

I thought I would leave detention, but my heart is there still

Lina

Lina is an artist who came to Australia in 2013. She had always wanted to study architecture. In Syria, hiding with her family, she began drawing. During a period of relative calm, she completed a course in drafting software. But then, as the war intensified, she wasn't able to leave their apartment for a year.

Every colour is a story

I started painting when I was in detention. Everyone was surprised. I'd never done it before. In detention, we had nothing—I mean, we just sat and thought. Some people, they were thinking about bad things, they'd been sad, and some people, they just started writing poetry and painting and drawing. They just found themselves, how talented they were, through the hard pressure.

One painting I made, it showed a strong woman and all the officers were like, 'Wow!'

The manager came and saw it and she said, ‘Do you like to draw and paint? We can provide you painting stuff if you like.’ They gave me colours and I said, ‘I don’t know how to paint, I know only with the charcoal and pencil.’

But when the colours came to my painting, I saw many things—I saw hope, I saw . . . Every colour, it affected me, started affecting my painting . . . Like, I needed to choose exactly what colour I needed to paint with. Every colour is a story in itself.

[*Deep breath.*] Like, green is important in my painting. Without green, without the colour that I want, I won’t get the results . . . So I have to mix blue and yellow together—green. And blue and red together—purple. Playing with colours keeps me busy and not thinking about any bad things.

In Syria, when there was war I started drawing. When you build a house, it’s like, because you don’t have anywhere safe, you try to build to feel safe. I feel safe when I draw and paint. I could show the immigration officers how we feel, that we’re not dangerous. [*Laughs.*] It’s like we are normal people.

I had one drawing that’s a woman with her mouth covered. I did this in Darwin. I showed everyone and they said, ‘What you mean by that?’ And I said, ‘You just need to understand what I mean, I don’t have to say.’ It’s really clear that I can’t talk. She can talk but they covered her mouth. [*Pauses.*] I hate politics. Yeah, I hate it. Humanity is more important than rules and politics. All my paintings are about people.

That pressure

So, before I came to Australia I was in Syria, and before that in Iran. In all these years we tried to find a place to feel safe.

In Syria, in the cities, you walk around, you go shopping, people are selling stuff, drinks, everything is okay, and suddenly

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you go back to the same places and they are totally different, all collapsed. My father, he had to leave the house to bring food for us and every time he went out my body was shaking. One day, we were sleeping and we heard some noises, like bombing. Then at 5 a.m. we saw a helicopter. I saw the fire coming from the helicopter and we were just scared. [*Deep breath.*] The worst thing is the noises of the bombing. In war you feel no one can hear you. It's like you're screaming and no one can come and help you . . . During that time, my best friend, she died. That pressure, it makes a bomb in my mind.

Every time we left a place we had to leave our stuff. I had to throw out many things I loved, from my childhood, everything. To leave Syria it was impossible to take them. Photos, birthday gifts, my notebooks. I love to write, I love to read poems in Arabic, so I had many things in my books. We couldn't even leave the photos as they were, so we had to cut them. Cutting the photos from our life, the people we loved, it was emotional. But being safe was more important than photos. At that time, they were nothing for me, I want to be safe. But when we get here, safe, I thought, *Why did I do that? Why did I throw them away?*

And then we left Syria and we went to Indonesia. We went to the boat. On the third day, the boat broke down, stopped moving and there was nothing. Nothing. It was all water. We couldn't see anything. And I felt that a human, a person, should have more value than that. It was like, *They shouldn't treat me like that.* Why do people have to choose the worst way to get in a safe place? Why they didn't provide a better option?

Everyone who has power is responsible. I'm not focusing on anyone, but people who have power, they can do everything to make things better. I don't believe in human rights. They did nothing. They're just words: human rights. What's going

on in Syria now, what's going on everywhere, it shouldn't happen. If human rights did anything, then ah okay, I would believe in them. But if there are rules, if there is something like human rights, but they did nothing, then what's the point of calling them human rights? I don't know. I'm not old enough to understand. But what I've seen is not right.

I was praying a lot

In Syria, I researched Australia, about the language. I was scared of learning the language because they said it's different from English and American language. I was watching YouTube clips of the Australian accent. It's really difficult. I told my family, 'I like Melbourne.' And in detention the English teacher was nice. He tried to educate me and tell me more about Melbourne. He was telling me good places, nice places . . . he told me when you wanna do shopping you just go to the cheapest one: Aldi!

On Christmas Island there were so many people with many hard backgrounds. Some people came from war, some people were so upset. I couldn't feel safe, because I didn't know the people and they were all around me. They were, like, next to my room where I sleep. Different people. Later, I used to help people, so I could feel safer because I was helping them.

I tried to be active, rather than sitting and being upset. Some people, they used to sleep in their rooms for hours . . . Some people started smoking. I saw many girls, single girls, they'd just smoke, smoke, all the time. Some people, they were just happy, dancing and singing like it's nothing . . . But inside, they were so sad.

I believed that if I showed I'm weak my parents would be sad, so I decided to show them that nothing had happened and I was fine and not upset because they chose this way to

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come. It was not their fault. We had to. So, seeing my mum made me stronger, to show her how I wasn't upset anymore.

I was praying a lot. I found that I was so close to my god, at that time. And I was also feeling just, like, I didn't feel . . . I had no feeling. It was like, I didn't care for me, personally. For my family, I did care. But it's okay. I thought, *Let's see what's going on, what will happen.* And it made me feel comfortable, relaxed.

I couldn't leave her

So, we arrived in Darwin. It was late evening. People were trying to tell us, 'Yeah, here is better than Christmas Island. Everything is good.' One lady, she told me they have good makeup, because on Christmas Island they couldn't wear makeup as they wanted. And the food is nicer. People were so excited to be in a better place than Christmas Island. And I could see how happy they are. I was happy, but I don't know . . . because in my mind I had many things . . . I had my plan . . . I wanted to reach the aim I came for, to study and work. I couldn't understand why they were so very happy. And most of them, they were sick. They had problems. One of the first I met was Ranya. Oh my god, so many things happened with me and Ranya.

I was sitting with my family. My mum was cutting fruit and giving it to us. I was drinking tea. And suddenly they brought Ranya from the hospital. She was sitting in front of the medical room. I tried to help her because she was alone and I knew that she was new. I asked her if she needed help . . . but she wouldn't talk to me. Later, I asked her, 'Why didn't you talk?' She said, 'I was afraid of talking. I didn't know who you were or where I was.' I thought that maybe she was waiting for the nurse. So I stayed with her. I couldn't leave her.

The nurse came and gave her her tablet and I was trying to know her and why . . . what happened to her. When she saw me with my family she felt safe. She thought, ‘Okay, I found a good family.’ Slowly, we became friends. Day by day.

I asked her how she came and she said, ‘I’ve never told anyone my story.’ I wish I can be strong like her, she has made me stronger. And I have learned many things from her. She’s a real woman. Strong woman.

One day, she needed to use her email and she had forgotten her email address. I let her use my email address and she was surprised how I trusted her to give her my password. Even I thought it would be too hard to find friends in such a strange place, but I did. I think detention is the best place to find real people. In hard times, you can see the real people. There, we’re not sharing our happiness, we’re sharing our pain and everything, the sadness.

So, we were together all the time and then I found out she was sick. Yeah, she started feeling bad. They tried to take her to hospital. I don’t want to tell her private story, but I tried to be with her. Sometimes, ah, when she fainted she hurt me, like my hand, but when I saw her I couldn’t feel mad, even if I was hurt. People in detention, when they see sick people, they stay far away because they think it will affect their immigration status. But I didn’t care, it’s about human with human. I don’t care about any immigration thing.

We were the craziest girls

Do we have time? I mean, because when I keep talking I’m not feeling the time. This is a true story. Truth takes time.

Some people thought that I was from Ranya’s country because we were always together, we ate together . . . Yeah, we were together and because she was sick, I couldn’t leave

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her long. She trusted me and I trusted her as well. But officers, they told her, 'You are doing this because you want to be famous.' They thought she was acting. And one officer told her, 'You need to get married so your husband will take care of you.' It's crazy things she was hearing from them.

They separated us [*sighs*] in Darwin. They sent her to a different detention centre and, ah . . . I was crying. It was first time I had cried like that. In that detention centre there were many people. She gets tired of being in crowds and . . . maybe there no one can help her like I did, like I was supporting her and being with her always. They separated us. They closed the door. She fainted. And I was crying, crying, crying . . . The officer, he . . . he didn't let me see that she had fainted . . . he didn't want me to see her, to get more upset.

Everyone knew about me and Ranya, like how we loved each other, how we were supporting each other . . . Ranya was thinking, 'No, they mean it, they want to separate me from you.' They saw that she was getting more and more sick, more than before, and that her health was getting worse . . . in that new detention she fell from the second floor and that time, ah, she was feeling very bad. She broke her body.

On that night I just heard that Ranya fell down from the second floor and that she was in hospital, that's all I heard. I was . . . I wanted to know if she was still alive, you know . . . And I didn't know anything about her until the next day an officer, she came and told me, 'She's in hospital and she's fine.' I requested to go to the hospital and visit her. After two or three days I was allowed to go with my family. She couldn't speak, I was just talking to her. I used to visit her always, always, till she got better.

Ah. That makes me tired. She made me tired. I'm so tired of her. [*Laughs.*] I don't know, but she was good girl. I mean, she is still a good girl, but . . . Immigration doesn't care about

‘good’ people or ‘bad’ people . . . She used to come and visit me as well . . . and then we did many crazy things. We were the craziest girls. [*Laughs.*] Darwin has two seasons, one dry and one wet. In the wet season it always rains and at night when it rains we were just playing in the rain. She was crazy. I love her.

When anyone gets sick they call ‘code blue’, and medical, they come . . . So, code blue was the worst thing I heard in detention, always code blue. [*Laughs nervously.*] Ranya, code blue . . . when I heard code blue, I knew that it was Ranya . . .

One day she fell down the stairs. Yeah, a time before the other one. Sometimes I was glum in myself: why wasn’t I with her so she couldn’t fall? I was so sad because of her. Why do I have my family, and she doesn’t? Why do I feel healthy and she doesn’t? All the bad things in her, why’s it like that? But, that’s life. I’ve never met anyone like her.

All the night talking, talking, talking

Immigration told my family, ‘You are going to Melbourne.’ We were so happy. My mum, she was crying. We were so happy, I was happy, but . . . I didn’t show that I was happy. I was normal so that other people wouldn’t be sad.

So, three days before my family transferred to Melbourne they brought Ranya to see me. I was surprised like, *Wow, they brought her here because they know that I’m transferring.* For three days, me and Ranya, we didn’t sleep—we were talking, we stayed awake all the night talking, talking, talking . . . [*Laughs.*]

The morning I left, Ranya was sitting on chair because she couldn’t walk . . . but I told her, ‘I am sure you are coming too.’ They wanted to send her to Nauru. Even I thought that maybe they would send her, but I told her, ‘I feel you are not

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going there. I promise, I promise you are not going to Nauru. I feel that I'm going to see you,' and she was smiling. And she said, 'Yep.' She was always . . . she doesn't want me to feel that she's sad.

Yeah, and the last piece of my painting, I couldn't finish it because there was no time. The activity officer, she told me, 'You need to finish it,' and I said, 'No, just leave it.'

'Are you an asylum seeker?'

We went to Melbourne. It was windy and cold, but it was good.

The second day we went to finish our Immigration things. I saw the city, we started taking photos and everything. It was so good. I was walking with my family in the city and I felt free.

I found people are friendly, nice . . . but the worst thing is that I always need to say that I'm an asylum seeker. As if there is a difference between an asylum seeker and not being an asylum seeker. When I go to any organisation, they always ask, 'Are you an asylum seeker? Where did you come from? What was your boat number?' It's like they remind me all the time: detention, detention, detention. It's easy for them because they just say the word, but for people there . . .

About being in detention, at first I was ashamed to say . . . but later, I felt like, no, it's okay. I was even thinking about what to tell my future kids. *How did I come to Australia?* I thought, *Yeah, they will be proud of me because I'm proud of my parents.* It was very complicated, what to feel about our being in detention. Because I now know what I learned, I'm not feeling ashamed.

They gave us bridging visas but without study and work rights. They told us, 'You have study rights, but you need to

pay yourself. But it means I can't study, so what for? I used to look for centres, education, everything. I was looking, asking, 'Where can I go to learn and study?' But wherever I went was expensive.

So, first I did more painting because I was still in the mood of detention and then . . . I felt that I needed to do more than paintings. I needed to volunteer in some places. There was a support and housing service, I volunteered for one year there. Some people who came didn't know English, so I used to help them. I used to give food parcels and vouchers to people. And that was a good start for me, to be in a community.

I talk to Ranya. I can't see her because they sent her to a different state, seven or eight months after me. She's in the community. She's suffering . . . I mean, she's not well.

Because she is far away from me I can't see her always. But she doesn't have anyone to trust more than me. Yeah, that's what she says. I hope we can be together again, she needs someone to support her. I've never asked myself this question, why should I feel this way. But . . . I just feel she's close . . . close to me. She feels good when she talks to me. So, when I see her she feels good, and it makes me feel good too. I miss her. Lots. [*Laughs.*]

I used to . . . I knew everything about what was going on in detention. [*Laughs.*] I used to follow the news and know about people there who transferred, who stayed . . . I thought I would leave detention, but I couldn't leave it. My heart is there still.