

Mohsen's story

This story appeared initially on the Behind the Wire website but the page is no longer available.

<http://behindthewire.org.au/stories/mohsen/>

Mohsen is a 20-year-old refugee from Afghanistan. He has graduated high school and wishes to become a police officer.

THREE WARNINGS

I am from Afghanistan, but when I was seven or eight I moved to Pakistan, because the situation was not good for my family. My dad was working with the American Army and he used to supply goods to them in the airport and the Taliban knew about it. They warned my dad to stop working with the American Army; otherwise they would kill him and his family. The way they used to warn people is that they would write letters with their stamp on it and just throw it in their house. They usually warned people three times. If the person didn't stop or respond then they'd just kill them.

My dad received two warnings and he knew that we had to leave. He did not want to risk a third. So my dad, my mum, me, my little brother and little sister; we packed up our life and left for Pakistan. My father told me it was dangerous for us to live there now and explained that we had to move to another place, a place where we'd be safe.

We crossed the border first, starting the journey from our city. When we got to the border of Pakistan we had to go a different way to cross. This different way was for those who didn't have documents or passports or anything, but it was a long way. We had to walk, it wasn't possible to go by car or van or anything. It took about two hours and it was very dusty, a long way up and a long way down.



WE HAD TO START OUR LIFE FROM ZERO

I felt very strange in Pakistan because I didn't know people. We had no people, there was nothing at the beginning; it was like we had to start our life from zero.

After some time I made friends, they used to go to school and the school was in our area so one day I told my dad I want to go there. My dad said, 'Yes, I think that's a good idea.' So he took me to the school to enrol me, where the principal asked my dad for some identification documents. But we didn't have anything. If we told them that we were from another country they would look down on you and treat you differently. So I stayed at home.

Soon my dad started working with his friend at a jewellery workshop and one day he told me to come and start working there and I will learn something. He knew it was better than sitting at home and doing nothing. I agreed and started working at the store too.

It was a good experience – working with my dad – I liked it very much. The people there were nice and they always tried to help and teach me things. At the beginning while I was learning I found it hard to do things, but after they gave me their time it was very easy. This went on for a while, but then things started to get worse.

THE FEAR IN MY HEART

By the time I left Pakistan the situation was very bad, it was everywhere, when I was going out from my house I recognised the fear in my heart. It was a feeling, a sense that now something is going to happen.

It was a very different time and not just for me; it affected everyone in the community. If you were to leave for work or come home from work, you didn't know if something was going to happen, you don't know if you were going to get there alive or not.

I know many stories about many people and what happened to them. I know the neighbour to one of my shops; they kidnapped the owner's son. His son was only 21 or 22, he was kidnapped and they told his dad to give them money. The ransom, if you convert it to Australian dollars, was about \$150,000. He was warned that if he did not provide the money, they would kill his son. So he organised the money and told them, "I'm going to give you this but you're not going to touch my son". He went through with it and gave them the money but one week later they found their son's body in a bag. He had been left in front of their shop. They had killed him and very cruelly. They had cut him into pieces, thrown him in a bag and chucked him on the street like garbage.

It made me feel very bad and very sad. I knew that boy, he used to come to our shop and we used to sit together and talk. He was my friend. I miss him every day.

My neighbour from my house, he used to drive a bus from one place to another and one day there was an attack on the bus. So many people were killed, the driver too. That driver, he was my neighbour. He was a good, simple man.

The target killings were carried out by a group which was known for killing mostly people of the Shia minority. So they were religiously motivated. But really they made up stupid reasons and it never made sense to me. There is no good reason to kill anyone.

EVERYONE WAS WAITING FOR SOMETHING

My dad told me about going out of the country and he said you are the one I can rely on; you are the one I can trust. I was 16. My father said that if he leaves the country there would be no one here to look after our family. If he left he knew it would achieve nothing. He told me I would have time and I could look after my brother and sister, even if something were to happen to him in Pakistan, still, I could look after them.

The whole situation made me feel very sad and very uncomfortable. I was just wondering what was happening here? First we use to live in Afghanistan and then our lives were in danger and so we came here. But just when our lives were getting better again, I learnt that we'd have to move because of the target killings and those stupid people. Again, we had to disconnect from our people, our life, to go somewhere else. Before I knew it would be alright because I was with my family, but now things were changing. There would be no family – I would be alone. I felt big pressure but I could not let my family down.

After my dad talked to me it took about six or eight months for me to meet the person who I was told would take me to a safe place. I said goodbye to my family. There was another boy like me from Qatar and we left for the airport and flew to Thailand, where we stayed for about 10 days. Then we moved to Malaysia for about eight days, before heading to Indonesia. This part of

my journey did not feel real enough to be felt and happy enough to be remembered.

When we arrived in Indonesia we went to UNHCR and they interviewed me and told me that there's going to be another interview in six months and you have to come here and we will process your application. But there were too many people. They would say: 'We have been here for two years'. Others had been there for four years. I asked what they were doing there, why were they waiting? They told me they were waiting for UNHCR. They were waiting for answers. Everyone had different stories and everyone was waiting for something.

I DIDN'T HAVE A CHOICE

I didn't want to go on the boat, but everyone was jumping in. I said to the guy who I came with: 'What are they doing? Where are they going?' He said we are going in the boat; we are going to Australia. All I was thinking was why this boat? Looking at it, the boat was for 10 people and 20 people were already inside.

He just told me that's how it is and I said I didn't want to go. He told me that I was crazy and questioned what I would do if I stayed in Indonesia. I didn't have a choice. I jumped in the boat and we travelled for a short distance, before getting into a bigger boat and beginning the journey from there. Australia was the place where we were going to be safe – the place where we would have a real future.

IT WAS THE WORST JOURNEY OF MY LIFE

It was the worst journey of my life. From the first night the boat had a hole, from the first night. Then as we are going the small hole is getting bigger. It was raining – very bad. There was water and food first and second day. After that no food and no water. The food was for ten people but there was 80 people in the boat.

I was just thinking about my family. I was not worried about what would happen to myself, I didn't care about dying but I did worry about if I die what is going to happen to my family, I didn't know. I was thinking about my mum. If the Taliban kill me she gets my body in a bag, if I die on these seas she will never have peace.

Everyone lost their hopes. Because of having no food no water, some of them were like dead bodies. We used to empty the sea water with buckets; when I felt weak I used cups. Sometimes even now when I think of it I wonder how I ever came away alive from that boat journey.

I didn't tell my dad about the boat journey until now. If I tell my dad about that journey he is not going to feel good. He will think he sent his son to die.

THEY ARE TAKING US TO AN ISLAND

After eight days we saw a small airplane, everyone had life jacket, all the people took their life jackets and waved them in the air and because our boat was really bad we made a sign with the words 'HELP US' to get the focus of the airplane. The airplane was just going around us for three hours and then the plane was gone and we are looking around and we saw two Navy ships coming.

I thought I don't care what is going to happen, I don't care about police, I don't care about anything. Now if they are going to take us from here then at least we will be alive. Then the Navy ship came and they quickly moved us to their ship and we were in their ship for 14 hours and then we got sent to Christmas Island.

I thought when we got there everyone was very welcoming. I felt good. They were nice people, welcoming and happy. Then after some time they took us to the detention centre. I noticed the boys around me and they looked very sad. You know when you talk with somebody and you can't feel comfortable, you're talking with them

but they can't talk back. It was like this. And I was staring into dead eyes with no soul behind them.

At the time they were not processing applications especially from Afghanistan for six months. When I got to Australia three months had past and there were three months left. The immigration people asked me: "If you knew about the policy would you still have come to this country?" I said firstly I didn't know about the policy. Secondly if I knew about the policy my life is more important than your policy.

YOU ARE NOT FREE

The detention centre is like your home but you can't get out. You are not free. They have fences around you. You can see a playground but it is only open during certain hours. When you go for lunch you hold your plate and you stand in a queue and you sign your name and you get your lunch, breakfast or dinner and then you go back to your room. It's not a very human experience.

I lived in a container. They have blocks and 5 or 10 containers were attached together and in each container they make two rooms. You have your room, there is your bed and your bathroom and that's it, there is nothing else and you feel like you are really small and you feel like you are in a jail.

I used to think of my family always. I fled a very bad situation; I always think about what happened, everyday. If somebody had contact with their family in the same city I used to live I would ask them how everything is. Like a bomb blast or killings I would be more worried because I don't know who got killed. Always these kinds of things coming into your mind and always this depression. Also no process you just think when am I going to get out of this detention centre? You are left with no hope. All I can think is again I have to start my life from zero.

BIRD IN A CAGE

My mind was like a bird, a bird you put in a cage. I was trying to get out of the cage but I couldn't I was trapped and left with my worries. Most of the boys in detention with me were depressed, some of the boys they tried to harm themselves. They used to cut their veins, they used to hang themselves. I saw this every day.

There were many boys even younger than me, they were 13 and 14, they also had depression. We were also worried about what we were going to do when we got out of detention centre. I'm by myself and I don't know the language or nothing about the community.

I didn't get any support. In detention centre you have to request for every activity you want to do. For example if you want to go to school you have to write a request form and then if they accept your request you can go to school but I did that many times and I couldn't go. There was an English class in the centre, the teacher would teach English for one hour. I used to go to that class but sometimes I couldn't go because I didn't feel good. Too sad. No energy to go to class because of that depression.

Normally if you want to do something, you feel to do something. But with depression even if I want to do that thing, I can't because I don't have the feelings for it. Makes very difficult. I was there for four months and while you are physically safe, you are not mentally safe.

We couldn't sleep in the night, we used to just sit and wait till morning. If I used to sleep I felt everything, just my eyes are closed but I am awake. It was that kind of sleep because of the stress and depression and when I went to the doctor they used to give me sleeping pills. I used to take them but it was the same thing and I thought later maybe they are going to make me more sad or more sick. So I stopped taking them. If I have stomach ache or body pain or if I have headache I used to go to the doctor, they used to say drink water – but that's not helping. They would just say they can't do nothing now. They

were not helpful; until you were at the point of dying then I guess they would do something.

Some of the Serco guards were good but some of them were very bad. Even when you talk to them they would talk to you like you were a criminal. That made the boys, the refugees feel more uncomfortable. Some of the guards used to say: "Why did you guys come here?"

A NEW CITY

When I transferred to Maribyrnong Immigration Detention Centre it was the same, the same but it had different atmosphere. The people came from the city to visit from the community, which was good. They used to come and have a chat but still they would come and see the condition of the detention centre and they would feel sad too. Once or twice I met some visitors and then I didn't go meet them again – when I see them I know they are happy outside but when they come inside, I thought I don't want to make them sad so I didn't go.

But still my application was not being processed. It was making me feel very uncomfortable. It was becoming worse than Christmas Island. The boys were fighting with each other because of the depression. Killing themselves, cutting themselves. I was scared that I would start doing those things, I didn't want to become like them, the other boys – angry. I was just trying to make myself busy.

Mohsen was released from detention in 2011 and moved to Sydney.

THE WASTED YEAR

So that one year was stolen. It was replaced with depression and sadness that made my body and mind weak. That's the big impact. Mentally you get sick. Seeing people cutting themselves and fighting with each other. I could have been

making positive change. I am 20 years old now but it's not something that I can forget.

I finished my HSC last year at Holroyd High School in Sydney and sometimes I think of school memories, they are good memories. It's a great school and the community of the school is very good. Mostly it is mixed so you feel more connected and it's very welcoming.

Now I have applied for university and I would like to study policing. I want to do it because that's something that I can do for justice and safety. Since I come from an unsafe community, where things are dangerous and I came here, I would like to be something important and have pride in serving the people in my new home. I think it is important to make safety for people.

LOVE IS FOREVER

I find Australians are very good and they are very nice but always they have some kind of stress. I don't know why they are always stressed. Most people want to live luxury lives and maybe they have a lot of mortgages and they have to work, work, work. It's kind of a bit silly.

Personally, me, I've learnt from family, from my elders that you should not stress or think about the things that are temporary. Something that one day will finish. That's why I don't think of getting something that is temporary or something that is going to finish as the most important for my head.

If you have love, family and human connections you will always have everything you need. For example if your father dies he lives in your memories, in your mind. Love is forever. This is permanent. What you leave behind in someone's mind and how you touch their heart is all that matters.