

Writer's Note on *EightEightFour*

EightEightFour isn't just a story to me — it's my life.

My name is Nicoleta and I'm a Greek/Cypriot (Yes, the Wog!) and I grew up in one of the most disadvantaged suburbs in New South Wales. At my high school, the population was 80-90% Islander, and on my very first day in Year 7, I was jumped by three Islander girls — one from my year and her two older cousins in Year 11. I fought back, and I won. I lost my watch in that fight, but I gained something much more bothersome the realisation that in this place, if you didn't fight, you'd be eaten alive. So I fought.

I got into fights weekly, not because I wanted trouble, but because I wanted to stand up for people who were picked on, for the girls who were being mistreated by the boys, so yes, I fought boys, I fought girls. There was no discrimination in violence where I grew up, respect wasn't given, it was earned through fear or force. People didn't mess with me because they knew I didn't hold back. My temper was big. My fuse, short. I was seen as a loose cannon, but I was also someone people came to when they needed help.

During a volleyball match one girl challenged me because she got so annoyed at my banter, she decided she'll drive her inch-long nail into the back of my neck just behind my ear. Blood came pouring out. I still remember the chaos out in the quad as the class crowded around us. I chased her down and pinned her to the ground. She surrendered. My unbeaten streak continued.

But that was just one fight out of many.

I've had knives held to my throat — twice — *at school*. I was hit in the head with a crowbar outside maths class. I watched my Islander friends form gangs and hang out at the local youth centre. Our school was literally across the road from a juvenile detention centre. I remember the day a kid escaped and blended in with the rest of us, like nothing ever happened. It caused a lockdown of the school but it was fun and funny to us.

That was our normal. I didn't know that most schools weren't like this. I didn't know that living in constant survival mode wasn't how most kids grew up.

I also happened to be a straight-A student, top of the class in every subject I took. I had a short fuse, a smart mouth, and a no-nonsense attitude at school, but when I got home, I studied hard. Some teachers couldn't make sense of it. They couldn't reconcile the girl who caused trouble with the girl who aced every exam. It got to the point where I was kicked out of class just for getting high marks.

So, this isn't just a story I made up. This is my lived experience, and the experiences of the people I grew up with. It's about life in a suburb marked by violence, stigma, and silence.

I've seen the kind of grief that doesn't go away. One of my friends lost her father to murder, killed in a drunken rage by her own boyfriend's father, (she also happened to be pregnant, and I always thought how is she going to explain that his grandfather was killed by his other grandfather?) To top it all off she was just months away from graduating high school.

I've carried these memories for years. And I've carried a responsibility to tell the truth of what it was like, not just the darkness, but also the resilience, the wildness, the humour, and the strange spiritual world that bubbled just underneath it all.

Because Campbelltown isn't just gritty — it's *haunted*.

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There's a famous local legend — the ghost of Fred Fisher, murdered in the 1820s. His ghost was spotted pointing to the spot where his body was hidden. We still celebrate that story today, discovering that he didn't leave back to England but that his neighbour killed him for his property.

But even stranger than folklore was what I saw with my own eyes at school. Every year, without fail, some of the Islander girls would become *possessed*. They'd growl, their bodies would stiffen, they'd stop blinking even as tears fell down their face they wouldn't blink. It was terrifying. Luckily one girl in particular knew how to snap them out of it (by hitting a pressure point in the neck), but as soon as one girl came back, another would go under.

One time, I accidentally touched one of them with my crucifix bracelet as I walked past. She jumped like she'd been burned, turned to me, and growled. That's when I realised, there was something real going on. Something deeper.

The supernatural parts of *EightEightFour* aren't just there for entertainment, they're based on some truths, strange moments, and unexplained experiences. Over time, I began to understand my own mediumistic gifts and why certain spirits stay earthbound, why some feel evil and others protective. These deeper truths are woven into the story too.

The truth is, there aren't many people who've lived what I've lived, seen what I've seen, and *also* had supernatural encounters like mine.

This story is my way of sharing all of it, the pain, the chaos, the culture, the unseen. It's a story that entertains, yes. But more than that, it teaches. It challenges. It tells the forgotten that they're not forgotten. And it reminds us that change, real change, *is* possible.

Just like many of the characters in my story, I've spent over a decade learning and growing, slowly realising that I don't need to live in survival mode anymore. I've been finding my way out through my passions: acting, writing, and storytelling.

But no matter where I go, I'm still seen as the "wog" from South-Western Sydney. I'm treated like a nobody. People stereotype me because of my accent, my presence, my background.

Still, I'm on a journey, learning to love myself, to see strength where others saw shame. I've chosen the path of change and growth, and now I want others to believe in that path too. To choose love over violence. Patience over reaction. Healing over survival.

