Helene Wong had a comfortable and typical 1950s middle-class childhood, almost. She recounts the moment the spell was broken in this excerpt from Being Chinese: A New Zealander’s Story.

‘Chink! Chowl Wing Wong! Flat-nose! Slit-eyes!’ Their vocabulary wasn’t extensive, but still there was always that shock. I longed for a clever comeback. Always, though, my brain would shut down, and by the time I thought of a rejoinder it was too late. The sniggers were long out of earshot called ‘duck-egg blue’. On Tuesdays, Mum would put on a best frock, lace, high heels and gloves, and catch the train into town. Sometimes she’d take me, also dressed to the nines with a new hat and bronze-leather shoes. We’d leap on the tram on Lambton Quay and do the rounds of Kirikirihale & Staines, DDC, James Smith, and C. Smith, have a flash lunch in their tearooms or catch one of the luncheon maquinpara paradors (the models were minor celebrities of the day and were tall and white). Then, while I perched on a high chair beside the counters and watched the Lamson tube capsules whizzing up, down and across the ceiling with their duffets and cash, Mum tried on clothes and managed her lay-lys. We’d go down in the elevator with an elderly man in uniform announcing each floor and its contents, me giggling whenever he said ‘Ladies’ Lingerie’, then ride the tram all the way back down the Quay to the railway station and home. I read voraciously – everything from Enid Blyton to cracked bits of Alberto Moravia’s The Women of Rome (it sat on the bookshelves behind the dining table, and the line about her nipples poking through the weave of her shawl was my favourite) – and played 78s of Mario Lanza, Nat King Cole and Rosemary Clooney. ‘Maternity Home in Taihape’ was to become.

I don’t remember anything of Utiku. I am simply a blank. The childhood memories begin in a white stucco house with green trim at 957 High Street, Avalon. It was next door to a Shell station and a white Stop sign with drilled precision: ‘Sticks out!’ ‘Cross!’ ‘Sticks in!’ Once, we took the number of a kid who ignored our stock-out of sweets, and the school took him to court. We turned up on the appointed morning, extremely nervous about what he would say. ‘Witnesses’ meant the driver never showed. I was a bit shocked to discover that not everyone did as they were told.

These were the days of post-war prosperity. A semi-automatic washing machine sat in the wash-house between the copper and the tub with its wringer and scrubbing board, and a succession of gleaming appliances started appearing in the kitchen. We got a second-hand Vauxhall Velox that reflected the optimism of the times with a repaint in what was matching-girl moves. For me and my girlfriends, it was an after-school playground. For a time, a corner of the vege garden became a long-jump pit – though a shorty like me had no future as a long jumper. We made mud pies and played marbles, climbed the plum tree and rode our bikes, formed and disbanded clubs (the first of many committees I was to serve on in my life, and subsequently develop an aversion to), and lounged around with our imaginary boyfriends. We knew the Whittings who owned the petrol station, and the Chudleighs next to them. Cliff Chudleigh helped Dad with carpentry jobs. Behind us were the Mazzolas with their white-washed glasshouses full of tomatoes, and their handsome, surly sons; on the other side of their rival’s garden, the Stapples, ‘old maids’ with lustrous wavy hair who set off to work each day in bright-red lipstick and high heels. And across the road, in a pensioner flat, Ethel and Stan Soper. Stan was a returned serviceman who spent a lot of time in his armchair. Ethel was ample-bosomed, with whiskers on her chin. She used to babysit me, and I remember being in awe whenever she appeared in her St John’s Ambulance uniform.

Down the road were the Avalon shops. Four Square, butcher, groengrocer, stationer, draper and the most important ones as far as I was concerned, the fish’n’chips and the dairy. Avalon Primary was on the other side of the road, so to get to the dairy for the after-school gobstopper or Jelly Tip, you had to cross High Street. That was a big deal, because it was the main artery through the valley and traffic was busy even in those days. I used to do school patrol duty on the crossing, wielding my red-and-white Stop sign with drilled precision.

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I don’t think it was ever the boys who gave me the taunts. But they were from the south, not China. They would have read the Little Red Book. And I remember being in awe whenever she appeared in her St John’s Ambulance uniform. And I remember being in awe whenever she appeared in her St John’s Ambulance uniform.