I wore a black shirt to my ceremony

Ali

Ali Bakhtiarvandi arrived in Australia by boat in 2000, aged 34. He was detained until 2004 in three different detention centres. He is now an Australian citizen.

I'm addicted to cups of tea

I'm working at the chemical factory in Ballarat. I have a big order at the moment I have to finish. It is ten hours a day; I am working two hours' overtime because I have to finish that order as soon as possible.

I had chemical work in my background. I was working in petrochemicals, back in Iran. That's why I like this job and I think it's been over ten years that I've been doing it. I'm a formulator and also machinery operator. We're making herbicide and different products for farmers. Some of the products are a little bit hard to make. As I said, it's a really good job. Most of the people in Ballarat they don't like to

work there because we have to use a full face mask and for the first few days when you start working there, because of the face mask, it's hard to breathe. But we are used to it.

It's hard to see myself getting tired physically but lots of times I get tired mentally. Mentally means when I see the politics in Australia—it's not working and it's playing games with people, and I get really tired. I would love to see something nice after thirty-something years working as a human rights activist. It's really hard to see. Another thing also: the news in the world, the Gaza and Iraq situations. Civilians killed for nothing. Crazy people. It's a broken heart I have, you know? Seeing those pictures on TV and also hearing it everywhere, it stops me being happy at all. But it does not stop me being a political activist. Still, I'm happy to continue this until the end. I was a political activist in Iran from 1979. I'm worried to say more than that because I don't want to make any problem for my family. This is really risky and dangerous. I am safe here in this country.

Life in Ballarat is, I can say, it's beautiful. I've been living there since 2004. It is a really lovely, nice community. The place I'm living, it's a double-storey unit and I'm living by myself. I have another five neighbours. Sometimes if my neighbours are not around I can practice music, because I play two traditional Iranian instruments. I listen to music, listen to the news most of the time, and try to have as normal a life as I can. In one small sentence I can say I have no problem in Ballarat with anything.

As soon as I get back from work the first thing I do is make a cup of tea because I'm addicted to cups of tea. And then I start answering the telephone or making calls with refugees and talking to them about their situation. Most of the refugees I'm involved with at the moment are in the community and they have been waiting a long time for their applications to be processed. I talk to them and, using my experience back from 2000 to 2004, tell them what they should do to cope with

this situation a little bit easier. I try to do as much as I can because I've gone through the horrible immigration system. I can understand it's really, really hard.

They are treating us like really dangerous people

I arrived in Australia on 5 June 2000. We arrived at Ashmore Reef. Then we came to Darwin and from there they took us to Port Hedland detention centre. We were 36 people, including women and children and also a pregnant woman. All from Iraq and Iran.

The people smuggler said, 'You're going to Australia. You will be there in eight hours.' We were on the way three days and two nights from Kupang to Ashmore Reef. Also, the people smuggler said, 'As soon as you get to Australia you will be arrested by the United Nations and you will be in isolation for 45 days. Then you're going to be released to the community with your visa and you will start your new life.' That is the only information we had.

The treatment from the first minute we got to Port Hedland detention made every single person think differently. *Oh, this is not right, because they are treating us like really dangerous people. Why we are here? The door is locked. There is no TV, no telephone. How we can tell our family we are in Australia and we are safe and we are alive? And how long are we going to be here like that?*

For the first month we were in the isolation block. Fully isolated from the rest of the compound. No nothing. The only people we could see were from the Immigration department and also the security company called ACM.*

* Australasian Correctional Management was a subsidiary of the US security company Wackenhut. It was awarded a contract to run all Australian immigration detention centres from 1998 to 2003.

Thirty-six people, everybody living in same place. We were using the toilet and shower system together—women, children and men. They have doors, but it wasn't separate. The Iraqi family started complaining about it, because of Islamic Law and also because it wasn't right for women and men to be using the same bathroom or shower. Then they let the women have the single shower outside the block. We had ten minutes' fresh air in the morning and fifteen minutes' after lunch. That meant less than half an hour a day.

People in Port Hedland live in houses next to the detention centre, but we didn't know that. The compound had over eight hundred people in it, and we didn't know anything about it. When we were living in that block, people in the compound had a demonstration and they smashed the fence and went to the street and were arrested by police. They took them to Perth gaol. And we didn't know anything about it.

One day we went for fresh air time outside. We received a tennis ball. People from the compound, they hit the tennis ball with the cricket bat. We looked at it, there was a white paper inside. We thought, *Oh, they sent a message*. The message was in Persian and it said, 'You come to horrible country. We are here for more than a year.'

Anyway, after one month, they started to call people for a first interview. My first interview started after eleven o'clock at night. I went to a different area in that detention area; they took me in a car. To be honest, I didn't know what the interview was for. I had no idea. There was a woman from Immigration and another woman as an interpreter. The interpreter said to me, 'She is from the Immigration department. She is going to ask you some questions, but before she starts do you have any questions?

I said to her in Persian, 'I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean, because I have been interrogated by intelligence services

and usually they put handcuffs on my hands, and use the black material to cover my eyes as well. The only interview I know, it's that.' She translated that to the Immigration woman and she said, 'No, just tell him we are two women here and this is your process and something we have to do.' She asked me some questions. It finished by twelve o'clock.

Ten or fifteen days later, they called me to see a lawyer. I went to the room again. He said, 'I'm your lawyer. We're going to talk about your problem, about why you came to Australia. This is going to be private between me and you.'

I was believing. I talked to him for more than an hour. But the statement he made for my case was only three paragraphs. I still have it. After more than an hour: three paragraphs. We didn't know anything. He gave it to me. I signed it. He gave me a copy. But still I couldn't read it, you know. And when he said, 'I'm a lawyer,' I was trusting he was a person who was working for me, not working for the Immigration department.

A few days later a man came and he said, 'I'm your case officer.' He was from Perth Immigration department, and I was shocked when I saw him. He wore a T-shirt and was full of tattoos on his body. Someone said he was member of dog racing in Perth, something like that. Before he started, he showed me that in his file he had every paper I had shared with my lawyer. I couldn't say anything, because I had no information and I didn't want to make my process hard. Anyway, he talked to me for almost two hours, I think. Then I was taken to the compound for first time. Everybody, when their process finished, they went to the compound.

There were too many people there. Women, children, you know. Different nationalities. From Kosovo, from Bosnia, from Russia, from Vietnam, China, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan. Everywhere was full of people, and there wasn't room. We had five double-storey blocks called A block, B, C, D and G.

And all of them were full. We asked the ACM supervisor and she said, 'I don't know. Go find somewhere for yourself.'

An Iraqi–Iranian man—who was really nice man and accused of being a people smuggler, they deported him finally to Iraq in 2004—said, 'If they are not giving you a room, come to the family area and I'm going to make my son's room empty for you.' It was called the family area but everybody was living there together: single women, single men, families.

In the compound there was a Telstra phone, but we had no money. At that time it cost a ten-dollar Telstra phone card for seven minutes' talk to Iran.

A few days later, some people came and said, 'Your name is on the whiteboard for an interview with the federal police.' In that time, people said that whoever goes to talk to the federal police are released a few days later. It means they get a visa, and you're going to get your visa too.

An old man from the federal police came to talk to me, again talking about my case, three hours of interview. Three days later I was rejected by the Immigration department. I think it was September.

I came here for my freedom

Then I said to the Immigration department, 'I didn't come here to stay locked up. I came here for my freedom. If you cannot let me to go out as a free person, I would like to see someone from the United Nations, because I'm not a criminal.' They said, 'No, nobody is allowed to see you.'

So that's it. I stopped eating. The first ten days actually were a little bit hard because I never had an experience like that in my life, except sometimes in war time back in Iran—because of the horrible war situation we sometimes didn't have food to eat, but just for one day, two days, maximum three days. That

time, no—just water. I was feeling really sick, honestly. My blood sugar was really low, my blood pressure really low, and I lost weight, from 67 to 53 kilograms. But I said, 'I'm sorry, if you ordered some food from outside, from the best restaurant in Port Hedland, I would say, "No." I'm Iranian, I didn't come here for my stomach, I came here for my freedom. I didn't have a food problem in my country. No. I don't want you to do anything for me like that. Just leave me alone.'

Day eighteen, one of the security guards came and said, 'The nurse wants to see you.' As soon as they put me in her room, they said, 'You are not going back to the compound until you start eating.'

They took me to a very small room, with a video camera in the corner. There was no window. All the walls and also the floor was covered with very hard sponge, like a mattress but very hard. No bed, no pillow, no blanket, and air-conditioning on 24 hours, and the light on 24 hours. There wasn't any switch inside the room to turn the light off or on. A small window in the door, you know, for the security guard to see me inside, what I'm doing. They took my clothes away. They gave me a white surgical gown. They didn't give me another one to change into. One month I was wearing that, without a T-shirt, without pants, without underpants, without anything.

One month I was in isolation. On my hunger strike day 46, someone from immigration or the medical centre in detention came with a piece of paper and they said, 'Mr Ruddock sent us an email or fax'—something like that—'and he said, "If you don't start to eat in the next 48 hours a doctor can force you." Could you please start eating?' I said, 'I'm sorry, no.' And by that time I didn't have feeling to move, you know. They used a wheelchair to take me to the bathroom or sometimes outside.

On day 48 they opened the door. I was lying on the floor. There were five or six big security guards. I was feeling sick,

and shocked as well. What do you want to do to the person who hasn't eaten anything for a long, long time? Two of them held my legs while I was on the floor. Two of them held my hands, this was four of them. The supervisor, she put my head between her knees. Another officer with a video camera was filming it. The nurse and doctor tried to use tube from my nose to my stomach. And the doctor injected some liquid thing.

That was really, really torture, because it wasn't easy to breathe with something going from your nose to your stomach, while they didn't put you to sleep using anaesthetic injection. I couldn't breathe. I didn't have any energy or power to move, because I was sick and held by big security guards. There was nothing I could do that time. And they went. They shut the door and they went.

At night-time, they came, opened the door, and said, 'Your food.' I said, 'No, put it outside. I don't want it, I don't want it.' I was there for another few days. Then they said, 'We're going to take you to Juliet Block. And we are not going to release you until you start eating.' I was there also for one week. They brought one of the detainees there for some different reason, and he said, 'Look, it's not going to work. People are waiting for you inside the compound, you have to go and join them in doing something together.'

I was really tired. Really tired mentally, because I hadn't seen anybody, my friends, for a long time, and the treatment of the security company and Immigration also made me more sick. I started eating. They released me from isolation.

Night was the worst time

Then later, still in 2000, a lady from Immigration department came from Canberra. She said, 'I have a special mission to see you and talk to you.' I thought, *Oh, I've become a very*

important person, to have someone coming from Canberra to see me! She said, 'I came to let you know you have to go back to your country. There is no way you can stay here. Even if you are in detention for ten years, we're not going to give you a visa.'

I said, 'Could you tell me why?' She said, 'Yeah. Just, listen, the Australian government and the Australian people, they don't like people like you. We don't like political people. That's why we're not going to give you a visa.' I said, 'Okay, could you give me a favour? I'm not that person who signs to go back voluntarily. If you use an injection and deport me back to my country I would appreciate it. If you do this, as soon as I get to Iran, something will happen to me, and that's the Immigration department's responsibility, and you are under the big question mark. I'm not going to stop you.' She was shocked.

When I was rejected by the Immigration department, the paper said they didn't believe my case. But she said, 'We believe you. You are a political activist and we don't like it.' That is two different things. Which one I should believe?

Every second of detention centre time is horrible. While I was in Port Hedland, I could see people walking, because the detention centre is very close to the sea, you know? From the second floor you can see the water, and sometimes you could see people walking around. I was always thinking, *Will I be allowed to walk that way, one day? As a free person?* It's hard to think like that.

But the most horrible thing in the detention centre was the different tricks they used to deport people. The night was the worst time, because they usually start to deport people at night. Sometimes in the daytime they told someone they had a doctor's appointment, and then that person disappeared. Then a security guard came to take his or her stuff. When we had to go to the medical centre, we told each other, 'I'm going.

If I don't come back after fifteen minutes, it means something happened. Tell everyone.' We tried to look after each other like that.

You cannot throw stones or rocks at the system

During that time we started painting T-shirts as a protest inside the detention centre. They gave us T-shirts, all the same colour, good for painting and making a demonstration: we wrote on them 'Freedom' and 'Free refugees'. Usually that was my job to do that.

We made another demonstration inside and it became violent between detainees and the security company. It was 2001. In all the time I was in the detention centre people smashed windows, smashed the fence, threw rocks or stones or something like that. But I never did anything like that, or swore at anybody, in all the time there. No, because I always believe we haven't any problem with the fences or the staff in the kitchen or the restaurant or the medical rooms. We have a problem with the system, and you cannot throw stones or rocks at the system. Fighting with the system is different.

But my name was on the list of leaders of troublemakers in Port Hedland detention centre. They took me back to the same isolation room. I was there for three days, I think, then they came in the morning and opened the door, took me outside to the van and took me to Port Hedland airport. No shoes, no sandals, no thongs. With tracksuit pants and one T-shirt. They never tell you anything. And when we get close I saw the police surrounding the airport in full gear. For few seconds I was thinking there might be some important person coming, because I had heard about BHP company in Port Hedland and I thought it might be them. Then I find out those police were there because of me and my other friends.

I thought, *Oh, I have become a really dangerous terrorist in Australia*, for the police to spend lots of money like that, to surround the Port Hedland airport.

We didn't know what was happening. Look, the immigration system in Australia is exactly like the CIA system in America. You cannot find out what they are doing. They took my friends to a bigger aeroplane and took me with another two to a very small aeroplane and we left Port Hedland to go to Perth. I didn't know where Perth was, or even what it was. Out the window it was all desert. When we got there, another van came, they put handcuffs on my friends' hands and took them to Perth detention centre. The security guards with me, they took me out and said, 'Do you want to go to the toilet? Are you thirsty? Do you want to eat something?' They tried to be a little bit kind and respectful.

They said, 'We are going somewhere,' and this took us five or six hours. It was from Perth to Melbourne, but I didn't know. It was night-time and, oh, geez, I saw the lights. *This is a huge city! What is this? Where is this city?* We came out and some security guards were waiting for us. I ask the lady, 'What is this city's name?' She said, 'Don't worry about it.'

They took me to Maribyrnong detention centre. They opened the isolation room and when I went inside I saw my other two friends there, the ones who had gone in the bigger aeroplane. They didn't want us to be together in a small aeroplane, that's why they made us separate.

I said, 'Do you know what this detention centre is?' They said this is Melbourne detention, Maribyrnong. Before they came to Port Hedland, they were in Maribyrnong. They were seamen. They jumped from an Islamic Republic Iranian ship in Port Melbourne and they didn't go back.

They gave us a separate room. It was very small room, with two double bunks. The first night was really scary,

because I came from a big cage in Port Hedland to very small cage, with lots of different people. The number of refugees was very low. Most of the people, their visa was expired and they were working illegally. Some others were released from gaol because of drugs or something like that, and were awaiting deportation. They were usually from Asia: China and Vietnam. When I say scary, not because of those people. Everybody there was really friendly. Scary because I didn't know what's going on in this small area they call a detention centre. It was very hard to even breathe.

Who is gonna be that person?

Next morning an officer came, and he said, 'You have a visitor.' I said, 'What do you mean by visitor?' The first thing that came to my head was that this was a trick from the Immigration department to take me out of this area and it might be something to do with deportation.

Because you know, it was a fully strange thing to me. I didn't know anybody in Australia, except Immigration department people and security company people. Somebody came to visit me and he or she knows my name? Who is gonna be that person? My other two friends were also called for the same visit. They said, 'We have to go. If they want to deport us, we are not sure we can stop them.'

My heart started beating a little bit normally when I got to the visit area. I saw a lady, she introduced herself as Pamela Curr.* I can say I trusted her straight away. It was my first face-to-face meeting with one of the Australian people and I saw she was a really kind person. She said, 'I found your name in

* Pamela Curr is an advocate for refugee and detention rights, including for many years with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre in Melbourne, which was founded in mid-2001.

The Age newspaper. It said they sent you here after the problem inside Port Hedland centre. I'm here to do as much as I can and help you if you need lawyer.' Before we met her, we thought this country was really racist, because the security company and Immigration department people would say, 'Look, Australian people don't like you. Australian people don't like you to be free. Australian people are scared of you.' And we believed it because we had no connection between ourselves and Australians. Meeting her changed my mind about Australian people.

We had lots of visitors in a very short time. Three times every day: morning, afternoon and night. And that gave us more energy, more power to be strong as before, because we saw we have the support of the Australian people against this situation. I saw even old people coming in very cold weather in Melbourne, staying in the queue outside for 45 minutes to visit us, plus driving from their suburbs. I'm sure, unless I get Alzheimer's, I will never forget the Australian people I saw when I was in detention and also when I was released. Sometimes, because they knew we were feeling really sad, they tried to make us laugh. They were full of kindness. It's not really easy to talk about it, because it was huge. I thought, I met a bunch of angels in Australia, you know, visiting three times a day. It made the heavy situation inside the camp a little bit lighter on our shoulders.

Still we had problems inside with the security company, with the Immigration department. In Maribyrnong detention centre while I was there none of the bedrooms had doors. It was open. And there was no switch to turn the light on or off. The security company turned the light off every night any time they wanted. Sometimes the light was on until two o'clock in the morning and sometimes ten o'clock.

Both detention centres were gaols. Built from gold or made with tents and razor wire around it, there was no difference for

me. Gaol is gaol. For myself, the difference between Port Hedland and Maribyrnong was finding out there are lovely people living in this country. And another thing was that it was easy for us to give reports to people about what is going on inside. There is a factory next to the detention centre and my room was very close to that factory fence. People came to the factory site and we talked to them from the window in my bedroom. Security couldn't do anything about it because that wasn't illegal.

I got a camera. I took photos of inside—the living room, bedroom, bathroom, everything—and I gave it to one of my visitors. It looked very dirty, very old. They put the photos on the Refugee Action Collective website. As soon as they did this, Immigration and the ACM company changed lots of things, like new furniture, new curtains—they made everything look fantastic.

I'm not going to wear handcuffs

I had a problem with my tooth. I went to see the nurse. She treated us really horribly. She said, 'I will send you to see a dentist outside detention.'

They called me for my appointment. The nurse said, 'The Immigration department said you have to put handcuffs on to go outside.' I said, 'No, I'm sorry. I am not a criminal and I'm not going to wear handcuffs.' I went back to the compound. That situation took me three months. My lawyer talked to Immigration and Immigration said that is ACM's choice. ACM said, 'It is Immigration's choice, we cannot do anything about it.' They were actually playing a game, you know. My right face was very swollen and really bad. Under my eyes it was the colour of eggplant skin—really dark purple blue. It was like someone had punched me. I couldn't eat very well and the medication started not working.

After three months, I went to the dentist in handcuffs. I was sitting in the dentists' foyer and some people were there, looking at me really strangely. *Who is that person? Under his eye is really dark. They put handcuffs on him. Four really big security guards with him. He might be a really dangerous person.* If I was one of them, I was going to think like that.

The dentist pulled out five teeth in less than fifteen minutes, while handcuffs were on my hands. When I came back to detention one of the security guards said to me, 'If I was you, I would never let them put handcuffs on my hands, because that wasn't right.' I said, 'It took me three months, I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, I cannot talk—I didn't have a choice!'

I saw a woman come for me

In early 2002, after thirteen or fourteen months in Maribyrnong detention centre, one night I had many visitors. Visiting time finished at nine o'clock. I was busy saying goodbye to my visitors one by one. I saw a woman come for me and she was crying. She said, 'I heard about your hunger strike and I was wondering if I could visit you.' I said, 'I don't want visitors to come here and cry for us. I want everybody to be happy, because that makes me stronger, you know.' She said, 'I promise not to cry.' She started coming to visit three times a day. She was living in Footscray, five minutes' drive from the detention centre.

And after a while, one night she came and said, 'I want to talk privately. I found out how you can be released from detention.'

I said, 'I'm not sure you can do anything about it, because I have one barrister and few lawyers working for my case,'

'I found out if we get married you can be released.'

'Thank you very much, see you later.' Honestly.

'Where are you going?' she said.

I said, 'Look, my political life is really important to me and it's never led me to play games with anybody's life for my freedom. I have five sisters. If I do anything like that with anybody's life, I have to let someone do the same thing with my sister's life, and it's not possible for me to let anybody to do this. But thank you very much, that was kind and I'm sure I will be released one day. It's not that hard for me.'

Anyway she continued to come to visit. One day she said, 'I talked to my family and I really want to marry you.'

'I'm too old to play games,' I said.

'No, really.'

I said, 'Okay.' I don't know actually if I was happy. She was a really kind person. People in detention, they pushed me to do it as well, because everyone liked her. I couldn't think properly—*Is this right or wrong*?—because my head was full of problems from the years in Port Hedland and Maribyrnong.

We let the Immigration department know we were engaged. One Wednesday morning, a security guard came and called me to my doctor. But they put me in the isolation room and a few minutes later an Immigration manager came. She said, 'I received a fax from Canberra. You have to go to Port Hedland, because we don't have enough beds in this detention centre.' I said, 'I counted last night and 24 beds were empty.' She said, 'No, I'm sorry. I received a fax and you have to go. You are not allowed to go back. You are leaving for the airport from here.'

At the same time, my fiancée came to visit and reception said, 'He is not here. We don't know where he is.'

To be honest I think they got tired, because visitors were making meetings with the Immigration department about lots of problems inside. We had no blankets in cold weather and the heating system was not working. Visitors had to

bring blankets for most of the people inside, especially in the family area for women and children. They wanted me to go to Port Hedland because they thought it would make their problem less.

I was really upset. They took me to Port Hedland and to the isolation block, again. At nine o'clock somebody gave me a phone card and I used the public phone inside the isolation block to call my fiancée and say, 'Look, I am in Port Hedland detention centre.' I said, 'Don't worry about it. I am here, I am safe. I am not happy, but it is what it is.' The next day they released me to the compound. Everything was the same, except the number of people, now less than two hundred people. But still I had some friends there, families and also singles. Now it was different because visitors came from Sydney and Melbourne and Brisbane as a group—maybe one hundred people, sitting around the detention centre fence outside and talking to people all the time.

We got married on the 29 November 2002 inside Port Hedland detention centre. It was in an interview room close to the isolation room I had been inside for the hunger strike. I was just in normal clothes, without any friends. Just me and my fiancée and two witnesses from outside who were friends with her. I wasn't happy at all, because getting married inside gaol, you know, it wasn't right to me.

That day they let us to go to a restaurant in Port Hedland with a security guard in uniform. Can you imagine? Everyone in the restaurant was looking at us really, really strangely. To be honest I didn't enjoy the day. I was just acting like I was happy because I didn't want my wife to be sad.

A few days later my wife said, 'I'm going back to Melbourne and I'm coming to say goodbye tomorrow.' Early in the morning one of the detainees went crazy. He went onto the roof naked. Then some of my friends said, 'You have a

phone call.' I picked up the telephone and my wife said, 'I came to visit and they said something happened and visiting is cancelled.' She asked them, 'Please, just let me say goodbye to him face to face.' They said no.

I remember the smoke

A while later we called for a meeting. We talked about organising a hunger strike and calling the media in the next few days. Other people's view was different to mine. In a very short time people decided to smash all the fences inside, because every block was separated by fences and razor wire from another one. That was for emergencies, to make it easy for the security company to lock gates to stop people joining any problem. As usual, I was one of the people against this. After living in Melbourne, I had more idea that this was all made by Australian taxpayer money and if we make them pay more money, it's going to change their view against us. People didn't listen, so they smashed the fences. Then they jumped to the double-storey isolation block and started a fire there. Immigration says it cost ten million dollars. I remember the smoke came out from that building for almost 48 hours.

When something like that happened, the security company went out of the compound for their safety and left it in detainees' hands. Lots of police came. They locked the gate again and for 24 hours we couldn't visit each other in different blocks. Then they started searching people's rooms. Someone jumped into my room at six o'clock in the morning. 'Don't move! Don't move!' I was really shocked. They pushed me to the wall and searched my body. They put handcuffs on me, plastic ones this time. They took me to South Hedland police station with some other people and put us into the police cell.

They were arresting people who were accused of making that fire.

I couldn't have done it because at that time I was using a crutch to walk. I had a problem with my right foot. I had that crutch when they sent me back to Port Hedland detention and I had been using it for nine months. The people who made the fire were jumping from a two- or three-metre fence with razor wire. How I can go there, make a fire and come back?

The conditions inside were horrible. There were more than twelve people. The federal police said, 'Your name was given to us by Immigration.' Immigration said, 'Federal police gave us your name. That's why you are here.' It seemed like we were a soccer ball, you know, passed between Immigration and the federal police. We said, 'We are not going to eat anything until we find out why we are here.'

After three days inside was really hot, humid. We decided to drink a cup of tea. They said, 'No, no hot drink for you. It's illegal inside the gaol.' I received a parcel from one of my supporters in Melbourne. They brought it from detention to the police station gaol. It was cigarettes, Lipton tea, soap and shampoo. Exactly everything we needed at that time. I said to people, 'Don't worry about it. There is shampoo—we can have a shower. There are cigarettes—we can smoke. There is Lipton tea and that's fine. We are not going to be worried about anything else. If we are together, we can have a good time.' We made cups of tea with the hot water from the shower.

After more than a week they released us, except one person who tried to kill himself inside the cell. They took us back to detention. I went to my room and I couldn't believe it was my room. In the middle, like a mountain, were all my clothes, everything. Like someone had come to search for the gold or whatever you have.

We're having a party tonight

Camp was quiet. It was late 2003, nearly 2004. One day, the activity officer, she said to me, 'Do you want to go with other Iranians to the shopping centre? Just for fun?' I said, 'That would be good. I can go there and buy a present for my wife.' Usually they never let us be farther than 50 centimetres from them, but she said, 'Look, I'm very tired. I'm going to sit here. This is the money. Go do whatever you want and come back here. I'm going to trust you.' My friend said to her, 'Okay, I have to tell you something. I really want to buy alcohol and because you said I'm going to trust you, I have to tell you this.' She said, 'I didn't hear anything. Do whatever you want. Just be careful, because when we go back they might search you or the stuff you bought.' He bought a carton of Coca-Cola, took all the Coca-Cola out. Then he bought a carton of beer and changed the carton. He bought two bottles of whiskey, one under my belt, one under his belt.

When we came back to detention, we tried to be very friendly with the security guard. He said, 'Oh, you bought soft drink?' We said, 'Yeah, we're having a party tonight!' We came inside the compound and went to the room. We had air-conditioning lines on the top of the wall in each room. We opened it and put the drink in there to be cooled. We had a fridge as well in our room, but it wasn't something we could leave in the fridge. I never touched it, you know, but other people had a good time.

Around then one of Immigration officers called me and said, 'You have to sign the paper to go back to your country. You have 28 days to think about it, otherwise you're going to be deported.' I said, 'Thank you very much and my answer is: do whatever you can, because I'm not going to sign this paper. I don't even want it left here.'

The 28 days passed, a second time, a third time, and then they said to me, 'If you want to go to Baxter detention centre we can organise for you to go there.' I had already heard from Pamela Curr in Melbourne they were going to shut down Port Hedland detention centre in less than a month. I said to him, 'I would love to go to Baxter.' We had a connection with people there by mobile phone and they said, 'The situation there is really bad. It's like a real gaol.' I wanted to see it, feel it myself, because you have to be in the same situation as people, otherwise it's hard to understand what the atmosphere is like inside.

Are we going to walk on the street?

I packed my stuff. I opened the back of my tape recorder and radio and I put my mobile phone in. I said, 'I'm ready any time you want. Just let me say goodbye to my friends.' They said, 'That's okay. We're going tomorrow.'

I went to Baxter. It was late night when I got there, after eleven o'clock. They checked all my stuff and they didn't find the mobile phone. I thought, *I'm going to have a problem opening the back of the tape recorder*. One of my old friends from 2000 was already there, so I said to him, 'How can I find a knife or something because I need to open the back of this?' He said, 'Don't worry, I'll give you a screwdriver.' Inside Baxter detention centre, a screwdriver! Less than ten minutes after I was inside I had my mobile phone out of the tape recorder.

In Baxter, there were different compounds with big grass areas in each. You cannot see anything outside, except the sky. Everywhere was full of security cameras and there was a special room for security guards inside the compound. To be honest, compared with Port Hedland and Maribyrnong, Baxter was a five-star hotel to me, because it was really clean. To go to visit the centre you have to go through four electric doors.

I promised my wife to be quiet. It was hard, but also I was physically and mentally really, really tired. I was broken from inside. Honestly, I was really broken. And I thought I had done all I could for my freedom and everyone else's. There was nothing else I could do. We were always thinking, *What's going on in the future? Are we going to be deported, or are we going to walk on the street?* From Port Hedland we could see people, but not from Baxter. But it was hard to find any answers for the questions that came to our heads.

For that freedom I had paid a big price

I was in Baxter for three to four months. In August 2004 they took me to Darwin for an unrelated court case. I was at a hotel in Darwin with one of my detainee friends, Reza. We met each other in Port Hedland in 2000. We were from the same state in Iran, but we didn't know each other there.

The security guards were friendly. They said, 'If you like, you can have a swim at the hotel swimming pool, or if you wouldn't like to, you can stay here, smoke and enjoy your time.' One of them, his mobile phone was ringing and when he answered, he said, 'Someone wants to talk to you.' It was my wife. She said, 'Did you hear the news?' And then she said, 'Amanda Vanstone* gave you a visa.'

You know, I wasn't happy at all. That news didn't even make me have a very small smile on my face. For some reason I was really sad. Because, first, for that freedom I had paid a big price: almost four and a half years of my life I cannot get back. Second, if it's true, how I can forget all the friends I have in detention centre, and what is going on with them?

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* Amanda Vanstone was Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs from 2003 until 2007 in the Howard government.

We went to the city and ordered lunch. Again, one of the security guards' mobile phone started ringing. It was a call from the Immigration department, so he gave the telephone to me. The person said, 'Congratulations. You've got your visa.' He wished me well and whatever. When the conversation finished, the security guards said, 'Congratulations. We are very happy for you. You are a free man now.' Believe it or not, since I heard it from my wife, I hadn't said anything to my friend who was with me because I didn't want him to get sad. I said to him, 'I'm sorry.' It was really hard for me to talk, you know, to say anything. When we finished lunch, we came out onto the street, looking at the shops, and security said to me, 'You are free. You can go anywhere you want.' I said, 'No, that's fine, and anyway, I have to be with you because I don't know anywhere in Darwin.'

We went to the hotel. They said, 'We're going to make a barbecue party tonight for you.' How can you go from being a person who is considered dangerous for four and a half years to a person they make a barbecue party for because he's got a visa?

A woman from the federal police came the next morning and took me to a very beautiful hotel. I got my visa and my wife came to Darwin. We stayed there at the hotel for a few days and then went to Ballarat. I've stayed in Ballarat since August 2004. I started working in the Ballarat chemical factory in November 2004, and I'm working there until now.

You lose your life, you cannot make it again

One year after I was released from the detention centre I received a bill from the Immigration department: $227,049.10 for the time I spent in the detention centre. I believe less than ten people from 2000 until that time got a bill. I started

fighting with this situation. It means you are released, you've got your visa, but still they are going to make you upset, to send the message to other people not to come to Australia because there is huge detention time waiting for you, a huge bill waiting for you.

I took the case to parliament with the help from Catherine King, member for Ballarat in Canberra. I had paid between seven thousand and eight thousand dollars and then I received a letter from the finance department saying I didn't have to pay any more.

When I had my citizenship ceremony in 2009, I wasn't happy because it was nine days after my sister died back in Iran, aged 57. I had filled in the application for citizenship four times and each time Immigration sent it back, saying, 'You didn't fill this, you didn't fill that.' I was really upset. I called one of them myself and I said, 'I'm going to take a week off from the factory and I'm going to chain myself to the Immigration department.' We sent the application for the last time and I didn't receive anything until I received a letter from Immigration department saying, 'Mr Bakhtiarvandi, you missed your citizenship ceremony at Ballarat Art Gallery.'

I called the number on the paper and she said, 'You missed it because you didn't turn up on the day you had your ceremony.' I said, 'Do you think I'm Jesus or a prophet who knows everything without anybody letting me know? I didn't receive anything from the Immigration department so how can I go there? Why does everything like that happen only to me?'

I wore a black shirt to my ceremony. There were some Liberal members of state parliament and the local council and some other people there. They said congratulations. I said, 'Don't think I'm a happy person to be here for this piece of paper you call citizenship. For this piece of paper I spent nine years of my life. Four and a half years in the detention centre,

then carrying a huge bill on my shoulders, and now nine days ago I lost my sister.' Some of my friends, including my ex-wife, were there and they said, 'Don't say anything. Don't worry about it.' I said, 'No, they have to know that if you play games with people's lives it's really dangerous. If you lose money, you can make money. If you lose your life, you cannot make it again.'

Music is the biggest thing that can make me relaxed

My wife and me, we lived together for while, but we both had problems and it didn't work. She is a fantastic girl, still I like her. I had problems because I spent very stressful time in detention centre. To be scared of deportation every single night for four and a half years, I'm not sure anybody can say it's easy to forget. It's not easy. I think it's causing more problems for me because I'm involved with refugees and I can hear their problems. The effect of this is too much. To be honest, I have less time for myself to have a normal life. I like to be really busy but most of my time, apart from my work, it's going with politics and being a refugee supporter. I'm not complaining, because really I don't want to see anybody going through the system.

Hopefully this situation is going to end and it will give me more time for music, because music is the biggest thing that can make me relaxed. The last time I had a concert in Ballarat, people afterwards were complaining to the committee of the festival, saying, 'Why, when we have someone like him in Ballarat, have we never heard anything about him and his music? Why are you not using him more than this?' That was really nice to hear and I was actually very happy. We didn't make money for ourselves; we raised money for refugee support and it was very good.