

**BECAUSE
I LOVE
HIM**

ASHLEE DONOHUE

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I LOVE
HIM**

Magabala
Books 

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Torres Strait Islander Storytellers.

Changing the World, One Story at a Time.

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Author's Note

Some names have been changed to protect the privacy and
identity of persons involved.

All accounts and recollections are solely those of Ashlee Donohue.

*To my great-grandmother, grandmother and mother, for paving the path
I walk upon, with light.*

Ashlee Donohue is proud Aboriginal woman from the Dunghutti nation, born and raised in Kempsey NSW. She is an educator, speaker and advocate around the anti-violence message and has been actively working for the Aboriginal community for over 17 years, notably for Gadigal Information Service – Koori Radio 93.7FM and Mudgin-Gal Aboriginal Corporation, where she developed programs for youth and women. For the past six years, she has attended and made presentations around the anti-violence message at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women forums in New York City.

Ashlee completed her Master of Education at the UTS, Sydney, won the UTS Human Rights Reconciliation Award and served as a Director of Community Education for the Bachelor of Arts in Adult Education and Community Management. Ashlee was featured as one of one hundred people in the Positively Remarkable People ending violence against women exhibition in Sydney. She was also featured as one of ten Indigenous women in the Amnesty International Australia Day Blog, Celebrating Indigenous Mums.

Ashlee is the Chairperson of Warringa Baiya Aboriginal women’s legal service, and a member of the ‘Our Watch’ Aboriginal women’s advisory group. She is a proud mother and grandmother of two children and three grandchildren.



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Prologue



20 October 1988

Dear Mum,

Goodness ... have I got a lot to tell you, and it's not good news either.

I spoke too soon about Dan and Cynthia. He was drinking and went stupid, got into Cynthia and accidentally hit Eli. Cynthia put a restraining order out on him. This episode has just made Lara worse. You see, she had moved in with them and was just starting to calm down a bit. That has just made her more stubborn than before. Now she won't do what anyone says. Why ... I don't know. I wish you'd come home to sort her out. It's just confusing. I can't put it into words.

Then there's Lucy and Floyd. Floyd's drinking heavily, which upsets Lucy, who just last night tried to take an overdose of Floyd's epilepsy tablets. My God, Mum, I don't know what's happening to this family!

Can you imagine the strain this is all having on Nan? Then there's Pop on one of his drinking binges. Nan keeps saying he's going to be the death of her. Things keep going this road and they will.

Oh Mum, this is so sad—our beloved dog Roman accidentally hung himself last night. Floyd tied him up at the back fence because he's been running out onto the road

chasing cars. When we woke this morning, we couldn't see him. Floyd went down to check on him and found him hanging by his chain on the other side of the fence. He must've jumped over then walked around through the gap in the fence and jumped over again. This upset Nan and poor Eli. Floyd and Lenny buried him over in the bushland near the park and put roses from Nan's garden on his grave. If it doesn't rain it pours.

The only little bit of good news is that Mimi had a baby boy. He's lovely.

Nan, Dave, Tina and I were in the labour ward. She did well. He weighed 7 pounds 14 ounces, measured 22 inches and he's gorgeous! He looks like Lenny and Eli mixed up. She named him Cayne David Mathew Sean after his dad Dave and Uncle Matt. That's the only good news I have. Apart from that everything and everyone else are okay.

But I do wish you'd come home from England. Everyone seems to listen and take notice of you. Oh, dear Mum, now that you've told me you're not well, God love me, I'll probably have a nervous breakdown.

Dan reckons he's going to come after Cynthia and me and drag us around by our hair. I don't know what I've got to do with any of it. Another worry.

Please write a letter to Lara. My baby sister really needs her mother right now. Being sixteen can be hard, Mum. You know that.

Come home soon!

Love,

Ashlee Zenna Dianne xxx



One

Humble Beginnings



The local welfare lady, known as Sister Griffiths, sent my mother to Sydney at the age of fifteen to clean houses. My grandparents (Nan and Pop) lived on the outskirts of Kempsey, New South Wales, and couldn't afford to send her to school. Up to that time, my mother had lived in a tin shack with a dirt floor in the bush on the banks of the Hat Head Creek.

She travelled by herself on the train to Sydney, where she was greeted by a Jewish couple at Central Station. She was then taken to the North Shore to clean a 'very flash house', as she put it, which was probably a mansion – not that she knew what a mansion was back then. She cleaned that house for the princely sum of eight dollars a week. It was 1968.

My mother told me how homesick she was there, how she had no one to talk to or to comfort or support her, so on a rare day off she headed over to a well-known gathering place for Aboriginal people known as the Block, which was in the heart of Redfern, to see if she could find any of her family. It was there that she bumped into her cousin Emmy, who had

also grown up in Kempsey. Mum told Emmy what had been going on. Emmy, in turn, informed her that it was slave labour, as her employers had my mother working from 7am until midnight on most days. Emmy told Mum to go and get her things, and to make sure she got her eight dollars too, and that she could stay with her and some other cousins just up the road in Surry Hills.

Mum did as she was told and before long she was living with her cousins. It was there in the heart of the city that my mother became ‘acquainted’ (as she puts it) with my father, Michael, a twenty-two-year-old brewery worker, over the back fence of the house she shared with her cousins.

As my mother told me, “It was a ‘hi’ here and a ‘hi’ there, and ‘how’re things going?’” until the Easter long weekend. It was Good Friday, and Michael invited my mother and her cousins over for a barbecue. My mother told me with a dry laugh, “I had my first taste of beer, among other things, that night.” She also said I was the result of her first and only sexual encounter with my father, on that particular Good Friday. When my mother told him she was pregnant, his response was, “Well I can’t marry you, I am already married.” She rarely saw him after that.

Once she discovered she was pregnant, my mother would drop in to see her Aunt Polly in Alexandria after each of her doctor’s appointments. After her six-month appointment, Aunt Polly became concerned when she found out my mother was to give birth to me at Crown Street Women’s Hospital. Aunt Polly warned her that Crown Street Women’s Hospital was notorious for taking babies away from their mothers with or without their consent, especially from unmarried Aboriginal women whose babies’ fathers were white men. Aunt Polly demanded that Mum return home to Kempsey to deliver me, and gave her money to buy a train ticket. Mum listened to her advice and left the next day.



My name is Ashlee Zenna Dianne Donohue. I was born on 31 December 1968 in a town called Kempsey, the first child born to Patricia Donohue, a sixteen-year-old Aboriginal woman from the Dunghutti Nation, on the mid north coast of New South Wales.

I have one sister – her name is Lara. She’s four years younger than me. When I was born, Mum’s room was on the Veranda Ward – a zone set aside for Aboriginal women. It was just that – a veranda with mesh around it, segregated from the obstetrics unit and the main maternity ward where the white women stayed.

Mum told me on numerous occasions that the nurses fussed over me because I was such a pretty baby. It was probably because I was blonde haired and blue eyed.

My first home was the same tin shack on the banks of the Hat Head Creek that my mother had left just over a year before, located about forty minutes drive east of Kempsey. My first bed was a bamboo fishing basket. My pop painstakingly washed that basket and filled it with fresh straw and pillow stuffing for my arrival home. In this shack lived Pop, Nan, my mother and six of her brothers and sisters ranging from six months to fourteen years old. There were other shacks in the camp occupied by other family members, including my pop’s brother, his wife and their children.

We lived there until I was about two years old, and then the family moved into town because Pop got a job with Kempsey Shire Council. We were one of the first Aboriginal families in the area. Besides us there was Aunt Beryl, an elderly Aboriginal lady who lived by herself across the road, as well as Harriet, who lived with her husband and four children next door. We didn’t know her when we arrived, but she became ‘Aunt Harriet’ over the years.

Pop worked hard and he always provided for us. He was a tall, strong man with distinct Aboriginal features – a handsome man. People would look at us funnily when I would sing out ‘Pop’ to him in public. Firstly, this was because I looked white, and secondly, because he didn’t look old enough to be a grandfather. In actual fact, he wasn’t my biological grandfather – he was my biological uncle. He was, however, the only father I knew, and he treated me like one of his daughters.

During my early years, I would travel back and forth with Mum from Kempsey to Sydney quite often. The earliest childhood memory I have from around the age of four or five is of tickling people’s feet during prayer time at the Hare Krishna Temple in Glebe. I also remember how delicious the apricot sweets were – little balls of sweet, soft, sticky apricot heaven that would melt in my mouth. I’m not sure what they were made from, but gosh they were scrumptious.

In 1978 my mum moved Lara and me from Kempsey to Sydney. We stayed at her friend Dani's house in Allambie Heights on the North Shore along with Dani's boyfriend, Mick. Mum enrolled us into the local primary school. I was so excited to be going there. I went shopping with Mum and Lara for new school shoes at the St Vincent de Paul Society shop, or Vinnies, and found a perfect brown pair I loved. I thought I was going to fit in.

I settled into school really well. My early days were great. I loved learning and felt really comfortable at the school. I was a happy girl and made friends quite easily.

One of those friends was a girl named Ebony, who I met on the first day. At the time I thought, *Gosh she's perfect*. Later on, I was invited to her house after school where we had biscuits and milk. We walked to school together and played together. She was my first best friend. I wanted to be just like her. I asked Mum if Ebony could come to our house, but Mum said no. I wasn't sure why.

One day at school, we had to do a test. I did it with ease and was so very proud of myself. That afternoon, Dani and her boyfriend Mick came to pick me up from school. I walked out with my teacher Miss Jane holding my hand, but as soon she saw Dani's boyfriend she let go of my hand.

I recall feeling uneasy, but I had no idea why. There was something going on between Mick and Miss Jane, but I was too young to understand.

The next day, Miss Jane's attitude towards me changed profoundly. She accused me of cheating on my test and I had to do it again. She took me into a separate room and made me sit down to do a different test. She sat across from me, glaring. I was so intimidated and scared that I couldn't think straight, and of course I failed.

She then arranged for Mum to come to a parent-teacher meeting. I was so excited when I saw Mum walk through the gates. She looked so pretty with her natural afro, nose ring and a long, flowing, hippie wrap-around skirt with little bells that tinkled on her belt. I ran up to her singing out, "Mummy! Mummy!" and threw my arms around her waist, giving her a big cuddle. I was so happy.

Miss Jane seemed a little shocked when Mum introduced herself as Ashlee's mother. Looking back, she may have thought I was Dani's child.

The next day, barely any of the other children spoke to me, not even

Ebony. I couldn't understand why and felt sad and confused. Then I heard the kids whispering among themselves, "Did you see her nose? She had an earring in it!" and chanting that I was 'dirty' because Mum was black. I'd never noticed that my mother looked a little different. I thought all Mums looked like mine.

After that, the kids didn't want to sit near me. Even Ebony behaved differently towards me and she soon stopped asking me to go over to her place. I felt miserable. This was the first time I realised I was different because I was Aboriginal. I was confused and didn't know how to act or what to do to make everything go back to how it was. It instilled in me a sense of not belonging, as well as the belief that I was not good enough. It was awful.

I went home and cried to Mum. At first, she tried to explain to me that some people reacted to Aboriginal people like this and then she announced, "That's it. We're going home!" We promptly packed up and left Sydney. We were only there for six months.

We moved back to Nan and Pop's house in Middleton Street, Kempsey, which was a four-bedroom weatherboard house. I continued to be raised with my aunties and uncles—six were older than me and four were younger. We grew up more like brothers and sisters than uncles, aunties and niece, and I never actually called them aunty or uncle.

I loved South Kempsey and being with my family. I didn't really need to make friends at school because I had so many relatives there. My school days were filled with happy memories. When I was eleven years old, I was chosen to attend a camp at Stewart House in Sydney. I thought I was selected because I was doing well at school—I had no idea it was a program for disadvantaged kids. It was the first time I had travelled on my own; I was scared and excited at the same time. We had so much fun, with trips to Taronga Zoo, Luna Park and other places that I had never been to before. There were also daily activities like painting and games.

For the most part, my childhood was filled with happiness and love, with flashes of sadness, despair, pain and disbelief. There was a fair bit of drinking at home in Kempsey. Our aunties and uncles would visit occasionally, and they'd all have a drink and then start fighting. At times, we could have up to forty people crammed into our place.

When I was about thirteen years old, a few of the girls decided to sneak out with one of our female cousins whose boyfriend was catching

the late train to Armidale. I didn't want to go but my older Aunt Mimi forced me. She grabbed my arm and twisted it, and threatened to hit me if I didn't go with them. I was too scared of her to say no. We placed clothes and pillows under our blankets to make it appear as if we were still there, and turned on the radio. We also put knives in the door, which Nan had previously told us to do when we had a lot of visitors. This was a simple security measure to alert us if anybody tried to sneak into our room while we were sleeping. On this occasion, we put the knife in the door to keep Nan out.

When we were ready, we jumped out the window. We walked to the train station in the dark and then waited for the train to arrive. I was fidgety and kept wishing that the train would hurry up. Then I saw my cousin and her boyfriend kiss ... I mean really kiss. It was the first time I'd ever seen anyone kiss. I was mesmerised. Aunt Mimi bumped me and gave me the look – the one that means 'stop staring'. I kept thinking, *I can't wait for a boy to kiss me like that.*

We decided to head home as the train was taking too long, and we left our cousin with her boyfriend. As we walked home, we heard Nan's whistle, followed by the sound of our car – which we had lovingly named Red Back because it was red. We ran and hid in the bushes, but it was too late. We had been spotted and we knew we were going to get it.

The car pulled up and Nan and Pop got out. Before they even came near me, I started crying, "Mummy, Daddy, Mummy, Daddy, no!" No matter what, if any of us kids were in trouble we would always cry, "Mummy, Daddy, Mummy, Daddy!" I'm not sure why – we just did!

Then I thought I could escape from my pop by running away, but I couldn't. He pulled me to the ground by my hair and whacked me with a stick. Except for my cousin, who was still on the train platform, we all got a hiding that night. I never jumped out the window again.



Kempsey was a great place to grow up. We walked everywhere, ran across the train tracks, climbed big trees, played in the park and regularly went to the beach. To this day, Hat Head Creek holds a special place in my heart. I often go there when I'm feeling overwhelmed and stressed. It's my favourite place in the world.

Not long afterwards, my world changed dramatically when two of my aunts (one aged fourteen and the other sixteen) fell pregnant. As a result, my life became restricted. Overnight, I gained a bodyguard in the form of my mother, who accompanied me out at night whenever I went to the blue-light disco. I couldn't understand why. After all, the blue-light disco was organised and overseen by the police. What on earth was I going to do when the police were everywhere and supervising everything?

My mother's minding activities were not just restricted to the disco. No matter where I went, I had to be dropped off and picked up at a scheduled time. It was a bit much, to say the least. It was like I was being punished for their behaviour.

High school was a happy place for me, although I struggled – not so much with the schoolwork but with the exams. I still believe my earlier experience of being labelled a cheat negatively affected my learning, to the point where my Year 10 supervisor advised Mum that it would be a waste of time for me to go on to Years 11 and 12. I remember my mother glaring at him and stating firmly, "She'll be fine!" – and I was.

I got along with most people in high school and had a few best friends who weren't family. I participated in sports, even though I wasn't very good at them. I was often put in the goal defence position for netball because I was tall. I wasn't particularly artistic either, but I was good at reading and talking. I was often expressing my opinion. I had a voice and I wasn't afraid to use it; in fact, I may even have been a little loud.

My first real achievement came when I was sixteen years old. I was in Year 11 when I was asked to participate in a department class in Sydney run by the famous June Dally-Watkins. I had decided to be an air hostess (the name for a flight attendant back then) and was told this course would help me achieve that dream by teaching me how to walk, talk and eat in public. June Dally-Watkins was one of the oldest department schools in Australia. I took part in the personal development course, which was designed to build confidence and to teach good manners and the value and importance of self-worth and happiness.

I was excited and scared at the same time. I was also ecstatic that my Aunt Cynthia was coming too. We were very close, so this was perfect. We stayed at the YWCA in Sydney. The course went for one week. We learned how to walk properly, how to eat soup, how to use cutlery and how to take care of our hygiene, among other things. It ended with a

fashion parade. I really enjoyed it. It was a simple program, but it had an enormous impact. I believe it instilled a little bit of pride in me.



I only had one boyfriend during my teenage years, and that relationship lasted for six months. I was fifteen and he was seventeen. He had the loveliest smile and shiny dark skin. His name was Simon.

Simon was the first boy I kissed – and the first to hit me.

I thought I loved him. He was drinking one night at the skate park and then started a fight with me. He pushed me and then punched me in the arm and leg. I couldn't understand why he would do this. I still can't.

I thought we had broken up because of this, I begged Aunty Cynthia to go on a seven-kilometre bike ride with me all the way from our home to North Street to see if he was still my boyfriend. I thought I must have done something wrong for him to want to punch me.

When we finally arrived, I went into his room. He tried to ignore me so I asked him if we were still together. He looked at me shyly and muttered, “Yes, we are.”

I threw my arms around his neck, gave him a quick kiss and ran outside as quickly as I could to where Aunty Cynthia was waiting for me. I jumped on the bike and said, “Let's go home.”

Aunty Cynthia asked me whether I was okay and I said, “Yep, never been better,” then started pedalling. I was terrified Simon would run out of the house after me to say he had changed his mind. As we got further away from his house, I relaxed and smiled all the way home.

We split up two weeks later.

I didn't have another boyfriend for several years after Simon, although I fell deeply and madly in love with one of the new boys who came to our high school in Year 12. His name was Brad, and he was tall with piercing blue eyes and dark brown hair, as well as the muscliest arms I had ever seen. Our friendship blossomed quickly, and there was lots of flirting and swift touching of hands and faces. Then one day he asked me to go to his place. I said, “Yeah sure,” as he lived only a five-minute walk away from the high school.

We walked into his house. His mum was on the lounge and he gave her a kiss and introduced me. I thought, *Wow! Isn't he sweet? He still kisses his mum.*

We went into the kitchen, and then he grabbed my hand and took me into his room. He pulled me close and kissed me like I'd never been kissed before. My knees went weak and I saw stars, in a good way. Luckily he had his strong arms around me because I swear I would have otherwise crumbled to the floor. I made the naive assumption that he would have felt as wonderful as I did while experiencing this kiss. As it turned out, that was the first and last time we kissed because he had a girlfriend.

When I turned eighteen I left home and moved to Port Macquarie to live in a big house by the beach with my Auntys Angie and Claudia, and cousins Karen and Ellen. I secured myself a traineeship with a travel agency and my adulthood began.