioned for the role of cathedral and won. I jumped. The ocean received me with the kind of grace that makes religion nervous. Afterward, I wandered sun-dazed back towards home, and my phone lit up with a message from my mate Koshin, who had been zigzagging across the world since February: South America, Europe, now Morocco. I'd told him half-joking, half-begging a couple weeks ago to come help me find my family. He'd gotten back to me a week ago, saying, I think Madeira is going to happen. And by this first afternoon on the island, he was there. It felt good to have an adventure buddy, someone who knows me in all my unpolishedness. I didn't know he'd actually come quite in handy.

Veronica had been messaging a cousin, Rosa, who grew up in Venezuela and now lived in Madeira. Our first night she'd replied with great warmth, and we were feeling positive about being able to meet some family. In the morning, the warmth became velocity. A message: I'm downstairs. Veronica had sent a photo from the veranda. Rosa triangulated it, and found us by 6am the next morning. There she was, open arms and in tears of joy, and perhaps, beneath it, feelings for loved ones that had been lost. We hugged like it was our first and last. Tears arrived without needing permission. Family, in that moment, was both revelation and reminder. I didn't think stories could do that—fold into a person and then unfold into you—but they can.

Dinner that night was chaotic and perfect. Sushi, because life insists on collaging cultures, and a translation relay run by Rosa's son, Ricardo—fifteen, spunky, a teenager with English that switched on like a torch even though he swore he was rubbish at it, and a worldview that had already walked around the block twice. He translated with flair. He couldn't believe his cousin, me, looked "more Portuguese" than him but sounded so very aggressively Aussie. He laughed when my Portuguese attempted vowels it didn't yet deserve. We were a mess that felt like a family table. The conversation was stop-start, and the feeling was continuous, and it felt right.

The next day, they took us to Santa Cruz. We caught a cable car that slid down the cliff. The beach was all stones—polished, honest—meeting water the colour of a promise. We swam, ate, lay in the heat until words lost their job descriptions. We walked, crouched to count crabs, pointed at fish and gasped with every new glance. Blue everywhere: water, sky, the domed thing behind the eyes that lifts when you stop insisting the world be small. This island is the most beautiful place I've ever seen. And I think it always will be because of all the beauty you cannot see.

At dusk, hunger made rules again. Rosa bought poncha, the traditional sugarcane rum turned citrus handshake, and insisted we drink properly. We did. The octopus arrived tender enough for a love poem, and then we were ushered up the street through a neighbourhood festival to what I'd call a butcher.

The line reached up the street. We stood for an hour, sun-burnt and delirious, while locals leaned into patience and we abided. At the counter, they handed us skewers heavy with meat. We turned to leave, confused about the reality of having to carry sticks of raw meat in an Uber all the way back to Funchal, but before I got away with my thoughts someone ushered us down the street. We followed the migration. A building's side opened like the island had designed it for the joke. Inside were three rooms stacked down the slope, grills run by smiling older men who made smoke look like an old friend. This was espetada: meat in its purest form, seasoned by community, cooked in a room that felt like a chorus. The flavour punched, then hugged. We ate simply alongside bread rolls and butter. And of course jug after jug of house-made sangria. I thought, Dad would love this, but also, Dad would love that I was here.

We ate and ate, our grins making it hard to even chew. Koshin and I raised a skewer like a toast to whatever we had done right. Our eyes met with disbelief at how free and light life felt, while Veronica, Rosa and Ricardo threaded memory and appetite with stories of this tradition and its relation to those that had come before me. Later, we wandered through the

street festival as music played by a band called “Acoustic Junkies”; they did a lot of 80s covers and I wasn’t mad because Veronica was loving it.

Days spilled into each other. The island taught me its grammar. Levadas stitched water into the mountains like they were hemming an old jacket with new thread. We walked narrow paths that took us through green tunnels and out onto ledges where the entire valley turned itself inside out for our benefit. Berries grew along the way. Apples. Plums. You feel silly using the word “abundance”, but sometimes words are just doing their jobs.

On the third day we were taken to Joao Frino, the valley my grandparents were from, and as we trailed the family’s levada, Rosa pointed down to a scatter of rocks: the ruins of my grandmother’s birth house. I stood very still, like movement might insult the landscape. My mouth wide open, internally trembling with this feeling of overwhelm and grandeur. This is where the handiness of having Koshin there came in, because I can often be a bit too proud to show my emotions outwardly—perhaps a trait I picked up from my dad—and in this moment he could tell I was struggling to know how to act. He whispered, with a nudge, “Are you freaking out? Because I am.” I laughed, the kind of laugh that happens when awe gets nervous. And said, “Absolutely.” It was truly one of the most amazing feelings to be somewhere so close to my Avo. I don’t think I’ve ever felt closer.

From that house, now ruins, my granddad, while tending to the land outside, used to sing across the valley to my grandmother inside. That’s how they fell in love, through fado. A memory becomes architecture, and there I was, trying to imagine the sound crossing the air, the notes doing the work of walking.

We began meeting more and more family members, and after one they kept on coming. I was being introduced to people who had known the younger versions of the people who raised the people who raised me. Someone sent us down a road to a shack where relatives sold food. There we found them, and they held our hands and touched our faces, saying to one another, “Ah, she’s Andrea’s(Andrew, my dad) girl.” Another directed us up a different road, to a fruit stand that found itself between a cliff and the road; we were told to ask for Regina—my aunt, on Granddad’s side. We found her. We found more. We were caught by the net a community throws into time. Once they met us they’d start singing out to their friends, beginning tangents of excitement I couldn’t understand but was completely involved with through a smile.

The dramas were there, because families are just theatres with shared DNA. We learnt the gossip at a tempo that suggested it had lived longer than we had. But the love was louder. And I think being reminded that family had its cracks at every corner was helping me make better terms with my own family’s grief at home. You can be flawed and good at the same time. You can hurt and heal, hardly in that order. The land we still own—complicated, split among relatives, half-belonged to other branches who had moved to Venezuela—was both a metaphor and an admin headache. I learnt the difference between heritage and paperwork.

Koshin and I woke at 5am one morning to chase a hike that started with a cliff and ended with a haunted forest. The day took us through weather systems like a demo reel: at times we were above the clouds, an hour later in a landscape that resembled Twilight, minus the vampires—rain, wind, sun, and something theatrical in between. A beach with black sand

and houses laid upon each other like Brazilian favelas. We drank garotos, our favourite coffee, tiny and persuasive. Before escaping a chaotic storm that led us into a forest of ancient trees, we found cows that acknowledged us with the kind of nonchalance only cows and old men can manage. By midday, my body felt unknotted. The island rearranged my insides without asking for a tip.

Somewhere in all this, I spoke to Dad on the phone. The line was a bit wild. I told him about the butcher and the espetada and Rosa and Ricardo and the levadas. I heard the catch in his breath when I described the ruins of Grandma's house. I said, "We're here. We're doing it." He was happy and said, "I'm proud of you." A sentence can be both balm and key. If there's one thing my Dad has taught me, his love is for his family and their happiness first and foremost—they say that's quite "wog", that.

We kept running toward things. I thought a lot about the difference between running away and running toward—escape and destination—how one has you staring at the problem in your rear-view mirror until it colonises your future, and the other keeps placing the horizon just far enough ahead to keep you honest. My thoughts felt like birds. Some circled because I fed them. Some perched because they were tired. I didn't try to trap them. I was finally allowing them to draw the shapes I'd never seen before.

I started to believe the obvious thing we forget: maybe the measure isn't being chosen, but choosing yourself. Maybe the only scale that makes sense is internal, which is both liberating and irritating because you can't outsource it.

We met a great aunt who kept photo diaries of my dad as a kid. I'd never seen those images. There he was: small, fierce, a boy who looked like he would write his own definitions if someone handed him a pen. My great aunt's hands had known that version of him longer than any of us had known the man. I felt the room compress and expand. I thought about the spectrum of displacement Veronica had described—the way conformity meets duality meets dissociation—and how all that theory stands very still when a hand touches your cheek and says your name like it's been away but always meant to come back.

I won't romanticise the nation. Australia contains many truths. One of them is dispossession—long, deep, and not undone—and another is the norm of asking difference to fit quietly, like a guest who should be grateful for the invitation. I grew up in the "wog" community's orbit, where love and survival shared a ledger.

But the story isn't just external. It's not just the schoolyard where someone mispronounces your name like the mistake is your fault. It's the kitchen where old rules try to move into new days. It's us. My aunt and dad were born here. They had every reason to call themselves Australian first and Portuguese second, or third, or never, depending on what the day demanded. Their parents—the grandparents I'm learning now in layers—wanted their kids to fit. Protecting your kids from cruelty is an ethical instinct; it's just that sometimes the protection looks like erasure. Nothing's neat. That's the point. Identity is a long sentence. The comma placement matters.

We learned small protocols that felt like inheritances: how to order food without looking like a tourist, how to look for levada entrances that hide behind shrubs, how to pronounce place

names so they don't fight back, how to greet neighbours who already know your surname because someone told them and someone else corrected them. We ate bolo do caco still warm, watched butter turn to an argument with garlic then make peace. We bought fruit in markets that smelled like school holiday afternoons.

Sometimes I'd remember the line I wrote before the plane: tie the laces and run. I realised running hadn't won me the island. It had won me my commitment to myself. I'd been the one holding back answers, waiting for guarantees like they were tickets that would be posted to my door. The island handed me uncertainty dressed as beauty. It said: take the risk. Double down. Say yes with your whole mouth.

Leaving was the kind of grief that introduces itself with gratitude first. I didn't come back fixed, because nobody is broken in the neat little ways that can be declared "fixed." I came back found—like the version of me who had been waiting, stopped waiting, walked up, and said, "About time." Identity hadn't been solved. It had been complicated with kindness. Belonging, I learned, is a practice. You do it. You fail at it. You remake it. It doesn't abandon you just because you move seats.

We get told to play the oppression Olympics and collect medals in sorrow. I had been training for that without realising it, counting bruises, building case files. The island interrupted me. It said: bite the joy. Not instead of the hard parts, but alongside them. Fill your own cup. Jump the cliff. Read the letters. Translate the love. Call your aunt. Call your dad. Hold the paradox in one hand and a stick of raw meat in the other.

I didn't know that the black pen vow would be this heavy or this light. I didn't know that the ruins of a house could build something new, right there on a ledge, with me as architect and witness and tenant. I didn't know that Veronica would be brave enough to step into it all without her mum, that Rosa and Ricardo would translate not just words but welcome, that Koshin would show up with the kind of loyalty you can't buy. I didn't know anything, really. I know a bit more now.