

THE SATURDAY PAPER

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When the author was offered settlement in the US, he felt as if he held the full moon in his hands. After more than four years on Manus Island, he is now living in Chicago, and feels he is home. By *Imran Mohammad*.

‘I am Imran’



Imran Mohammad in Chicago.

I never thought I would hold a piece of paper that said I was a recognised citizen of any country. But now, after seven years’ imprisonment in refugee detention, I am no longer known by my boat ID EMP-065. I am Imran.

I can't find the exact words to describe the feeling of being free. I live in Chicago now, in the most diverse neighbourhood, crowded with many people of different nationalities. My home is on the second floor of an apartment block. It has one bedroom, a kitchen, and a sitting and dining room, which I share with another Rohingya man who was also on Manus. There is a Burmese family living next door and we greet each other every morning, as they go off to work and I go for a run around Warren Park. Walking out of my building and down the street still warms my heart and gives me hope. There are restaurants operated by people from so many different backgrounds, including Chinese, Indian and Pakistani. It takes me a few minutes to walk to the local shopping centre where everything is available, including a laundromat. I like to take the subway to the Memorial Fountain and Promontory Point park, as they are my favourite places, where I can sit by the lake and cherish my liberty. My friends ask me, "Where are you?" and I tell them, "I am home." This is the kind of feeling that can never be bought with money.

I thought I'd lost all hope when the Australian government forcibly moved me to Manus Island on October 29, 2013. For so long, my life was controlled. It was not mine. I was not allowed to live the way I wanted. I saw what I didn't want to see, I ate what I didn't want to eat. I wore clothes that I didn't want to wear. I heard what I didn't want to hear. I slept when I didn't want to sleep. I was treated in a way I didn't want to be treated and I lived where I didn't want to live.

The pressure I was under was enormous – enough to break me into a thousand pieces and strip me of the things that helped me feel like a human being. There was not a single moment for me to feel what I wanted to feel. It was like I was living for the rest of the world, but not for myself.

From the beginning, Australia's policy on Manus was never clear. They didn't have a plan for us. There was no agreement in place for us to settle in Papua New Guinea. It was obvious PNG did not want us anyway and we wouldn't be safe there. Our loss of hope, and lack of clarity about our process and our future, deeply damaged our emotional health. The setting was so inhumane, it broke me. I emerged only through the beauty and gift of writing, which gave me motivation and a purpose to wake up every morning.

I was taken into a room by a US official who gave me my result – America had accepted me. Holding the piece of paper felt like I had the full moon in my hand.

I couldn't believe I would be offered my real freedom in the United States of America. Australia made a deal with the Obama administration in 2016 to send refugees from Manus and Nauru to America. At that time we were still imprisoned in Lombrum detention facility on Manus Island. We were told if we showed our interest we would be processed by the US. The slow, painful process began on March 3, 2017, with an interview at the Resettlement Support Centre East Asia. My biometric information was collected a month later. I was then scheduled for an interview with officers from the US Department of Homeland Security, which I was told wouldn't happen until August. Finally, on September 20, 2017, I was called for a mandatory medical examination and US health screening.

I thought everyone who'd completed the process with the US officials would be moved to America before the Australian government abandoned its Manus Island detention centre in October. But only 23 refugees were taken there. More than 600 of us were left behind, with no

food, water or electricity. After 23 days, the barricade finally ended: every refugee and asylum seeker remaining inside the Lombrum centre was removed by PNG armed police with brute force and the help of Australian Border Force officers.

I received word in early December that I would be going to Port Moresby to meet people from the Resettlement Support Centre. Five days later, I said goodbye to the hell of Manus forever. There were feelings of great happiness, sadness, confusion and guilt. I was so happy knowing that I could be a free man soon. Still, I was devastated to be leaving behind my brothers. We had lived together for years; we had become family. I felt guilty, as I was going to live in a safe place and they were not. There was a great deal of confusion, too, because I didn't know whether my asylum case would be accepted by the Americans.

I got on the bus, surrounded by guards. It was so hard to look back and wave to my friends. If only they had taken everyone at once. The process of seeking asylum splits good friends apart. We get separated from our loved ones over and over again. I can't describe how hard it is, the loneliness felt being sent to different places. Our already broken hearts are damaged again and again.

There were moments of joy, too. Everyone took photos as we waited for our plane at the Manus airport. The happiness that flashed over our faces would be seen once in a lifetime. I was still paranoid that something might go wrong, and we would be taken back to the centre. My anxiety was eating me from the inside.

Finally, I got on the plane and in time arrived in Port Moresby. We were escorted to Lodge 10 Hotel and I was scheduled to receive my outcome about resettlement in the US the next day at 1pm. I was taken to another hotel and called into a room by a US official who gave me my result – America had accepted me. Holding the piece of paper felt like I had the full moon in my hand. I was told I would be moved to the US within six weeks.

In the meantime, I had to complete a cultural orientation class. It was so pleasant to sit in those classes. The realness, the purpose of them, was pure and clear. Everyone was focused and interested.

Just a few days before, our lives had been full of boredom and depression. We had to worry about our survival, safety and our loved ones. We couldn't focus on learning English because there was no hope. Our brains wasted away because we couldn't see into our future. But in those final classes in Port Moresby, the promise of a future didn't feel like a lie. It made a huge difference.

We were scheduled to fly to the US on February 13, 2018, but some of the men were still not on the list, including me. I was devastated. For the first time in my life I wanted to end it: I felt there was no reason to go through with this agonising time. A quick death would be the best way to say goodbye to this unbearable life. I was one of the few men who was strong mentally, but still I had suicidal feelings. Only God knows how the other men felt. For the next five-and-a-half months, we were stuck in our hotel rooms.

As our hope started to fade, the negative thoughts came back. Then, by the grace of God, we received a departure date. At 7.30am on Tuesday, May 29, 2018, I said goodbye to Papua New Guinea. And so ended five years of torture.

The last words I heard from the customs officer in PNG as I was boarding were, “Don’t ever come back to my country.” If only he had known that I didn’t wish to come to his country. I was happy to be leaving. But I don’t have any animosity towards the Papua New Guineans, despite the fact my days there were filled with fear, horror and insufferable pain. Instead, I will be forever grateful to the land itself for allowing me to live for five whole years. I want to thank the local ladies who swept their motherly hands over my head whenever we met in Lorengau town. I promise if I ever have to come to your country again, I will do so with proper documentation.

Having a boarding pass in my hand for the first time in my life was so marvellous, in a way that cannot be imagined. From Port Moresby I flew to Manila, and from Manila on to Los Angeles. The first words I heard after stepping onto US soil were, “Welcome to America.” I cried when the immigration officer said that to me. It was all I ever wanted to hear.

I had two nights in Los Angeles before travelling to my new home, Chicago, where I was welcomed with love and respect. I feel as if I was reborn on Friday, June 1 – the day I entered my new home.

I am bound to Australia by suffering. Australia, a country that had every resource to save me but, sadly, didn’t even let me step onto its soil. It doesn’t matter how hard I try to escape from those terrible days and nights on Manus, I relive the horrors of five years every night in my dreams. Sometimes I feel like I am not free, that this is all in my imagination. I don’t know how long it will take me to get over those nightmares. But I am thankful I now have control over my life. I can go to a park to breathe fresh air. I can lie down in the grass and hide myself from this chaotic world.

In my quest for freedom, I lost so many of my growing years. I spent them in jail for a crime that does not exist. I have no remorse for this. I have become a person who can see pain, love and beauty, in life and the environment.

I can contribute to this beautiful world and help others ease their pain now. I wouldn’t have this opportunity without the love and unwavering support from the kind caseworkers who came to Manus. I wouldn’t have learnt English without the teachers who solved the language’s grammatical mysteries for me and checked my writing during their lunch and dinner breaks. Their willingness, dedication and my motivation formed me as a writer.

The world would have known nothing of us without the tireless work of lawyers, journalists and advocates in Australia. I would have been lost in a sea of evil without the generosity, kindness, pure love and care we received from our Australian supporters.

In America, everything is so different and new. It is shocking, pleasant and convenient at times. It is really overwhelming to absorb a lot of information: I had nothing and suddenly I am getting everything in life.

I am stunned to be exposed to the American system in which people work hard and often struggle on the minimum wage. The cost of living seems disproportionate to people's ability to earn money. There seems to be a high risk of failure and limited support if you become fragile, sick or injured. I am fascinated by the number of people who use the internet or phone apps for their shopping instead of going out.

It is going to be extremely difficult to build a life from scratch in this country, but no one can take away from me the feeling of being free. I am hopeful about the opportunities that freedom in a place such as America gives me and will work hard to reach my goals. Shortly after I arrived, I was fortunate to make contact with a freelance journalist from New York who has travelled to meet me to continue an audio diary that I began on Manus and now have been recording for several months.

I am seeking help for my education and applying for IDs to start working. I am just living in the moment. I feel like a bird – free and able to fly away into a mysterious blue sky. I believe in myself. I am more hopeful and motivated than ever. With help from all the generous, blessed hands that have reached out to me, I will achieve my full potential in life.

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