

# **She said, 'You can be my son'**

## **Taqi**

*Taqi Alizada's family are from Afghanistan. Taqi fled Pakistan as an unaccompanied fifteen year old. He spent eighteen months in Indonesia before arriving in Australia, where he completed high school at Dandenong High School. He is now waiting for his Australian citizenship so he can bring his family here.*

### **A lot of things came into my mind**

A couple of years ago I didn't know much about anything. I was kind of stupid, I was too young. I didn't know what life would be like. And the idea of waiting in detention—I always thought waiting is waiting, don't worry about it. But now I care, I am more adult, and I have experienced a lot of problems.

I suffer from depression and stress always. But at the end of the day I feel good because I can be smarter than others my age because I have lots of experiences of those things. I suffer from those things but I feel kind of lucky.

## THEY CANNOT TAKE THE SKY

I can speak six or seven languages. They are Urdu, Hindi, Indonesian and our language, Hazaragi, and Arabic and Malay. Malay and Indonesian are pretty similar.

Most Australians my age, when they see my card balance, they are always shocked: ‘How you get so much money? How do you still have it? Are you still saving?’ They can’t save; they have five dollars and then it’s gone on fish and chips.

Yeah, I am good at saving. People always tell me that I have savings, that I know how to deal with other people. They always like my socialising; they say, ‘You always cooperate with all kinds of people. Like, if it’s a junkie you cooperate, if it’s a professor you cooperate with them, if it’s, like, middle-class people you can cooperate.’ This is because of that kind of experience.

When I was in Indonesia I got a phone call saying that my father was missing. And then a couple of months later my family left a message on Facebook saying I should call. I made a time to go onto the internet, and they said, ‘The good news is your dad is at home. The bad news is he got tortured, he’s in very bad health condition.’

At that moment I was so helpless. I thought, if he has been tortured who knows if he is going to live or not. And then a lot of things came into my mind, and I was so depressed for a couple of months. I lost a lot of friends. Everyone thought that I was on drugs or something, because sometimes I was shaking, I lost a lot of weight. Then he died. He passed away four years ago.

### **I left home**

So, it was 5 March 2011. Most of my friends had left Pakistan and told stories of what happened to them afterwards. And as I saw there was no future in Pakistan I told my mum that

I wanted to go. But my dad, he knew the way I'd go, by boat, and the struggle, and things, and he said, 'No.' I had arguments with my mum, then my dad, and even my older brother. At first no one agreed with me going. And then later on all of them agreed.

I left home around twelve o'clock. It was a pretty sad moment. My mum, she did not know that I would be smuggled by boat and these things until then, so she cried, and my older sister cried, and I was pretty upset. I left the home. I saw some of my friends on the way, and I told them I had a boxing competition in Peshawar and everyone believed it. I did not want to tell anyone that I was going to Australia. I was fifteen.

*With the help of a smuggler, Taqi travelled with a small group of fellow under-age asylum seekers, first to Malaysia, then to Indonesia.*

## **WOW Hotel**

It was first time that I had travelled in an aeroplane, legally or illegally. There was a plan for us to stay in a hotel for the night and the next morning go to Jakarta. Some people saw us—as foreign people we looked suspicious—so when we departed from that hotel there was a policeman and he stopped us straight away, saying: 'Australia, Australia, Australia'. He took us to the police station and we stayed there for a night. And then after a night they said, 'We will take you to the WOW Hotel, a five-star hotel,' blah, blah, blah. We didn't believe them. We were refugees. We were criminals. Why would they take us to a hotel?

But it was Immigration's place. We were locked in there for 45 days, four people in one room. It was a five-star hotel, but

## THEY CANNOT TAKE THE SKY

there was only the one bed and we were four. The door was always locked. If you wanted to ring your family you had to pay the guards. They would take our mobile, give our family a missed call, then our family would ring us. Just for that, we paid five dollars.

Those 45 days were the hardest in my life. It's like it took 45 months. We always looked at the watch, and it was always the same. Tick tick, still the same, still the same.

When we washed our clothes we had to hang them to dry because there wasn't a dryer. One day we washed our clothes and wanted to hang them outside on the balcony, so I was knocking on the door. No one came, and I was knocking louder, and bit more louder and then a guard came and hit me. Slapped me, couple of slaps. My friend came to try and stop him and he hit him too. The guard said, 'This not Afghanistan, this is Indonesia.'

The guards could do anything they wanted. There was no way to complain, no requests, their supervisor or manager never came. The guards were way older. When we paid for the telephone, they would collect the money and then bring girls at night-time, and drinks. One night I was sleeping, and I think Marwin came in, one of the guards, and he said, 'Wake up, wake up,' and I woke up and he took me to the balcony, and there were three girls and two other guards, Anwar and Abdullah.

So there were drinks, and I think they were going to have party. So I sat there and I said, 'Hi,' to the girls and we started talking but I couldn't speak Indonesian and they couldn't speak English. And then I said I wanted to go to sleep. And I don't know what they did that night, or what happened, or why they asked me go out there. I have no idea. But usually every Friday, every time they got money, we would see some bottles of beer or wine or alcohol on the balcony. They made

parties with our money, just from letting us use their mobile to give a missed call to our families.

## **A big saloon**

After that I found a smuggler from there, and the smuggler said, ‘You’re going to pay Immigration staff to transfer you.’ He said I should pay them US\$3000, then they would transfer me from there to Jakarta.

So I paid them, and they transferred me from WOW Hotel to Jakarta. My other friend, who didn’t pay that much money, they transferred to Tanjung Pinang detention centre. From Jakarta, they transferred us to Bogor,\* where there is a shelter for people under eighteen, and I was there for sixteen to seventeen months.

The first time I came to the shelter there were a couple of Afghan guys our age, so I was pretty happy. Our bedroom was kind of a big saloon, and then there was a double bunk bed—we had to sleep on that. There were fourteen or fifteen boys—it was pretty noisy, you couldn’t sleep well.

We were allowed to leave the shelter but we had to be back by ten o’clock. If you were going to be a bit late you could ring them, and then they would be fine. And if you wanted to stay somewhere at night-time, you could fill a form and give details and then they would let you stay. If you didn’t come back for two nights your payment from UNHCR would be stopped.†

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\* Bogor is a city around 60 kilometres south of Jakarta.

† UNHCR is responsible for the care of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Indonesia. Together with its implementing partner, Church World Service (CWS), UNHCR runs a small number of shelters for unaccompanied minors in Indonesia, including this one in Bogor.

## THEY CANNOT TAKE THE SKY

In the shelter I saw a couple of boys who had girlfriends. So I asked them what was going on, how to get a girlfriend. And the boys would say, 'Just ask *nomor*'—which means number—'and they will understand.' And so sometimes the girls would ask us, '*Nomor?*' and we give them our phone number. And they might say, 'Hi,' or send messages in Indonesian. We'd show the security guard and he would explain, and help us reply. And so, through talking to girls and having girlfriends, I learnt Indonesian.

### **She said, 'You have very nice eyes'**

On the first day after they transferred us to the shelter, my case manager came to the shelter and said, 'Welcome.' She could speak a bit of Persian. She said, 'You have very nice eyes, nice colour.' At that time I was the youngest guy in the shelter and I felt much more comfortable and much safer when I saw older women, like my mum's age, or older than that, so I felt comfortable and safe with my case manager, and that's why I was honest with her and whenever she came to visit I would always try to sit next to her.

There was another Afghan at the shelter and he said to her, 'You can adopt Taqi. Taqi needs you, you can help him.' So this is what happened. She told me she could adopt me, as she had only one daughter, and she said, 'You can be my son.' And I said, 'Why not.'

Yes, I got my refugee status. Australia have a policy that they don't want any minors because it kind of complicates things for them. And so, when I realised they do not accept minors from Indonesia, I got on a boat.

The water was pretty rough. We couldn't go back, we couldn't go forward. There was one family on the boat always screaming and shouting, 'I want to go back, take us to some

island, I don't want to die with my kids.' The second day we finished our food and water. On the fourth day everyone lost their hope. We didn't know where we were going to end up. I was lying on the deck of the boat and I could see one sultana, and I was so lazy, I didn't have the energy to get up and get it. But there was a 60-year-old man who did jump up to get the sultana. One thing I learned was, never hesitate. Three days, three nights, no food, no water. We were trying to find any other ship or boat, to ask them for food or water. On, I think it was the third or fourth day, there was a big ship coming by and we tried to get to them, but they must have thought we were thieves or trying to get their money or cause trouble, because they skipped. The fifth day, we saw something that looked like a ship, and we came closer and closer and it was Christmas Island. And we thought, *Thank god.*

### **I was on the news**

Then as we came close to the land there was a navy ship. Straight away we told them we were asylum seekers looking for safety. Then they captured us and gave us water and milk and said we couldn't go to the detention centre until tomorrow morning.

And so in the morning they took us to the navy boat. And when I was on the boat I had one wish: that I would get on the news. So I was trying to sit at the front so that when they took picture I would be seen. And it actually happened, I was on the news.

Eighteen of us were minors and they sent us to Charlie camp that night. We were in Charlie camp for a month. At Charlie everyone has their own bedroom, and there were

## THEY CANNOT TAKE THE SKY

Serco officers always around us. They were scared something was going to happen. They were always around us.

The food was always rice, with some meat and some salad. They give us one piece of fruit. And they called us by our number, never by our name.

After Charlie, they transferred us to Leonora detention centre\* for two months. Charlie was kind of a boring place. To call family we had to wait for hours and hours, and sometimes by the time the telephone box was free it was nine or ten at night and we had to go to bed. It was pretty hard. But when we came to Leonora it was fun. We had a couple of pool tables, we had schools, we had outside excursions. We would go to the mountains, have a drink and some fresh air and then come back, just for a walk.

At Leonora, there was one teacher, and he said, ‘You should write a complaint letter. They should not call you by number. You are not a criminal, you are just an asylum seeker.’ I had never thought about it before that, but once my teacher said this I was always aware they should not call me by number.

### **I never thought I would do those things**

Leonora is a big centre. There was—I can’t remember—I think more than two hundred containers that we lived inside there. Mine was number 185, right in the corner, at the edge of the detention centre. I was scared at night-time, always scared, always thinking that there was something moving in my bedroom. For the majority of the two months I was having bad dreams. I was feeling there was something in my

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\* The Leonora detention centre operated from 2010 to 2014. It was located about 800 kilometres northeast of Perth in Western Australia.



bedroom. I made a complaint and they said, 'There is nothing going on in there, you will be fine.' But still the nightmares were the same.

Where my container was it was always windy, and I was scared this wind was going to do something. The nightmare was usually like someone was holding my hand, trying to get me, and there was always someone trying to open my fridge, and I would have a feeling that there was someone and then wake up, and nothing.

I spoke to boys who had been in detention for almost a year. I was scared that if that happened to me, I would lose myself. I was scared of that. There was one guy who had been there six months and I was scared of him. I don't know whether it's true or not, but the boys said that he had been in Indonesia for a long time and Immigration thought he was helping smugglers and that was why he had been in detention so long. And I was so scared, because I had also been in Indonesia for a long time, and I had told them I could speak Indonesian.

There was one guy who often tried to suicide. And there were always all these Serco officers with him after, whenever he tried to suicide. And there were also a couple of other people who had mental disorders. *No*, I thought, *no matter what happens I will not hurt myself*. I sometimes get depressed and stressed, but I never thought I would do those things.

Yeah, I also remember—I will never forget—that every Sunday at nine o'clock, the Indonesian lady who wanted to adopt me would call me, and I would always have a chat with her for an hour, which also reduced stress. She would always send me an email asking how I was, and what was going on, every day. And I still have them—my emails, most of them are from her, for three years, every day. Her emails made me feel like I should be someone.

## THEY CANNOT TAKE THE SKY

And after two months in Leonora, I got transferred to Dandenong. Melbourne was freezing at that time, it was September or something. It was 2012. Two immigration staff came and picked us up from the airport. In the car, radio FM was playing, and the announcer said ‘G’day mate,’ so I knew it must be Australia, and that made me so happy.

In December 2014, I went to Pakistan to visit my family, and even though I was with family, in the place where I grew up, I still missed bloody Dandenong. If I go for a couple of days out of Dandenong I miss Dandenong, I don’t know why.

### **I dream about him**

The most important thing I want is to have a successful life, bring my family here, do something for the community, and be useful for them. To have a good job, a happy life, a lot of money in the bank, a nice car, a nice house, a job that I will never lose, permanent forever.

I really care about my youngest brother, I love him the most. I want to bring him here. Because he is young he can be something if we can bring him here and teach him. Right now he is eight. The day he was born, one of my wishes was that I would take him to school—that on his first day of school I would drop him off and pick him up from school. My wish never happened, but I still have a wish to do it here—to take him to school, or uni, or take him to his first job. That is my wish.

My father tried to find a safe place where we could stay, but my father got tortured, and passed away because of that torture. Usually I dream about him. I think about the lost possibilities, I think about that. He is always on

*Taqi*

my mind. I always think that he's asking for help, always imagine him asking for help. I don't know what kind of help. Maybe it's help for my family, doing anything to get them out.