

# I have been tortured and I have been loved

## Imran

*Imran Mohammad is a stateless Rohingya man who fled Myanmar as a teenager. He taught himself English in detention on Manus Island.*

### **She moved her fingers over each verse**

In our garden, there are many trees: fruit trees, flowering trees, trees with colourful leaves. My mother didn't let me go out because it wasn't safe for the Rohingya boys, especially the ones who are young. So I would spend my evenings with my mother in our garden and we always talked about her family: her father, mother, her grandfather, grandmother, all those sorts of things. And we also discussed about our future.

In Myanmar they don't accept us as their own citizens. We are not from Myanmar, they say. But we were born in Myanmar, and our parents and our grandparents were born in Myanmar. When I was sixteen I had to flee my country. I had no choice. I was nineteen when I arrived on Manus Island; now I am 22.

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When I was back home, my mother was the first person I saw every morning. When I first opened my eyes, I saw her praying. My mother is a very religious person, she taught me many things about our religion. She used to pray five times a day, on time. She didn't go to school so she can't read and write—it was so painful for her because she wanted to read the Holy Quran. When she woke up, she prayed first and she took the Holy Quran and just moved her fingers over each verse and that made her happy.

I used to talk to my mother while she was getting breakfast for all of us. We always ate together: breakfast, lunch and dinner. She used to make flatbreads and different types of vegetables . . . And when she finished making breakfast she woke everyone up and we came to the kitchen and sat together. I always sat next to her because I wanted to eat the best flatbread . . . All I can say about my mum is she was the most precious person in my life. I was scared, I was traumatised and I was persecuted when I was back home. I wasn't safe in my country, but whenever I was with my mum, I found peace in her eyes. I felt the safest person in this world.

### **Many things happened when I was on that boat**

So, I was in Myanmar; I am from Rakhine state. I left my village during the night. I caught a boat, with my friend. We were in Bangladesh for maybe twenty days, then my family arranged another boat for me.

I was on that boat for fifteen days. It was one of the terrible experiences in my life. The boat wasn't very big but there were almost five hundred people on that boat. There were women, older people, babies, teenagers like me. After four days things started to get harder and harder because we were running out of water, food. After nine days people started to die. [*Sighs.*]

You know I saw some babies who died in their mother's lap. The mothers didn't accept that their babies had died. And some old people, they got really sick and died. We just threw them in the ocean.

Our goal was to reach Malaysia, but we reached the Thailand border three times before we reached Malaysia. Thai authorities turned our boat around twice and the third time they started shooting at us and some people died. I felt like I was an animal. Nobody on the boat had a heart that a normal person has. We were put in a position where we had no sympathy for each other. We were dehumanised by the smugglers because they just cared about money. Believe me, if I knew I would go through this hardship after I left my country I would never, ever have left my country. I would rather die in my country than . . . [*speaking quietly*] than die in another place where I don't feel safe. There are many things that happened when I was on that boat. I think people would find it extremely hard to read those stories.

After fifteen days we reached Malaysia. I was underage. I was not allowed to work, but I had no choice because I had to afford my meals . . . so I did construction work. It was very hard work and it was very risky as well. I saw many young boys lose their lives when they were working. I was a stateless person so I had no legal documents. They didn't pay me as much as they should.

I really didn't want to work, I really wanted to study. I cried every morning when I saw the kids going to school . . . I really wanted to be one of them. There are many heartbreaking stories in those workplaces in Malaysia. Really. There are many people there from Bangladesh, from Myanmar, from the Philippines and many of them had no documents. I saw with my eyes the places in which young people are trafficked, woman are raped, and so many other things that I cannot describe.

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I wasn't there for long, just five months. I decided to leave Malaysia and I wanted to come to Australia because I heard about Australia—that it was a country in which I would receive my fundamental human rights.

### **Everywhere I looked was pitch dark**

In 2012 I wanted to come to Australia. [*Long pause.*] For ten days I was in a home that was provided by the smuggler and then we got arrested by the Indonesian police. They put me inside a detention centre for seventeen months. It was complete prison. We were locked up.

The camp was very small and it was totally crammed with people. There were families, adults and underage people, and there were prisoners as well, most of them were from the Philippines. We didn't have space to move around. There was no playground, nothing. We were interviewed by UNHCR.\* They came every five months to interview some of us. They stayed for four or five days and they went back. During the whole process we were not able to go outside of the compound.

I received my refugee status after fifteen months and my life became much easier. I was released and I was accommodated by the United Nations. I was a refugee and I was free in Indonesia. But I'm a human being. I wanted to study and I couldn't study. I was given one hundred and twenty dollars a month. I wanted to work, because it wasn't enough to survive. But I was not allowed to do anything. I was thinking, *How can I pass my days?*

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\* United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is the agency responsible for leading and coordinating international action to protect refugees. Its primary purpose is 'to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of refugees' and it also has a mandate to help stateless people. In the absence of protection claim assessment systems in many countries in Asia, for example, UNHCR is responsible for determining asylum claims.

The United Nations visited our accommodation once a month. They never let us know they were coming. When we saw them we asked, ‘Can we make an appointment to talk to you guys? To explain our situation?’

‘We don’t have time,’ they said.

‘When will we be processed? How long are we going to stay here?’

‘We don’t know,’ they said.

So all these obstacles made me leave Indonesia. Somehow we managed to get a boat to Australia. We were on the ocean for four days. The journey was . . . so, so terrifying . . . Because the boat was so small, so small, compared to the amount of people that were on it. [*Disbelieving laugh.*] There were 295 people . . . the boat was small. And we didn’t have food, we didn’t have water. After two days, something broke and during the day, we emptied the water from our boat. During the night we couldn’t do anything because it was too dark and there were so many waves. I was very, very frightened because everywhere I looked was pitch dark. And, you know, there were many people around me, they were peeing and vomiting. The children were crying. The person who was driving the boat kept trying to escape. Believe me, I thought . . . This is my last time.

We were rescued at six o’clock in the afternoon. If they didn’t rescue us . . . we would all have died. That’s for sure. It was a miracle.

### **I had good control over my mind**

I arrived on Manus Island on 29 October 2013. It was a horrible experience. They put me in Delta compound, so it was a very small room—there was no space, there was no privacy, so I couldn’t study, I couldn’t do anything in my room.

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I didn't have any book, or any pen, or . . . any materials to keep myself occupied. However, I made up my mind that I need to get something out of this place which will help me in the future. So I started thinking, *How can I improve my knowledge?*

Yep. There were many people in my compound, it was really crowded, people were very depressed and they didn't know what they were doing or what they were saying, but I didn't lose my mind. I was suffering from many things, but I had good control over my mind.

So every morning I woke up at four o'clock, because it was quiet, everyone was sleeping. I used to sit in front of my room and I started teaching myself English. I had no dictionary, no nothing. So, I just got some English papers and I taught myself. What does that mean? When I couldn't figure it out, I went to a teacher and I started talking to them. My English was very poor, but I didn't give up.

After two weeks, I went to a class, there was a teacher, her name was Judith. I was sitting at the back. At the end, she sat with me and asked me about my life. And she said to me, 'How do you have hope, in this environment?' I just told her, 'I don't know. There is nothing.'

She told me to write, 'If you write something every day it will help you. It will improve your English and also it will help you to cope in this environment, because you are not keeping your anger in your heart, you are letting it out.'

The first piece I wrote . . . ah . . . I wrote about my mother. And I wrote about my girlfriend. I did not know I was writing my story and it could be a book one day. I had no notebooks and I grabbed a request form from the guardhouse. I wrote eight lines on the back of this form. There were 24 mistakes.

## **I didn't suffer from anything**

I started writing, but I had no idea what to write. What should I write? I was very unfamiliar with these things. So I started writing about my family. I mostly wrote about what I learned from my parents and how life is back home for a Rohingya family. It wasn't very clear, in that time.

There were no novels that I could read to help myself. I just did it by myself and I was very proactive. I didn't waste my time, I didn't chat with my friends. I didn't suffer from anything, because I woke up every morning thinking, *What can I write today?*

I used to write fourteen hours a day. It's crazy, really—fourteen hours a day. I didn't have any space, I didn't have any privacy, you know? When I was in Delta there was a table in front of my room, so I was writing on one side and there were other people who were playing cards at the same time. Whenever they needed me they started talking to me. They always interrupted my writing or reading. But you know what? The noise was really annoying, however it helped me to write more, because I was getting angry, then I was putting all my anger on the paper.

They were my friends so I couldn't tell them to go away. They could see I was writing and reading. They are human beings and they have their own brain. You can't make people learn. People need to learn by themselves. They didn't give me my space, but I didn't tell them anything. I was busy with myself.

I have written a lot of things, I have written 23 chapters. It's a complete book. This place is so strange. You can explain things about this place for years and years and it will never end.

### **I know how to count my blessings**

I spent this afternoon studying English grammar and then I prayed. After that I went to gym. I've just come back to my room, after having a shower. Now, I'm ready to speak to you. The other day you asked me, 'Do I fear death or not?' I don't fear death because I have experienced death many times in my young life. I have been tortured and I have been loved. [*Sighs.*] By experiencing both things I have learned something else: I know how to count my blessings.

I experienced death when I was on the ocean. I've experienced death on the land as well. That's why I left my country. And in 2014 when I was in Mike compound during the riot, I was about to die. I was beaten and I was unconscious for 24 hours. I'm a religious person and . . . I know that according to my religion, if we do good things while we are alive we will go to paradise when we die. If we do bad things we will go to hell. However, I don't want to die. I want to do something with my life. When I was back home, I didn't know what I was capable of doing in my life. But now I know—I know that I'm gifted with many abilities and I know that I can do something to help other human beings. And that's my goal, my ambition. [*Sighs.*] I hope it will come true one day.

Since I left my country I have met many people . . . I call some of them my angels, and Rebecca was one of my angels. She was my caseworker for a long time. The first time I met her, she came to Delta compound in the afternoon with an interpreter to talk to me . . . I was very shy, because in our culture we are not familiar with communicating with women. Because we don't see them outside their houses. They are always inside.

I don't know why, but I felt very comfortable whenever I talked to Rebecca. She started helping me. Every single



morning at ten o'clock she came to my compound and sat with me, helped me with my writing, speaking and reading. I used to write down the words that I could not understand so that I could discuss these strange words with her in the morning.

She was not allowed to give me anything. However, she got me blank paper every day, and gave me pens and pencils. One day she gave me a dictionary. Oh, it was so amazing [*laughing*]! I felt like I had been given the whole world, because I needed a dictionary so much. I cried for a dictionary.

Whenever Rebecca came to visit me in Delta compound, she sat with me on the floor because there were no tables, no chairs. In my country, and the countries I've been to, the officers treated me like an animal. She treated me like I was a member of her family. I'd never experienced that. I was learning a lot of things. There were many times when I was so scared. I was depressed, stressed and frightened . . . However, I had someone who . . . who helped me during those terrible times. She held my hands and told me that everything will be okay. She is not working here anymore, she left almost one year ago, but she still helps me with my English, with my writing. This is a place that was set up intentionally to torture vulnerable people, but I was blessed with . . . an angel.

I remember one thing that my mother told me when I left my country. 'Son, you will be looked after in your life wherever you go.' And . . . [*crying*] her words were so true. I have struggled a thousand times since I left my country. But I was given help, I was protected, and I'm still being loved. I think that's why I've been keeping myself so strong.

Speaking of my mother's words, I want to say something about Sandra Fulham. She lives in Mount Isa, in Queensland. She has never been to Manus Island. She managed to get my information somehow and contacted me. She is my mother

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angel. Everything about us is different: language, culture, place, religion—everything. However, she calls me son and I call her mother. In the old days I struggled with lots of things: I didn't have shoes for months, I didn't have T-shirts, shorts. I cried many times, many times. Sandra has been sending me parcels. Every morning when I wake up, I get a text from her. Every night, I fill her in about my day. She has been loving me unconditionally. It is the kind of love that only a mother can provide. There are no words to express it. It can only be felt.

I have been tortured so much by Australia, but I don't prioritise the hardship I have endured. I focus on the love that I receive from these amazing people. And I would like to say thank you to all of them.

I speak to my mother in Myanmar every fortnight. It's difficult to get through to her but I manage to talk to her somehow. I share all these things with my mother just to make her feel relieved. Now she knows that I have been looked after, that I am well, I am healthy.

### **All we can do is talk to each other**

Our situation is getting worse. They are separating the guys who have a negative refugee assessment from the guys who have positive assessment. I don't know why they are doing it, because the gates are open and we can move between compounds. It doesn't make sense at all. I have no idea. All I can say is they are trying to make our lives even more miserable, that's all.

I have got some friends who have received a negative. They are so depressed so I am spending some time with them and trying to give them hope. Sometimes we are really concerned about them because we think they will do self-harm. We don't leave them alone, we stick with them and talk to them

and if they need any help writing a request or a complaint or something, then we help them in these ways. We can't do much to change our situation—all we can do is talk to each other. Those who are strong, they need to help the ones who are not strong. I am privileged and feel honoured to be able to help them in some way. I've tried my best. I've done what I could. We are very vulnerable and we get scared about little things in this environment, however, when we stick together and look after each other it helps us to survive.

Our refugee case doesn't mean anything, because we don't have the power. They have the power. When I say 'they', I mean the Australian government because everything we have is provided by the Australian government. They are the ones who are controlling our lives.

### **We are allowed to take three packets of cigarettes**

There are thousands of things I can tell you to explain how we have been treated like animals. We have been imprisoned for the last three years—for what?

Let me give you an example. One day they say you can have an apple. The next day you can have two apples. The third day they say you can have three apples. Then on the fourth day, they say you can't have an apple. You can't have an apple. And they stop giving us apples for a week. After a week, they start giving apples again. And everyone goes crazy about it. It's nothing—but, you know, it's the system that makes people crazy.

They bring one hundred packets of biscuits for three hundred people. So we start buying biscuits from the canteen. There are two hundred people who can't buy a packet of biscuits from the canteen. Then they become depressed because they can see that their friends are eating biscuits, but they can't eat biscuits.

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Before I move on to another question, I just want to tell you something more about how we have been treated. We have been traumatised for the last three years, we have forgotten so many things, we don't know how to live normally. Then suddenly, the camp was open and we were able to go into town. So many things have changed over the last few months.\*

We were not allowed to have a phone for two and a half years. Millions of dollars have been spent in this environment in our name, however we were not given phones. We have to trade cigarettes in the market and we have to manage to buy a phone by ourselves. Nowadays we are allowed phones but we don't have credit. I spoke to Immigration and told them that we don't want to trade cigarettes. We asked them to give us money, not cigarettes. But they have never listened to us. They want to show the world that we are bad people. [*Sighs.*] When we go into town, we are allowed to take three packets of cigarettes with us. But we cannot take more than two bottles of water.

They change the rules without informing us. Before, everyone from the prison camp was allowed to stay at the transit centre in town. Then they changed the rule and they said we can't stay at the transit centre. After one week they changed it—they said those who have a positive assessment can stay and those who have a negative assessment can't. It lasted for one week. Then they changed it again. They said, 'Okay, no one can stay at the transit centre anymore.'

One night I stayed at the transit centre, then I went to the market in the morning. And when I came back they did not let

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\* On 26 April 2016, the Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea ruled that the immigration detention centre on Manus Island was illegal. The court found that detention breached the right to personal liberty in the constitution. In the following weeks, some rules were changed. The men were allowed to travel by bus into the town of Lorengau, about 40 minutes from the detention centre. They were also allowed mobile phones, and restrictions on movement between compounds were relaxed.

me in. My bag was there. One day they didn't even let me use the toilets . . . This is so ridiculous. Now we can go into town but we have to come back to our prison camp. If we miss the six o'clock bus, we don't have any place to stay.

### **I talk to myself all the time**

I want to live my life. It's really important for a human being to live their life. But what does it mean, life? I always ask this question to myself. I don't talk to other people very much—I talk to myself all the time. And I question myself, *What do I want from my life? What is this?*

I left my country, I've been to many countries, I've been to many detention centres. Now I am here. I'm still not satisfied with my life. Why? Why not? I have clothes, I have shoes, I have food. I have everything that I need to survive, so that's enough . . . No, it's not enough. I should be respected, I should be honoured, and I should have my fundamental rights.

The worst moment of my life was fleeing from my country in the middle of the night, not being able to hug my mother, father, brother and sisters. Not being able to say goodbye for the last time broke my heart into a thousand pieces. If I knew I would never see them again I would never—I would have chosen to die in my mother's lap, rather than die slowly in this strange and lonely place.

If anyone asks me, 'What do you want from your life?' I will tell them I need to feel safe. If someone tells me, 'Oh, this is safe place'—no it's not. Because I'm not feeling safe in my heart.

### **I sit on the ground so that I can feel the earth**

My world was small when I was back home, because I was isolated; now my world is quite big. It is still small, but it is

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bigger than when I was back home. My father had a dream for me to become a doctor. Now I can see my future, and I believe I can be whatever I want to be. I just need to have the opportunities. I do not know if I will be able to become a doctor or not, but it's my ambition.

When I was back home I had a girlfriend, but I didn't know it was love. Because I was very young, I was sixteen and she was only thirteen. My girlfriend's house was next to my house and she used to come over with her mother, because her mother and my mother were friends. It was like . . . family. We were young and nobody cared because we were young. So . . . I spent a lot of time with her, but we didn't know we loved each other. Because we were too young, we were just friends. As soon as I left my country I realised: Oh . . . It is love. Because I was missing her all the time. She was my first love.

Since I left my country I talked to her a couple of times, and we knew that we loved each other. The last time I spoke to her I was in Christmas Island. I didn't talk to her after I came to the Manus prison, because it was becoming harder and harder for her, and for me too. In our culture, women can't wait for a man for long, so I didn't want to ruin her life. I loved her—love means let someone live their life, not keep them for yourself.

So, I told her: 'Forgive me and just live your life, because my life is stuck in a political limbo and I don't know what will happen in the future. And I'm a person who is stateless and I can't go back to our country, so you'll never see me again. There is no point waiting for me.'

I forced myself to lose her. But she will live in my heart forever, because it was my first love. We are not together physically, but we are together emotionally and it will live forever. I always think about her and I always think about our

time we spent together. I am not trying to forget it because, you know, love is something that keeps us alive, so these memories help me to be strong. I can make myself happy just by remembering.

I don't talk to her on the phone because I don't want to ruin her life, but I can talk to myself. And people ask me, 'Hey, are you crazy? Why are you laughing by yourself?'

'I'm not crazy. I'm talking to myself, and I have someone in front of me who you can't see, because she is not here.'

I try to find a peaceful place where I can be myself. I sit on the ground so that I can feel the earth. I place my hands on my chest and bend my legs and keep them close to my chest. I look up at the sky and then recall the memories. I always tell her, *Being in love doesn't mean we have to be together physically. I love you and my love is unconditional for you. All I want for you is a happy life. Always remember that you were the one who taught me how to love. You will live forever in my heart.*

She always tells me, *Imran, although we are apart I can feel you in the earth and see you around me, because you were the one for whom my heart beat for the first time. My love for you will be alive forever. All I want to do is eradicate the suffering from your life.*