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Crispin Chan grew up in the suburbs of Perth.

His parents were migrants from Hong Kong,

and they ran a popular Chinese restaurant called The Man Lin.

Then in September 1988, when Crispin was just eight years old,

the family was woken up in the middle of the night by a phone call.

There'd been a terrible fire at the family restaurant.

At first they assumed it was a gas leak,

but then the police established the place had been fire bombed with a Molotov cocktail.

At the same time Perth was being plastered with posters demanding Asians out

and attacking other ethnic groups like Jewish Australians.

The organisation behind the posters was a neo-Nazi group

calling itself the Australian Nationalist Movement,

led by a man named Jack Van Tongeren.

More Chinese restaurants were fire bombed,

and it became clear that this was part of a concerted terrorist campaign,

right here in Australia.

This is the subject of the latest season of the ABC Podcast Unravel,

which is called Fire Bomb,

which has led Crispin to recall that dangerous time

and to think about the motivation of the man behind these attacks.

Hi, Crispin.

Hi, Richard. Thanks for having me.

Like I said, your parents were from Hong Kong.

What brought your dad to Australia in the first place?

My dad and his identical twin brother, he actually came over as well.

They came from a very poor family in Hong Kong,

and being the eldest in the family,

the family felt that it was best for them to move to Australia

and to study there and to hopefully find work

and stay with their aunt and uncle there who was sponsoring them

and to help provide a living for the family back in Hong Kong.

So my father and his identical twin brother came over in the early 60s

and they stayed in Sydney.

His aunt and uncle had a restaurant

beside his kitchen hands and worked their way up in the kitchen,

and then eventually they, after school,

worked in other restaurants around Sydney.

So then he and his brother moved out west to WA,

and that's where he met your mum. How did he meet your mum?

So he worked the restaurant scene in Perth,

and mum was waitressing in one of the restaurants that he was working at in Subiaco,

and mum was working as a clerk in the daytime for Princess Margaret Children's Hospital,

and at night time to make a little bit of extra income to your waitress at the restaurants.

I've always wanted to be a guest at a Chinese wedding because weddings seem to be all about the guest rather than the bride and groom. They seem like extraordinarily festive occasions. Tell me about what you know about your dad's wedding to your mum. Well, it wasn't just a wedding with my mum and dad. It was also a bit of a double wedding actually because at the same time my dad's identical twin brother fell in love with my mother's oldest sister who was also working in Perth as well. Get out. Really? So the two fathers married the two sisters? Exactly. It makes an interesting thing, especially when you throw in that little effector of the identical brother. So, you know, my cousins and I, we kind of joke that we have the same father genetically, which is a bit of a funny story to share. But they got married on the same day, and they even had the reception for the wedding in the restaurant they were all working at. They didn't have much money. I mean, it was still, you know, it was still pretty tight. So they had a very small group of people coming around for the wedding, and the guys basically rolled up their sleeves, went into the kitchen and cooked the wedding reception meal for everyone. That's lovely. So you spent your early childhood in Rockingham, south of Perth. Would that have been like the classic Aussie beachside childhood for your early childhood, Crispin? Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. We were close to the beach where our place was. And, you know, I remember a lot of times going down to the beach with Dad and building sandcastles, exploring the limestone coastline around there. And I distinctly remember, you know, they smelled the sand dunes, the smell of that salty air, it was something that was very strong in my memory in that period. Absolutely. What language did you speak at home as a small boy? Actually, my first language was Cantonese, which is very strange because I don't actually speak very fluent Cantonese now. In fact, very little at all. But for the first five, six years, mum was a live-at-home mum. Dad would work at the restaurant down in Rockingham, and mum took care of us. So we spent a lot of time at home. And if you look at the home videos, I'm speaking very fluent Cantonese, but it was until when I'd gone into primary school, pre-primary, that's when things started changing, and I picked up a lot more English quite quickly. Yeah, but was that a problem for you to begin with once you started going to school? Yeah, so that was an interesting kind of period in that transition going from a home life into school, where suddenly I was in an environment where I had a lot of people speaking English, and I actually developed this...

I don't know if I would say I was mute,
but I definitely kind of withdrew from the class
because I think at that time I was quite confused about code switching from Cantonese to English.
And so my teacher at the time suggested to my mum that I actually go and see a speech therapist.
So I have his memories of being in this hospital in Rockingham,
walking through the corridors and being in this room that was full of books and toys
and other kind of tools that the speech therapist would use to help us.
And it was from that that they recommended that I do speech and drama as part of my development.
So my parents, after that, put me into youth theatre schools through primary school,
which helped my confidence, helped develop my speech.
But I think a very unfortunate side effect for them was that I became very interested in the arts.
And you're enacted today?
I'm enacted today.
Perhaps not what they quite had in mind for you back then?
Exactly, exactly.
I didn't think that it was such a long-term investment,
but unfortunately, I didn't become a lawyer or a doctor or an engineer.
I went into the arts.
So they planted that seed very, very early in my development.
So when you were six, the family moved to Perth and they set up the restaurant, The Man Lin.
How different was it for you at the age of six?
Yeah, so we moved back up to Perth for the restaurant.
And we moved into an area that I guess you could say back then was quite a rough neighbourhood.
I was put into a primary school, a public primary school there.
And it was quite different.
Back in Rockingham, one of the very few Asian families there,
people treated us as if it didn't matter where we were from.
It was just a very strong community there.
We had a really strong sense of being part of a town there.
But back up in Perth, in the school, I distinctly remember being quite lonely.
I didn't really have friends in that first year.
And that was also when I kind of had my first experience with...
Looking back on it was quite a racist thing.
There was this boy that I remember of his great school uniform.
He had this very distinctive brown mullet, hair mullet.
And he was kneeling on top of me during lunchtime.
And he was doing these ching-chong eyes with the fingers.
And he spat on me.
And actually, during this podcast, doing some research,
I was looking through some of my old archives from that period,
seeing what I could find.
I actually found an old school diary from that year in school,
that first year up in Perth, into school.
And I actually wrote in it that I actually had a fight with someone.

And it was actually the last entry of the diary.

And after that, I know that my parents actually took me out of that school and put me into a Catholic school nearby to get away from, I guess, from that bullying that I was experiencing in year one. I remember kids like that.

And looking back, I just always wonder whether they got that from home and brought it into the school yard.

What do you think about that?

Oh, yeah, absolutely.

I was in the area where there was a lot of new migrants, particularly from the UK, from areas where there was a bit of that kind of latent racism that came from that period, the national front of it, perhaps.

Maybe also because in that period, multiculturalism was also very relative new.

And definitely, I think that back at that time, a lot of those kids picked up things from their parents.

Whatever views these parents had about what was happening in that period in Perth.

Were there any teachers that stood up for you in that situation?

Yes, I had a teacher in that same public school before I left who really took care of me.

Her name was Miss MacDonald.

She would let me stay in the classroom at lunchtime and let me have my lunch there and just do my thing.

And she became quite a good family friend.

She would check in on us and she'd actually come to the restaurant when we had the restaurant later on and have meals and catch up with us.

And we stayed in touch up to the point where even when I got married, she actually came to the wedding, which was about 13 years ago.

Oh, really? Right.

Yeah, yeah.

So she's always been a part.

She's always been there.

And one thing I remember distinctly, which I was always really kind of impressed by, she always had this really sleek sports car that she drove around.

I was really kind of like, wow, this teacher is really cool.

So your parents set up the restaurant, the Man Lin.

What are your memories of the Man Lin?

How would you describe it?

What does it look like in your memory?

Oh my gosh, there's so many memories about that restaurant.

It's so ingrained in me.

It's been with me for almost 30 years that place.

So the Man Lin was one of the rare few restaurants at that time that was a standalone building.

And it had this distinctive Chinese style pagoda roof.

And it was a bit of a landmark in some ways.

You know, people would say, you know, go down this road, turn left, and you just, you know, just stop by near the restaurant with the Chinese roof.

It was one of those places that you could kind of see from a long distance.

A total landmark.

Yeah.

It was something you give directions with.

And it was, you know, your typical suburban Chinese restaurant, you know, the ones that serves the sweet and sour pork, the spring rolls, the chop soup, the charmean, exactly.

And all the customers of these white Australians and not many Asian customers because, you know, they'd walk in and they'd see their menu and they'd just go, this isn't an authentic real Chinese restaurant menu.

So your dad and his twin brother were doing the cooking at the restaurant.

What was it like to observe your dad and his brother in action?

Oh, they were going crazy.

I mean, they'd have four walks going at the same time, one for each hand.

One person is doing the fried rice constantly.

One person is pumping out the Mongolian lamb.

The other person is doing all the seafood.

It was constant flurry of hands and walks and clattering and flames shooting up.

It was quite a sight to see.

And how about your mum and your auntie?

What was their role at the restaurant?

So they worked the front of the restaurant.

They worked the dining room.

So they went out there, mixed with the customers.

They were taking their tokei orders.

And so it was a really smooth kind of operation.

But then I also remember my auntie also had the role of also washing the tablecloths for the restaurant.

So there's 20 tables.

So you've got 20 tablecloths, or at least sometimes even 40 if you do two sittings in one night.

And every time I'd go to her house to visit, there'd always be this red tablecloth constantly hanging out to dry in the backyard on the hills hoist or something like that.

We weren't going to take it out to a laundromat and pay someone to do it.

We'll do it at home.

It's no problems.

And she even had the commercial ironing machines.

Everyone's those really big, metal rollers that's heated.

And she's just rolling it through.

So that was quite a sight to see her have a place.
And what sort of hours were your parents putting in at that restaurant?
Dad was working there seven days a week.
And his day would start at 10, 11 o'clock in the morning.
And then he'd finish up maybe 10, 11 at night.
And sometimes past midnight, it was a particularly busy weekend.
And mum would work maybe five, six days a week.
And then other times she'd look after us.
But because they were working long hours,
my brother and I would be left to,
we were particularly young,
we were left with our neighbours who babysat us.
So I had an Italian family looked after us for a while.
We had a British family looked after us for another time.
So I only saw my dad for like two hours a day maybe
in the morning before he went to work.
And then maybe on the weekends,
I might catch him a little bit longer.
But they worked really hard for most of that time
of the restaurant six, seven days a week.
So then we get to the mid to late 80s.
And these posters start appearing around Perth.
Do you remember these posters as a little boy?
I do. I do.
They were everywhere. You couldn't really miss it.
There were different sizes.
They were like the size of your palm all the way up to like,
you know, those big A3 posters that you see on the side of a building.
They'd be on lamp posts.
They were on bus stops.
There were some that were even posted on our parents, my parents restaurant.
They had some of those posters posted on the door.
And also at the bus stop across the road from the restaurant.
I remember seeing those same posters as well.
That said Asians out.
It had caricatures and it's horrible caricatures
of what they thought Asian people looked like
and the buck tooth and the slanty eyes.
And did you think that when you looked at that,
did you think they're talking about me?
Yes, I recognize that.
I recognize them as being about me.
But also at the age of eight, it didn't.
I didn't understand the hatred or what it meant about where they saw me.

I didn't quite understand the messaging at that time.
It was only only later on as I was a little bit older
when I was reading newspapers.
I of course was a more mature that understood what was messages meant.
So then the first of September, 1988, you were eight years old.
What do you remember about that night?
I remember me being in bed and hearing the phone ring.
And I remember waking up and hearing it, hearing Dad answering the phone.
And I remember him swearing and the phone kind of clattering down to the table.
And then the footsteps of Dad running out to the car and then driving off.
And seeing the headlights kind of swish across the windows and the shadows are moving.
Then I fell asleep again.
And then the next set of memories that I have, they're kind of like little vignettes.
There was this moment when we arrived at the restaurant and the way to school.
Mum said that we should stop at the restaurant first on the way to school.
And I remember seeing the crime scene tape around the restaurant, this yellow tape.
And eight-year-old me thought it was quite exciting.
I thought it was something from a movie.
I thought it was something that was something that was quite exciting to see as a novelty.
And then I remember also looking, peering through inside the restaurant and through the dining
area.
And I remember seeing the Chinese lanterns, the black Chinese lanterns.
And they had melted.
And the plastic had melted from the ceiling down to the floor.
And it was almost like these black grotesque stalactites that was in the foyer along the walls of the
dining room.
But I don't remember at any point my parents ever saying to me that the restaurant had been fire-
bombed, that this was an attack.
On that day, my parents at that point didn't think of anything of being a racist attack.
They thought it was just, you know, maybe a gas leak.
They were still very quite confused about what was happening.
But I mean, I wasn't really kind of briefed subsequently about what it all was happening and why it
happened.
Did you take a souvenir from the scene for yourself?
Oh, yes.
I remember being handed.
I don't know how I got it, but I got handed, I think for my mum, this tumbler that was covered in
smoke.
It was kind of soot and blackened.
And it had a very strong smell of smoke.
And I took it to school.
And I did it show and tell with it.
You did a show and tell from an artifact from the burnt-out restaurant.
Yeah, on the day that it happened.

And I don't know, I wish I knew what I had actually said.

Like, how did I explain that?

How did I explain that to the class?

Did I just say my restaurant was on fire today and here is a glass from it?

I wish I could remember what the reaction was to that.

So when did it become apparent that the fire at your parents' restaurant was no accident, Crispin?

So on that night of the firebombing, it wasn't just a restaurant that was firebombed.

There was actually another restaurant that was firebombed a few hours earlier, which was the China City restaurant in Como, which was only about 15, 20 minutes drive away from the restaurant.

So already it was a little bit of suspicion, but no one really knew who had done it.

I think when the third restaurant was firebombed, which was two or three months after our restaurant was firebombed,

that's when things started to click.

And definitely amongst the restaurant owners, definitely amongst my parents and the people that they knew,

they knew that there was something very suspicious, something that were being targeted.

At that point still, I don't think they necessarily thought it was the workings of the neo-Nazis.

They thought it could have been triad gangs trying to do some kind of extortion.

They thought that it also could have been something, or they thought that it was just a bunch of hooligans,

just a bunch of ragtag hooligans who were just trying to cause trouble.

It never occurred to them at that point at least that these were actually the works of a much more organized, more structured organization.

So that brings us back to the posters that had been appearing all over Perth with the Asians out slogan.

One in fact, as you said, had been plastered on the door of the family restaurant before it had been firebombed.

They were branded with the words the Australian Nationalist Movement or A&M.

What do we know now? What do you know now about the Australian Nationalist Movement?

Well, there were a semi paramilitary group and they were led by a man by the name of Jack Van Tongren,

who also was a Vietnam vet and he was heavily influenced by the ideology of neo-Nazism and his aim was to establish a white Australia and he had followers, members who shared the same sentiment

and they ran a military training camp up in Bindoon in the country.

They had an underground bunker up there.

They were stashing firearms, cash, and they were actually even training themselves in a firing range on that site with the firearms.

And in order to fund all of this, they were committing burglaries, breaking into warehouses, stealing equipment

and using that to fund their posters and any other activities they were trying to embark.

I mean, they really had, they were really determined.

They had a plan.

I mean, these guys went as far as even running for state election. They actually ran for one of the seats in state election and fortunately they didn't get far, but they'd only got a couple of hundred votes, so they were nowhere near. But I mean, they were determined. They were fully determined to set things in motion about establishing a white Australia and driving away Asians from it. Groups like that always want to make themselves, pop themselves up to make themselves look bigger and more popular than they really are. I remember around about this time, certainly the years before this, Crispy, in the punk scene, the punk scene was very ideologically anti-racist and anti-fascist. You had the dead Kennedys, who was kind of a leading band of that period, which had that song, Nazi Punk's F-Off. But around the fringe of the punk scene, there were racist skinheads at the same time. So they're going to the same gigs. Fascinatingly enough, their favourite music was Scar, which is, of course, music developed by Afro-Caribbeans, but they never seemed to bother them at the time. Did this campaign by the Australian Nationalist Movement sort of embolden the local skinhead scene in Perth at the time? Absolutely. They even went as far as using them as henchmen. I mean, they involved some of those members in their activities as well, which was very scary. And that was something that I only just discovered in this podcast during the research. I had no idea that there was this whole scene between the skinheads and the punks. I was very young at that time to really know. And the irony is, is that the punks who were on our side, the anti-fascist groups, they've been the people that my parents would have told me to stay away from because of how they looked and the hair and the clothes and all that, not knowing really that actually these guys were actually on our side trying to fight these racist skinheads. Had the consciousness of this sort of filtered up into the broader community in Perth, or was this something that was sort of happening below the radar? It was below the radar. Even when we talked to one of the punks, they admitted as well that the mainstream Australians even then really weren't aware of what was going on because there were skirmishes. And maybe from the outside, it just seemed like they were just fighting amongst themselves, but they were actually fighting for a much bigger idea, a bigger reason. Maybe they were just seen as hooligans, perhaps. So at this time, Jack Van Tongren's name started bubbling up. Was he starting to get a profile for himself in the Perth media? Yeah, he was seen as a bit of an oddity. I mean, the idea of this man who was wearing this powder blue suit, he had this comb over hair, this mustache. In fact, one of the investigating police officers kind of described him as a Hitler clone. And this man was just kind of walking around with his followers,

wearing who all had uniforms of their own as well, his khaki uniforms.

It was a bit of a sight.

And I think the media kind of jumped to that thinking that this was a bit of an oddball, this kind of Hitler wannabe walking around proclaiming that he knew what society needed or what he, you know, the Asians need to leave.

And I think in some ways it gave him a bit of a platform for him to talk about his views because they thought that his views somehow made for good news.

So that was an unfortunate thing.

And I think in some ways that enabled or perhaps may be encouraged more people to share those very horrible views more openly.

And definitely the community, the Asian community felt those effects.

You know, people were spitting at them, calling out yelling names at them on the streets.

And so it really had quite a presence in Perth at that time.

Now, how did you as a boy at the time become aware that Perth's ninja community and there was such a thing had taken interest in these racist attacks?

So this ninja group was started by a man called Zhong Ang.

Zhong Ang is this Singaporean migrant who just arrived in Australia in 87.

And the minute he landed, he saw all these posters around saying Asians out.

And he was quite disturbed by that.

And he felt that the Chinese community wasn't doing enough to speak up and speak out about this.

And get the authorities to do something about this.

So he took it into his own hands to run this to start up this ninja society, this ninja school.

And he had the full ninja outfit and everything on.

And he had this incredible presence.

And he advertised that he was providing a hotline service to the community, the Asian community to say, if you have any problems, if you're getting any harassment, call us and we'll come down and assist.

And I think when he made that announcement, the media just jumped on that.

I mean, the idea of ninjas being thrown into the mix, fighting new Nazis on the streets.

I mean, it's not funny, but it kind of is like dial a ninja. That's wild.

It is dial a ninja. Exactly.

And the media just lapped that up.

And unfortunately, I think they didn't take it seriously.

I think they didn't really address what really John was trying to kind of make a point of is that we need to be heard. You need to see how scared this community was.

But there is some merit in having a public figure like John Ang stand up and say, this is wrong and we're not going to stand for this.

And we're going to stand together against it, isn't there?

Yeah. He was a very strong part of my memory as a kid growing up.

And maybe it didn't help the fact that at that point,

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles was just coming out on TV.

You know, it was kind of like, oh, wow, there's a real life ninja in here in the streets of Perth doing good.

It really kind of was something that was seen in my mind.

But that's the interesting thing is that I only found out in the research of this podcast that actually John, his wife actually is in a social dim sum group that my mom is a part of, my mom and dad are part of. So we were trying to find John Ang. I mentioned it to my mom saying, oh, yeah, I'm trying to find out who this guy, where this guy is now. What is he doing now? And the darling ninja guy. And my mom was like, oh, I think his wife actually has dim sum with us. Are you kidding me? Seriously? Is it that easy? I mean, that's Perth, right? And I got mom to tap the wife on the shoulder and actually John rung me up and said, actually, my wife told me to call you up. The long reach of the dim sum group in Perth? Dim sum diplomacy. Dim sum diplomacy, indeed. You're listening to Conversations with Richard Fadler. Hear more Conversations anytime on the ABC Listen app. Or go to abc.net.au-conversations. So, Crispin, we get to 1989 and there's another attack on a Perth Chinese restaurant, the Co-Sing restaurant in Linwood. The police investigation revealed that this attack was different from the other ones. It wasn't a Molotov cocktail hurled through a window. It was a bomb, an actual bomb that had been placed inside the restaurant and wrapped in masses of fencing wire. Perth had been, as you say, kind of sort of sleepwalking through these attacks. How did the use of an actual bomb change things in Perth and with the police, the WA police in particular? This definitely took things to another level, the use of an explosive in a Chinese restaurant. And what really disturbed me when I dug into the details of this particular bombing was that the fact that, as you mentioned, it was wrapped in fencing wire. And when the police were examining the crime scene, this wire had turned into shrapnel and had embedded themselves in the roof, the ceiling, the floor, it was everywhere. I think that was what was alarming for the police. They made them wonder, why would you want to wrap an explosive with wire like that? That really raised the stakes at that point. Now, Jack Van Tonga, the leader of the Australian Nationalist Movement, denied involvement in those attacks. But when he was asked about these attacks by the media, he said, quote, extreme times call for extreme measures. What did that sound like to the police? I wonder.

Well, I mean, it's very clear that Jack saw that in order to achieve the aims of what the A&M wanted to do,

that he was willing to go as far as he felt was needed to do that.

And I think the police read into that as being the case,

which made it much more important for him to find the evidence

and get the opportunity to put these guys behind jail.

So how did the police then establish a connection between the posturing campaign of the Australian Nationalist Movement with these firebombing attacks?

Well, it was really in some ways.

I mean, leading up to that, the police have struggled to find evidence at the restaurant that linked them to the A&M.

At the same time, though, the laws at that time with the posturing,

although the A&M's name was on those posters, the incredible part about this is that,

first of all, it wasn't illegal back then to put posters up that incited racial hatred.

It was illegal, however, to put up posters in the wrong place,

so it became graffiti or vandalism.

But the thing is, you had to be caught in the act of doing that.

And actually, the A&M was caught at one particular time.

Ironically, they were caught by a minister from the government, Gordon Hill.

He was a multicultural and ethnic affairs minister at the time.

But he also, before that, prior was also the police minister,

but not at the time when he caught them.

It was still too difficult for them to make that link.

It only was a moment of sheer luck that they came across someone who informed them

that they know of a house that was full of electrical stolen equipment,

that these police went to that house and that they found A&M propaganda inside that house.

So then the police took the opportunity to stake out the place

and waited to see who would come through the door.

And it was at that point that three members from the A&M came in.

Of note was John Van Blediswick, the right-man handman of the A&M to Jack Van Tongren, and also a Russell Willey.

So the police, when the police interviewed them, they put pressure on them.

And I think Russell Willey realized he was facing a lot of charges for the stolen goods.

So he decided to turn on the A&M.

He became a police informant?

He became an informant for them. That's right, yes.

He became the police informant for them.

He was wired up and he was allowed to go back to the A&M.

And it was through his work with A&M for the tapings that the police collected evidence.

And that was when they finally were able to pin on the A&M

that they were the ones responsible for the racist posters but also for the fire bombings.

Jack Van Tongren was eventually found guilty of 53 offences,

including willful damage, assault, occasioning, grievous bodily harm,

arson and causing an explosion.

He was sentenced to 18 years in jail.
The judge in the case called his actions a, quote,
departure into the black depths of terrorism.
Did that give some sense of, I don't know, relief or justice?
To your family at the time, Crispin?
Yeah, it did. I think it really helped give some closure to the community.
I think everyone was living in fear for a while
because you had restaurant after restaurant being fire bombed
over a period of months with the racist posters going around.
And up to the point when Willie came informant,
there was no, seemed to be no kind of resolution to this.
So for police to finally arrest and to put these men on trial
was a massive relief because now it felt like as if
they didn't have anything to fear about anymore in terms of violence.
So now we fast forward to 1996 at the federal election.
Pauline Hanson was elected in the seat of Oxley in Queensland
and in her first speech to parliament she gave an incendiary speech
which was covered by all the TV networks where she complained that
Australia was being quite swamped by Asians.
You were just in high school at the time.
What kind of an effect did that speech have on your mind
and on how you felt about being someone who lived in Australia, Crispin?
Well, there's this interesting period just leading up to Pauline Hanson
that I kind of went through, which it's not a part that I'm very proud of.
But there was this period after when the trials for the ANMs went on
I was asked to record the news for my parents
because they were working at the restaurant all the time.
So I recorded the news every night for them.
I would help them cut out the newspaper clippings for the trials and everything like that
and they did their own as well and put into a scrapbook.
And during that time I was about 10 and about to go into high school as well
and I kind of started reading up and understanding what had happened
and understanding that, wow, we were actually targeted by racists.
They didn't feel that I belonged here, that the Asians didn't belong in Australia
and I read up on what the things were saying about the stereotypes about Chinese
and it deeply affected me going to high school.
I felt very self-conscious.
It made me question who I felt I was.
I finally felt myself not being Australian enough suddenly that I had to somehow prove it.
I felt that I'd be very self-conscious about being Chinese
and it got to the strange stage where I found myself kind of experiencing internalized racism.
I would be very self-conscious if my parents started speaking Cantonese outside in public.
I became very conscious about being on family holidays
and being treated as a tourist rather than being someone who lived here in Australia.

I would occup my accent.
I would avoid having Asian friends.
I just basically tried to assimilate
and try to deny this part of me that was an essential part of me being Chinese.
So when Pauline Hansen came onto the scene with that speech
and suddenly I was seeing in Parliament someone reinforcing that,
it kind of just shook me up.
And maybe also at that same time I was also working in my parents' restaurant more.
I was washing dishes but also working in the dining room.
And the thing is you have to remember my parents' restaurant.
It was full of white Australians.
It was this place where we were serving Chinese food to these white Australians
and my mum had a community around her.
We had this community of friends, people that we went and saw, customers that came regularly.
We knew their orders beforehand.
We went to their funerals. We went to their weddings.
I was part of this community where suddenly I did belong here.
I could be Australian and I could be Chinese.
And when Pauline Hansen came into that speech,
it made me really kind of reassess and really look around me
what exactly I had in front of me.
Because she said that we were being swamped by Asians,
that we didn't belong here, that we needed to go back to our own country.
What does that mean?
I was born and raised here in Perth, in Australia.
If I went back to Hong Kong, which is where my parents originally came from,
if I went to Hong Kong now, I wouldn't be able to speak Cantonese.
I would instantly be called...
Well, I know this for a fact.
Some of my family members in Hong Kong, distant family members,
have called me a banana because they say you're yellow on the outside
but you're white on the inside.
You know, it really kind of shook up my sense of my identity.
And it really made me kind of work...
Who are you, Chris? What are you? Where do you sit?
How do you identify yourself in this world where you have...
You're living on the fence between two worlds in some ways.
You have your parents from the old country and then you're in this new country.
So, interesting twist.
Pauline Hansen of anything really kind of gave me a sense of who I was.
It really shook me up and made me...
It gave me clarity. It galvanized how I saw myself
as being an Australian Chinese boy.
In 2002, Jack Van Tongren was released from prison

after serving 12 years of that 18-year sentence.
He denied he'd been involved in terrorism,
but was there ever a connection established between him personally
and the attack on your family restaurant back in 1988?
Yeah, that came out in the court trials
that he actually was directly involved in the firebombing of my parents' restaurant.
And there's a funny story that comes out of that in a way.
So, what they did to our restaurant was they had these jerry cans of petrol
and they were spraying petrol into the eaves of the restaurant.
And then they were going to light a Molotov cocktail
and then throw the Molotov cocktail through the windows into the restaurant.
Now, the thing was with those sprays that they were using to put up,
they were leaking and their petrol was leaking onto Jack Van Tongren's arms.
His sleeves were covered in petrol.
So, when he lit up that Molotov...
Not only did the Molotov light up, his arms lit up.
So, he dropped kicked it.
He apparently dropped kicked the Molotov.
It flew into the window and exploded and did its thing.
But not only that, he then dropped down to the floor and started rolling on the ground on fire.
So, are you telling me he was in danger of becoming the sole fatality of his own terrorist attacks
here?
Exactly.
I mean, imagine in his restaurants on fire in the background
and there's guys rolling in, you know, he's in his, you know, army fatigues
rolling around the ground on fire.
It's just, it's a classic movie moment.
It's always a moment that's been burnt in my mind.
Not as much as it's burnt into his arm by the sound of things, though.
Exactly.
But this is the thing about this.
It's like, there's this whole thing about the A and N.
Like, there were, there was sinister, but there was also this aspect
but that were also kind of like these amateurs as well.
There's this strange kind of...
Idiocy?
Idiocy, you know, amongst all of this kind of calculated organization
that they were trying to be.
In the early 2000s, Crispin, you made a discovery about Jack Van Tolver
and when you looked into his background, tell me what you found out about his background.
So after the Paulding Hands, I went into university
and in one of my score assignments, I felt like it was a good idea
to try and use the story of my parents' prior restaurant bombing
as part of that exercise.

It was an exercise in film documentary.
I was doing a film minor in university
and so I thought, I'll just do a little mini doc in my parents' restaurant.
So I started digging through my parents' scrapbooks
and the videotapes that I helped them record when I was younger
and I came across an article that I must have missed
and there was an article that describes how actually
Jack Van Tolver and himself was actually Eurasian.
He actually had a father who was half Dutch, half Japanese
and his mother, I believe, was Irish.
So you had the A&M, the Australian Nationalist Movement
a group that was trying to create a white Australia
being led by a man who was Eurasian.
How did that sit with you once you found that out?
That blew my mind.
I was trying to understand that.
I mean, first of all, why are all these white Australians
following a Eurasian man to be a part of this
which just kind of did not make sense and I had to unpack that.
But none of this makes sense.
Like I said, skinheads get their music from Afro-Caribbeans.
White nationalists go for Chinese meals all the time.
Often they have these backgrounds to it.
Maybe it's got nothing to do with...
We're outside the realms of logic here, I think, Chrissie.
You know exactly.
And you know there's a nice story about that.
So Russell Willey, the guy who turned on the A&M,
he was involved in the second bombing
of the coasting restaurant with the mining explosives
and he actually mentioned in this documentary
found called Nazi Supergrass.
He mentioned that actually...
He only lived a couple hundred metres away from the coasting
and it was actually his wife's favourite restaurant.
And it was a shame he mentioned about firebomb restaurant
because they've got a really good beef black bean.
It's just mind boggling.
Like you say, it just does not make sense.
But however with Jack, there was something that was very interesting
about this aspect of his story about being Eurasian
which I kind of connected to.
And that was the fact that I kind of understood...
It seemed to me that there was some kind of self internalised racism going on here

because we also found later on a letter
that his mother had written to the media
who basically said that as a child living in Australia
Jack himself also had experienced racism for being Asian.
And I too of course experienced that racism as a child as well
and Jack was a big part of that.
And I remember this sense of self internalised racism
I was going through in high school.
And it kind of just...
It just was an interesting intersection that I found with Jack
that this man would go to the depths of being so assimilated
so this need to belong or some way to identify himself
that he would go as far as stripping himself of that part of him
this part of him being Japanese
and embarking on this campaign of terrorising Asians
people that he was a part of in that community.
Do you think he saw it in these binary terms?
That he could... This is pure speculation
but do you think he perhaps thought to himself
well I can stay with a marginalised group
or I can join the bullies?
Absolutely.
It was a survival instinct maybe.
And it didn't help that when he was in the war in Vietnam
that you're in a war where your enemy...
you have to dehumanise your enemy in order to engage them.
Who knows how that war affected his own sense of who he was as well when he came back.
Perhaps there's more to it than that Crispin.
This is again speculation but I've heard him talk
and he does have this super thick Aussie accent.
Real super thick old school Aussie accent.
And if you wanted to do that
if you wanted to side with one group over the other
you could just be that guy, that muttering old guy
that sits there muttering the odd racist slogan here and there
around the family table.
But to form an actual neo-Nazi group
to conduct terrorist attacks
that's something else.
It is and I really...
I would love to find out from him to understand that.
I mean because that's a very deep hole to fall down.
And I can't think of a rational explanation for that
unless I talk to him and find out more.

But to be able to strip away that part of you
is terribly sad.
I had this really conflict of feelings when I think about
what he's done to himself
and how he's shaped his own identity.
So I have this weird sense of pity for him
and at the same time disgust
because I mean the guy personally fire bombed my parents
my family's restaurant.
I mean that can never be excused.
But it brings me into this...
It makes me want to talk to him
because I also see this as some kind of Asian-Australian story
about himself.
He's a migrant himself.
What is that actually?
It's another story that needs to be heard.
I need to understand that.
It's a weird obsession that I have
that to try and understand what that's all about.
Like I said earlier, one of the tactics of such groups
is to puff themselves up and make themselves look bigger,
more popular and have more community support
than they really do.
They try to make themselves look like spokesmen
of a big, silent majority in Australia.
When you look back upon that,
did you ever believe that that they spoke for a silent majority
of deeply racist, hostile Australians
or did it become clear that that wasn't the case?
No, I didn't think it was ever that sense
that we were against some kind of silent majority.
I think it was very clear from the outset
after the fire bombings in my parents' restaurant
that clearly this group was in the minority.
They were a very loud minority and a violent minority,
but it was very clear also that we had
an incredible support of multicultural,
diverse, friendly community,
and Australia is that essentially.
When my parents reopened the restaurant four months later,
the restaurant was packed.
If anything, the beautiful irony of this whole campaign
that the A&M was trying to inflict on the Chinese communities

that it actually brought the community closer,
our restaurant thrived after that fire bombing.
We had so much business afterwards.
Everyone wanted to come in support
and they wanted to hear the story about what the A&M did.
The police would come every day,
someone from the different districts in the area would come
and they'd get takeaways and check-in on us
and everything like that.
It clearly wasn't a case that we felt like
they were speaking for a greater majority by any stretch.
But having said that,
I think we need to also remember that
the amount of damage they did inflict as a small group,
the kind of violence, the physical violence,
the mental violence,
what they did to the community,
creating that fear has a consequence.
What are some of the lingering effects you've observed
since making this podcast amongst talking about people
in the Chinese community?
Yeah, I mean, that's one of the things
that I really wanted to do in this podcast
was to kind of give a voice to my community
who was involved in that time
because it was a time that was quite difficult.
We were trying to make a living working six, seven days a week.
I mean, all the restaurants were working six, seven days a week.
There was no time to really process those feelings and thoughts.
My parents never talked to me about racism.
My parents never told me what it was all about.
Even during the trials,
my parents didn't actually sit me down and say,
hey, Crispin, let's talk about what these guys did.
How do you feel about that?
No one processed that with us.
And when we were trying to talk to the Chinese restaurant owners
about this podcast,
a lot of them still didn't want to talk to us about it.
A lot of them, I mean, most of them are in their 70s now,
80s, the restaurant owners.
They didn't want to talk about it because one,
they were either still scared
or they didn't feel the story was relevant to them anymore.

They say, well, what can I do about it?
What can I contribute?
Nothing that I say is going to help change things.
But what was interesting was when we started talking
to the kids of these restaurant owners,
the restaurant kids as we nicknamed them,
people like myself who are now in their 30s and 40s,
even 50s,
we started uncovering that
as second generation immigrant kids,
we were in this kind of purgatory space
where we were exposed to these horrible elements of racism.
Yet we didn't know how to process them,
how to communicate with them.
We were told to ignore these attacks,
to ignore racism, to ignore these bullies
and just to keep our heads down and work hard.
It's that model minority kind of mentality.
Don't stir shit up.
And so I think that's what we're only just uncovering now
is just actually how much racism can hurt a community
without necessarily achieving its goals.
To stand back and look at this,
what we really see was that in the late 80s and early 90s,
a concerted terrorist campaign was launched
against one segment of the community in Perth
and which had its knock-on offence for the effects
for the community as a whole.
Was it seen as terrorism at the time?
Because if this isn't terrorism, Crispy,
nothing is terrorism.
Yeah.
At least initially there was no...
It never crossed the minds, I think,
in the eyes of the community and the minds of the police
that this was some sort of domestic terrorism.
That these were the actions of a terrorist group.
And maybe that was maybe why things took a long time
to take action,
why the police was maybe slightly slower to respond,
that they didn't see...
I mean, in some ways, the police probably saw these...
the actions of this group, the posters and all that,
as being misguided.

They weren't seen as being harmful.

They weren't taken seriously.

The idea of Nazis walking around in Perth,

that sounds something from Indiana Jones or something like that.

But then, however, you apply what we've experienced since 9-11,

when we talk about terrorism now, if you look back on that,

definitely everything that what these guys were doing

definitely were the acts of terrorism

that we should treat it as being.

Chris, I mean, it's a completely fascinating story

and an amazing insight into this semi-forgotten part of Australia's history

that ought to be better remembered.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations

with Richard Feidler.

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