

A Daughter's Story

Fatima Moradi

I was born twice.

The first time was as a baby girl in Afghanistan in 1994. The second time was as a teenager when I landed at Sydney airport in 2005.

Seeing my father after almost six years was the most unforgettable memory of my life. When he left Afghanistan sometime in 1999, my mother and I had to go and live with my uncle's family. Even though we had my uncle's support, Mum had to provide for her children. When I think of those times, I see her sitting behind the sewing machine, making dresses so that she could support her seven children. At night she worked by candlelight.

Looking after seven children without a man's help may seem like an easy thing to do in a Western country, but it is not easy in a country that is governed by the Taliban. Women had no rights. They were not allowed to work or have control of their lives. They could not leave the house without a man. If they did, they would be punished severely or even shot.

Like most Afghanis, my mother dreamed of having a baby boy. She gave birth to five girls before her dream came true. My dad, on the other hand, didn't care so long as the children were healthy. Every time Mum gave birth to a girl she got upset. Dad just asked if the baby had both legs, both arms, and looked like any other child. He was grateful for that.

I was Dad's favourite. Before my brother came along, Dad used to say, 'If I don't have a son I have my daughter Fatima. I wouldn't replace her for 10 boys'.

I will remember that sentence until I die.

My sister was born in 1995. A rocket hit our house when she was two or three months old. That's when my parents realised that life in Kabul was impossible.

We decided to move to a place called Jaghori, which is in Ghazni province. Even though it is only seven or eight hours drive, it took us almost a year to get to the village. That's how hard it is to travel in a war zone. It just isn't safe. We stayed at family or friends' houses for

some weeks or even months until it was a bit safer to travel. Then we'd move on and stay with someone else for a while. Finally, we arrived in Jaghori.

It wasn't easy for Mum and Dad to forget the happy life they had in Kabul. But they had to move on and accept the fact that life has its ups and downs and the world doesn't always remain the same. My dad was the manager of a hotel in Kabul, and we had the best and most comfortable life that anyone can imagine. It was a different story in Jaghori. In the country, people had to work for their own food, and almost everything else they needed. The women looked after the house and cared for the sheep, cows and goats. The men farmed and some of them travelled abroad to countries like Iran or Pakistan to make extra money. We lived with my uncle for some years, until Dad decided it was time to make a better life for his family.

Dad left for Pakistan sometime in 1999. My younger sister was one or two months old when he went away. Living away from Dad was hard. I missed him a great deal. But having a woman as strong and amazing as my mother around the house meant we had nothing to worry about.

Mum is a fighter. You have to be when you move from one place to another and have to take care of seven children almost on your own. The good thing was that she had the support of her brothers. They were very generous, allowing us to live with them and their extended families. After all we've been through, I love them like my own family.

My father came to Australia in 2000. I wonder if he would have done it if he knew that getting the Australian government to accept his refugee status was harder than the dangerous journey in a rickety old boat. To make things harder, Osama bin Laden attacked America in 2001. This made things doubly difficult for refugees from Muslim countries. The crazy thing was that while many Afghans feared the Taliban and were terrified of being killed in the war, the world was suddenly scared of Islam and Muslims. But the thing is, we had no choice. We either stayed at home and got killed or risked a dangerous journey in search of a better life. It took almost two years for my father to get settled in Australia, and it took

us about three years to get the news from him. By that stage, we didn't even know if he was alive or dead. Can you imagine what that is like?

My mother decided to move back to Kabul when Hamid Karzai became president of Afghanistan in 2001. By that stage, our house was nothing like we remembered. Everything was stolen: the carpets, the curtains, desks, tables and cupboards. Even some of the doors were missing. Kabul had become a very ugly place. There were hardly any houses left standing. And you couldn't possibly live in the ones that were still upright. Walls were peppered with bullet holes. Every family had lost a loved one. For my family it was my 25-year-old cousin, Ahmad, and my aunt's husband.

Mum still talks about Ahmad and how he was shot dead on the way home from the tailor, where he went to get his wedding suit. Everything was ready, Mum says. Ahmad was getting married, everyone was happy, and then they heard the Taliban had shot him. At least we know what happened to him. My aunt's husband went missing, and we never heard from him again.

Everyone had a story to tell about how loved ones were killed or missing. Some had seen their loved ones get shot or blown up by bombs. The streets were packed with children and adults without limbs, begging. Yet, in the middle of all this, we were happy to be back in our country. The hope was that our beautiful Afghanistan would become the heavenly country it was before the war, a place where people lived in peace and harmony.

Dad finally decided to bring us to Australia in 2004. I'm not sure why he waited that long to bring us here. But since he is religious, I thought part of the reason was that he didn't want us to grow up away from our own culture, religion and people.

I was on top of the world when I heard that we were going to Australia. I made a big list of things I would do: get educated and find a good job were high on that list. I also thought I would always wear my Afghan clothes and stick to my own culture. I planned to always listen to my parents and do as they wish, and to always do my prayers. There was

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-60888-7 - Paper Boats: An Anthology of Short Stories about Journeys to Australia

Yaşar Duyal

Excerpt

[More information](#)

a lot of other stuff. But things changed when I came here. I realised that things never go the way you want them to. You have to make sacrifices in order to fit in.

We left Kabul in 2004 and went to Pakistan. Was I sad? The answer is no. Maybe it's because I was too young to understand the cost and sacrifices I would have to make in order to live in a country that is totally different to my own. All I wanted was to get to Australia and see my dad. We stayed in Pakistan for almost a year before the Australian embassy in Pakistan interviewed us.

That was the most amazing year of my life. I got to know my dad's side of the family for the first time. I had lots of cousins, uncles and aunties I had never met. We were total strangers to them and they were total strangers to us. Even my mother didn't know most of them. One year is not long enough to get to know your relatives, but I was glad we got to know them a little. That's the story for a lot of Afghani. You have cousins that you never knew existed. Three decades of war separated every Afghani family from their relatives and friends. The war left millions of us homeless, and forced us to spread all over the world like stars.

Our visas came through in December 2005. We came to Australia and settled in a town called Griffith. For the first few weeks we just relaxed and got to know our father again. It wasn't until school started that I realised life here wasn't going to be easy.

My first day in Year 7 had to be the worst day of my life. I didn't know the language, and the students made fun of me. In one of the classes the teacher told one of the students to take off his hat. He said he wouldn't do it until my sister took off her headscarf. I wasn't wearing a scarf, but when we were walking home some of the students ran after us and pulled my sister's scarf off.

The scarf wasn't the only problem. We wore different clothes; we ate different food; we had a different lifestyle ... Everything was different about us. To make things easier, I mixed a little bit of Afghani with Aussie culture. That made both parties happier, but we were still living between two worlds. As time passed, life got easier. I made friends at school. Just as

I settled in, my sister finished Year 12, and we had to move to Melbourne so she could go to university.

Life is easier in Melbourne. It is a very multicultural city compared to Griffith. I made friends here quickly, but I still miss the friends I made in Griffith and I'm glad we keep in touch. We have lived here for almost two years, but I'm still not used to the weather. Whenever I go out I don't know what to wear because the seasons change so much in one day. I live my life a little differently to the way some other Afghanis live. For instance, I don't wear a headscarf; I don't hang out with Afghanis at school; I go to parties; I go shopping. But I do have my amazing Afghani friends outside school. All of these girls mean the world to me, and I will never forget the happy times we've had together, no matter where life takes us.

Some people judge a book by its cover. They think I am a bad girl because I don't wear a headscarf. But that doesn't matter to me. All that matters is my family's opinion. So long as I have their love and trust nothing matters. They know I won't do anything against their will. That gives me energy and makes my life happy. I couldn't ask for anything more.

The Space In Between

Kpana Bolay

My name is Nowa and I have a story to tell.

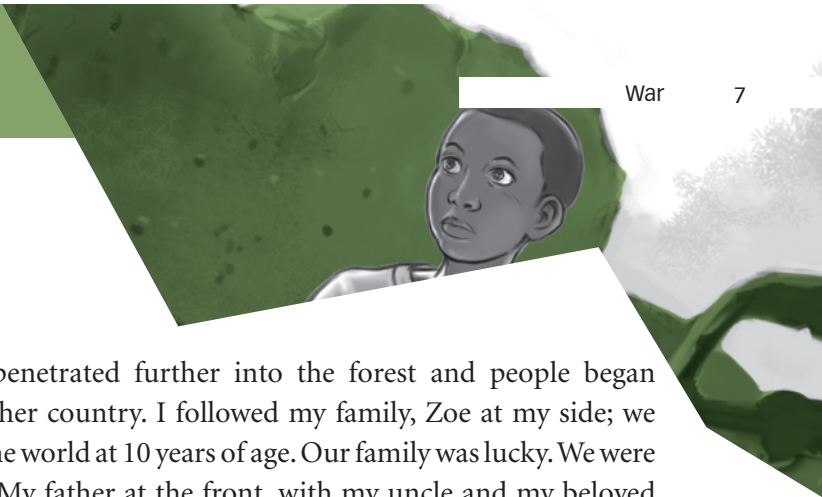
I was born in Liberia, the youngest daughter of an influential family. My father's name is Toimu and my mother's name is Korlu. I had seven sisters and three brothers. This made for a very busy home. My oldest sister Miata has a daughter who is the same age as me. Zoe is my niece, but she is also my best friend. Life was always happy until the war came. Now my family is broken. Some are dead for sure and some I am uncertain about. My name is Nowa – it means 'the space in between' in Kpelle, like a space one would seek to hide.

Liberia was a wonderful place until the war began. My home country was a caring environment but, when the war broke out in Monrovia, it became a harmful place – a place to fear. Terrorists and rebels rule with cruelty and violence. Children are forced into killing and working for the political cause that is financed by blood diamonds. People had to leave their homes and shelter in the forest, under bridges or anywhere that was away from the fighting.

I have lived like this, clutching at my nanna's skirts for security; there was never a safe place. When the war started, I, along with my parents, my nanna, my uncle, my brothers and sisters and, of course, my best friend Zoe escaped into the forest. We were there for a long time. I slept on the ground and lived on fruits from the trees. Zoe and I clung to each other many times, wondering if we would live to see another day. We managed for about three years while the rebels were overthrowing our town.

Hiding from the rebels was hard. Many men dressed as women and lived in silence. It was important to survive. Rebels raided when they learned that there were people living in the forest, and the people moved on if they wanted to survive.

One time, Zoe and I became separated from our family. We cowered, shaking, praying for our lives, and by the grace of God the hilarious face of my father dressed as a woman peered at me through the dense undergrowth. Silently, he clasped my hand and Zoe's and we were reunited. If it hadn't been such a serious a situation, it would have been the funniest thing to see.



The rebels penetrated further into the forest and people began heading for another country. I followed my family, Zoe at my side; we were women of the world at 10 years of age. Our family was lucky. We were still all together. My father at the front, with my uncle and my beloved nanna: my mother, my sisters and brothers, Zoe and me following.

A journey to where? Zoe and I discussed this at length. All we knew was that we must stay alert and follow instructions. Many, many kilometres of walking and while walking you had to listen to the sounds of guns, carefully trying to work out where the sound was coming from, how far away it was.

There was fear everywhere, on everyone's face. For me and Zoe, confusion and pain were constant companions. The jungle insects preyed on our soft skin. Sores developed where we scratched, blisters and splinters filled our feet. My nanna soothed me with her voice; even though she was tired, she rocked me in her arms.

Without warning, gunfire exploded around my head. I looked for my father and uncle. The ear-splitting screams of my sister, Zoe's mother, pierced the thick jungle air. A bullet had penetrated her leg, leaving her shinbone smashed and splintered. It bled heavily. I sat frozen, watching my mother hurriedly drag her into the cover of the foliage. She wrapped a frayed cloth over the pulsing wound and begged her to be silent.

From our hiding place we watched the rebels kick the lifeless body of someone from our group. We hadn't even noticed that she had paid the ultimate price for freedom.

Soon I realised that it was my beloved nanna, lying not far from us, being abused by the rebels. Rage welled in my 10-year-old body. My mother covered my mouth with her free hand to stop me from crying out. My shoulders heaved with great sobs. We stayed there for hours, waiting for safety.

My father, my uncle, my brothers and sisters were nowhere to be seen. From our hiding place, we watched as the rebels committed acts of complete horror. They tortured men. They killed them in front of their loved ones for fun.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-60888-7 - Paper Boats: An Anthology of Short Stories about Journeys to Australia

Yaşar Duyal

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I felt vomit gushing to my mouth, but I was unable to spit it out for fear of making a sound.

I feared sound as it meant certain death. We would certainly be killed and I believe that the Lord Almighty saved us by giving us the strength to be silent. As quickly as they had arrived, the rebels left.

I was as stunned as my mother, sister and Zoe.

We were separated from the rest of the family. We prayed that they had survived.

Had my father and the others been shot too? 'Please Lord, spare them', I prayed.

My mother insisted that we keep moving. I was brave and ventured to find something that could be used as a walking aid for my sister. I did not cry because I knew that if I cried I might be heard.

I was creeping through the jungle in search of a suitable branch when someone grabbed me from behind. My heart stopped and in that moment I believed that I was to be attacked and have unspeakable injustices committed against me. I had seen the rebels do it to other young girls. Then I realised it was my uncle. His harsh grip loosened into a warm hug as he lifted me up. He kissed me gently on the cheek and I knew that we were going to be safe.

I followed my uncle to a small, roughly constructed hut, deeper in the jungle, while my father fetched my sister, Zoe and my mother. Only one of my sisters and one of my brothers squatted out the front of the hut, kicking at the jungle floor. Once we were together again the horror of what had happened became apparent.

One of my brothers was dead. Another could not be found. We prayed. Two of my sisters were dead, three could not be found. Again we prayed.

We ate our food raw that night, as we had on many nights, so that the smoke from the fire could not be seen. During the night my father and mother planned what to do next. It was decided that we would travel to Sierra Leone and seek help. How that help would come I didn't understand.

My father explained that we could be refugees and seek asylum in a country far far away.

‘Astrilia?’ I could hardly say it.

Many others in our group had talked about this place, but I never imagined that I would live anywhere else but my beloved Liberia.

I spent five years in a Sierra Leone refugee camp and all the while I prayed for my brothers and sisters lost to the civil war. I prayed to be reunited with them.

My family and I were subjected to interviews and health checks. Many questions were hard and I didn’t know the answer. I worried that I had been a bad daughter and shamed my family.

We changed our names to Western ones so that we would be accepted in this new country. My father chose the name James, but the authorities didn’t believe my father was who he said he was. We had no official papers to prove our identities. He went back to his real name, Toimu. They still didn’t believe that he was our real father.

Just when it seemed that we would never leave, my father received a letter of acceptance to immigrate to Australia.

‘What about my brothers and sisters?’ I cried.

My mother wept and my father was broken. Confusion and conflict surrounded us again.

Our country had been ravaged by war; whole villages had been wiped out. Unspeakable crimes had been committed and it was still not safe to return to Liberia. We couldn’t live in this refugee camp forever. Our family was fractured. Hope is all we had.

We were no longer the lucky family.

My name is Nowa and I have a story to tell.

I arrived in Australia early one Thursday morning in 2007. I was 15 years old. When I arrived I knew nothing about my new country, nor did I know anyone who lived here.

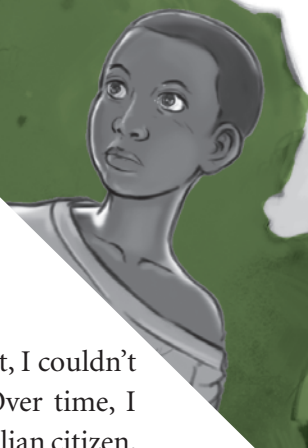
It was winter. It was really cold and I wished I hadn’t come. As time has passed, though, I have become used to it. I am slowly making

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-60888-7 - Paper Boats: An Anthology of Short Stories about Journeys to Australia

Yaşar Duyal

Excerpt

[More information](#)

connections and figuring out the way things are done. At first, I couldn't even work out where to buy food or where a store was. Over time, I learned to read and even write, and I feel lucky to be an Australian citizen.

I am faced with the challenge of figuring out what the future holds for me. It is my dream to become somebody and make a change in the world. I believe that as long as I have a vision I will be able to fulfil my dreams.

I want to find my brothers and sisters. I want everyone to practise tolerance, to respect each other's religion and culture, and I want to be truthful but not hurtful.

Life is always changing and I want to always look forward.

My name is Nowa. It means 'the space in between' in Kpelle. It is like an emotional bridge between Liberia and Australia, just like the heart between the two lungs or a child in between a parent's arms.

My name is Nowa, and I have a message. My message is one of peace.

