My face is plastered to the window

Jamila

Jamila Jafari was five years old when she fled Afghanistan with her mother and her younger brother. She thought it was an adventure to find her father. Now twenty, she lives in Perth and studies at university.

The day that we were leaving

I was born in Afghanistan just before the Taliban came about. The Taliban, they wanted to take over. My family and I, we're Shia Hazara—the Taliban hate the Hazaras—and we supported a resistance political party. So, culturally, religiously and politically, we were on the other end of the spectrum. That made us a big target.

In 1999, Dad had to run off because it wasn't safe for him. And then, after a while, it wasn't safe for my mother, my brother and me either. I asked Mum what was going on, where were we going, and she said, 'We have to leave.'

I remember the day that we were leaving. Everyone around us was crying: my aunty, my grandmother, even my mum,

and I didn't understand why. I assumed we were going on an adventure to find Dad.

I had a little doll that I absolutely adored. It was my only toy—that I remember having, anyways. I asked if we could take my doll with me, because the doll was with me everywhere I went. Mum said no. The way that she told me, I knew I had to listen. So I gave the doll to my aunty, who I also adored. I told her to look after it. We get in the back of the van—my mum, my little brother and I—and the van starts driving off, and I see my aunty, my grandmother and my grandfather standing there crying, and my aunty has my doll in her hand. Her figure gets smaller and smaller as we drive off. We turn the corner, she disappears and all I could think about was my doll. I'm sorry, it's so many years ago, I don't know why I get so emotional.

We made our way to Indonesia and we were extremely lucky to meet some really lovely families who were also refugees fleeing Afghanistan. There was a Hazara couple and they had three boys. There was also another lady; she had a son and a partner with her. The parents were a massive support network for my mum. The older boys were like brothers, always looking out for us. They were that shining light in all of that darkness, you know?

Adventures are supposed to be fun

So we got on the boat, and there were 435 people on it. It was a wooden fishing boat. I remember being at sea. They were really rough seas so we were always jolting to the side, but I didn't mind that much because every time I got a little worried or I wasn't sure what was happening, I'd ask my mum what was going on and she'd tell us, 'We're looking for Dad.' So I was like, 'Cool, that's fine. Wherever Dad is, I'll be safe

with Dad.' You know, adventures are supposed to be fun and exciting, so I didn't mind.

The boat was really old and unstable, so the engine broke down a few times. And every time there was wailing and crying from the women and the children, there were people reading out prayers. Just imagine being in this extremely unstable vessel. You look on all four sides and all you can see is the blue sky, the blue sea and nothing else. The Australian navy intercepted us once we reached Australian waters on the thirteenth day.

We were taken to Christmas Island and transferred to Darwin, and then transferred down to Woomera.* And, man, I don't think there are enough words in the English language to accurately depict how horrible Woomera was. Just, thinking about it, really . . . I'm trying not to be weak.

They stared me down

First we were taken to the compound where the new arrivals were put, so we couldn't contact the people who had been there for a while. I remember, I would look at everything and it was just . . . the desert, basically, all around us. They had dongas—demountable buildings—all lined up, and in each donga there was just enough room for two bunk beds and a tiny passageway. It was so tiny. It had a small window out the back with bars on it and just behind the row of dongas was a fence with barbed wire. It was so disgusting and stuffy. It was no place for any human to have to be in. You're either in that tiny donga, or you're outside, but all you see outside is just fences around you. They were both equally as bad. You

* The Woomera detention centre was located about 450 kilometres north of Adelaide. It opened in November 1999 and closed in April 2003 following a number of high-profile riots and protests, including a breakout in 2002.

just had to put up with it, you know? There was no other option. There was no green area you could go to, to escape all of this confinement.

My mum, one day she told me: 'Go outside. Play outside.' I went round the back, behind our donga. There were about two metres between the back of our donga and the fence. I was skipping about and I noticed these vehicles on the other side of the fence. Like, rows of vehicles. I've stopped because I'm curious to see what's going on. The car doors open and I see these people dressed in black: black shoes, black pants, black shirt, black hat. They step out, they're staunch, and their figures are really dominating. I remember being so intimidated. I was doing nothing wrong, I was just skipping about. It was . . . crippling. I don't really know how to put it into words but their presence was so scary that it made me want to crawl up into a ball. They stared me down and I burst into tears. I was frozen. I couldn't move. I didn't know what was going on! This image, it's always been in my mind, ever since that encounter.

All this time Mum said, 'We're finding Dad.' I think the adventure stopped—I stopped thinking of it as an adventure—when we got to Woomera.

The word 'freedom'

We had the initial interview, and it was in a lovely, clean, air-conditioned building—really different from the dongas. There was a desk, an interviewer, an interpreter and a chair. Mum sat on the chair as she was being interviewed, and my brother and I had to sit on the floor. I think they gave us a piece of paper and a few coloured pencils to occupy us with. And, I mean, it should have been something enjoyable to do but what was I supposed to draw? Razor wire all around me? That's all I'd seen ever since I'd arrived here.

So, once you've been initially interviewed, they transfer you over to make room for the other new arrivals. The other donga we were moved to was much bigger and it had a small living area, a corridor and three bedrooms on each side. Each bedroom had two bunk beds. So we took one of the rooms there, there were other Hazara families in the other rooms. And these other Hazara families, they were, I think, the epitome of what detention does to children. Of the psychological effects detention has. The lady, she had quite a few children. She had two older boys: one was thirteen and the other was twelve. She had lots of girls as well. When I think of detention, what I saw with them are a big part of the memories I have.

Woomera was the most notorious detention centre in Australia. There were lots of protests and riots and that sort of thing while we were in Woomera. I saw adults and children with their lips sewn, bruised and all this stuff. The thirteen year old and the twelve year old, they both sewed their lips. The mother too.

During one of the riots on 26 January, I was standing there and there was arguing going on. There was screaming, people screaming out, 'Freedom! Freedom!' It was the middle of the desert during the really hot season and the conditions were just unbearable. I remember the thirteen year old, he had some kind of blade. He'd written the word 'freedom', he cut that into his skin, his left forearm—I'm sorry this is so graphic—his skin's ripped open, his blood's dripping, and he's screaming out, 'We want freedom!'

I could never remove that image from my head. It's so vivid. And his voice is . . . it's shaking, there's so much pain in his voice. A thirteen year old! Doing that to himself! And all the other adults, older children, protesting and screaming out, 'Freedom, freedom, freedom.' When I think of my childhood, that is one of the main words that I remember, like it's been

engraved in me, and I have never . . . I wish I could . . . I wish I could remove those images from my head. But I can't. It's impossible.

After the boy cuts himself, the next thing I hear are people screaming and crying out because a man has climbed right to the top of the fence and then he just jumps off. He lands on a coil of razor wire and people are shrieking, they're crying out. Everyone is so surprised. As he lands, his weight causes the coil to bounce, so he bounces a few times, like a heartbeat. His arms are all cut up because of the razor and he's bleeding. There's a documentary about him, called *The Man Who Jumped*. He didn't die, but the conditions in the detention centre drove him off the edge, literally. You wouldn't do that if you were completely sane, you know?

And those boys, they were so damaged, honestly. They did a lot of hectic things but I just admired them so much for their fearlessness, their boldness and their bravery. It's not an easy task to sew your lips together, to go on a hunger strike, to then resort to cutting into your own flesh. You couldn't help but admire them for having those personality traits in the face of such hopeless times. I think there were other people who felt the same way about them, even people older than them.

Red earth

We arrived at Woomera and had our first interview before 9/11 happened, and were waiting for the results. Then, we heard about 9/11. I remember people saying, 'Afghanistan has attacked tall buildings in America.' There was a lot of fear. Whatever the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers and boat people was, 9/11 completely changed it. They put a freeze on all visa applications; they were refusing to process anybody.

People were throwing mattresses out onto the ground in the detention centres—and it was just earth basically, no grass, no pavement—and lying there in the 50-degree-Celsius heat, in protest, not even drinking water; people with their lips sewn, lying there, lifeless bodies. Everywhere you turned you'd see people lying, protesting.

One day, I was outside and everywhere I looked was red earth, dry and flat. I'm trying to imagine how the real Australia would look. I picture rolling hills, lush green vegetation and I'm trying to figure out how far away it would be and how long it would take us to reach the real Australia, even though we were in Australia. They had tracked Dad down: he was in Australia. So by this stage, I knew Dad was here, and I was trying to picture him in the green, rolling-hill scenery, and I'm just wishing so badly to be with him.

There was a stretch of road along the fence. I put my fingers through the fence and I'm looking out. A car zooms past and I'm trying to imagine how it would be not to have my world stop at this fence. This was it—this was the barrier and I understood that. It's this fence that's stopping me from getting to my dad, from getting to the rolling green hills.

I remember some of the employees working at the detention centre. There was this donga that was like an educational centre. We were taken in there and it was absolutely lovely. It was so bright and colourful, it was air-conditioned and there were desks and bits and pieces of paper. There was this really, really lovely guy. He must have been in his forties, fifties. He came in and sat on the ground and he was doing all these silly things to make us kids laugh. It was about one hour of just laughing. In comparison to the guards and all the other employees there, he was just so lovely. The next day we were so looking forward to going back in there. But he didn't turn up again.

The sky looked pretty for once

One morning, it must have been six o'clock, I was sleeping and Mum woke me up. She was like, 'Get up, they've called our names over the PA system.' The atmosphere of that day, in comparison to all the other days we'd been there, it was just so different from the onset. The moment I woke up, I just felt so different and so alive. Even the sky looked pretty for once and the weather was nice and cool.

So, we walked down to the office and they told us, 'Your visa's arrived.' And it was honestly the best day ever, the environment felt unreal. They were taking us out the next day, so we had that one day to pack what little belongings we had. It was always a really happy occasion for the person who got their visa, but also sad for the remaining detainees.

There was a tradition in the camp where, every time someone got their visa, as they walked out, the remaining detainees would spill out water at their feet. It was like a good luck thing. And the day that it happened to me, I was so happy and so excited and all I could think about was, 'I'm finally going to see my dad!' And it felt like an adventure again. I felt happy again.

And I see him

So we said our goodbyes to all our friends who had become like family. From Woomera they drove us down to Adelaide. From there, someone had arranged for us to get on another interstate bus to travel to Sydney where Dad was. I don't remember the journey but I remember the end, when the bus was starting to slow down—I think it was somewhere in the CBD—and I hear a lot of noise outside the bus, and people start to open up their curtains. I see these massive, tall

buildings and I'm intrigued. It was like nothing I had ever seen before. There are all sorts of people, all shapes and sizes and colours, and everyone looks so busy. Everyone's walking really fast, trying to get to the places they're heading off to. Amongst this crowd, this busy, busy crowd, there's only one figure that catches my eye. And I see him, he's dressed in a T-shirt and trousers and belt; T-shirt tucked in, in early 2000s fashion. And he has a moustache and short black hair and Hazaragi eyes and he's power-walking like he's a man on a mission! The bus stops, the man walks to the front door of the bus and I've recognised him by now. My face is plastered to the window, and so are my hands as I scream out, 'Babai!'

It's the first memory I have of my dad. Obviously, he was around when I was born and stuff, but I don't remember that. So, it was like . . . a new birth, like seeing the world for the first time.

We got off the bus, we hugged and we were just so happy! We had smiles plastered on our faces. We got into a taxi and drove out of the city, over to Auburn, which is where he was living at the time. Turned out Dad had taken the same journey as us.

The next day Dad took us out to the shops. We didn't have toys, and I still missed my doll so much. He took us to this toy store, and it looked like heaven! I chose a Polly Pocket set. Do you remember those?

And, you know, growing up we did have a lot of toys and stuff like that, but it was never the same as my doll that I had to leave behind. The first time I finally got in touch with my grandparents and my aunty, I asked my aunty, 'Where's my doll? Have you still got her? Have you been brushing her hair, washing her face in the mornings?' I always remembered her and mentioned her. When I was about ten or eleven years old I brought her up in conversation again, and Mum was

like, 'You need to stop thinking about her. She's gone. You're not getting her back. She probably doesn't look the same anymore. Because, you know, it's been a few years—toys wear out.'

But it was that separation that really got to me as a kid. And, even though I had all these toys, all these new dolls, it was like my parents were trying to compensate for what I had lost. But it was never the same.

Keep my lips zipped

The real difficulty after getting out of Woomera was the temporary visas. They're horrible and I don't see any logic in them. If you deem someone to be in genuine fear of persecution and stuff like that, and you grant them that refugee status, then why keep torturing them for a further three years?

The years that we spent on temporary visas were really hard. It was a massive uncertainty. Dad's three years finished up before ours, obviously, because he had been here before us. Around that time, when he was filling out his forms, going in for interviews and stuff, I remember being so scared. I remember praying my little heart out because I didn't want to leave my teachers or my school. Initially Dad was rejected, and it felt like the end of the world. But he appealed, and when he was granted permanent residency, it was automatic for us as well.

Growing up, I always felt different, I always looked different. And it didn't feel entirely like home, to be honest. For a few years, I didn't feel like I belonged. And because I had been bullied for my scarf, my religion and stuff like that, I always tried to be as 'Australian' as possible. But there was always something about me that was different to the rest of the crowd, and that made me a target. So, when I learnt English,

I made the big mistake of abandoning my Hazaragi language. I wanted to be the same as everybody else. Looking back now, I wish I had put in more effort into speaking Hazaragi, because now I can't speak it that well. I realise that now, and I have this deep regret in me.

For a very long time I suppressed everything, and I was never willing to tell anybody I was a refugee because I thought I was illegal, that I was a 'queue-jumper', that I didn't deserve to be here because I'd done something wrong. I remember news snippets and the then-prime minister John Howard. When I think of him, this one speech is what comes to mind: 'We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come!' The whole room is cheering for him, and that really gets to me. The strong way that he said that—it was convincing even to me! I thought I was a queue-jumper—like when you're standing there in line at the school canteen and kids jump in, in front of their friends, it was annoying. And then I'd think, 'Hang on, but that's what the prime minister says I'm doing.' It built up this massive guilt inside of me, and I didn't know how to get rid of it. The only thing I could do was to suppress it. Keep my lips zipped. Not tell anyone. Because if that kid pushing in line angered me, then I thought that the whole country had every right to be angry at me for supposedly pushing in line, for supposedly being illegal.

The first time I told one of my non-Hazara friends was in year 9. This was when asylum seekers and refugees were back in the news a lot. I was like, 'How do I say this to her?' We were absolute best friends, we were joking, laughing, and I was like, 'Haha, I'm a boat person!' I was so petrified of her reaction, I was like, 'What did I just say? This is the end, she's not going to want to be friends with me, I'm going to be alienated from the entire group.' But she was like, 'Really?

That's cool.' And she moved on. This massive weight from my shoulders was lifted.

That was a point in my life where I started doing my own research and I came to realise that, 'Hey, what my family did was not illegal. We are not queue-jumpers because there's no such thing as a queue in regards to being a refugee.' I think it changed my perspective of my own existence in this country, and I felt more at home. I accepted myself.