

From Afghanistan to Aotearoa

by Abbas Nazari
illustrations by Laya Mutton-Rogers

Imagine having to make an impossible choice: stay with the life you know in the country of your birth but face misery after misery – or risk everything. Flee your homeland, where your family has lived for generations, for the chance of a new beginning.

The following is a true story. It begins when I was seven. Although these things happened to my family, the story is not only ours. It belongs to Afghan refugees everywhere, but especially to the people rescued by the Tampa.

Jakarta, Indonesia, August 2001



Sungjoy, Afghanistan, March 2001
(five months earlier)



By the spring of 2001, the Taliban controlled almost all of Afghanistan. People were frightened. Many of the houses in our village had been abandoned.



We're leaving, too. We can't stay here.

But Mojtaba can't even walk.

Well if we stay, he won't be safe.

But our friends, your brother and sister!



My father had got us all passports. We were leaving for Pakistan the next day.



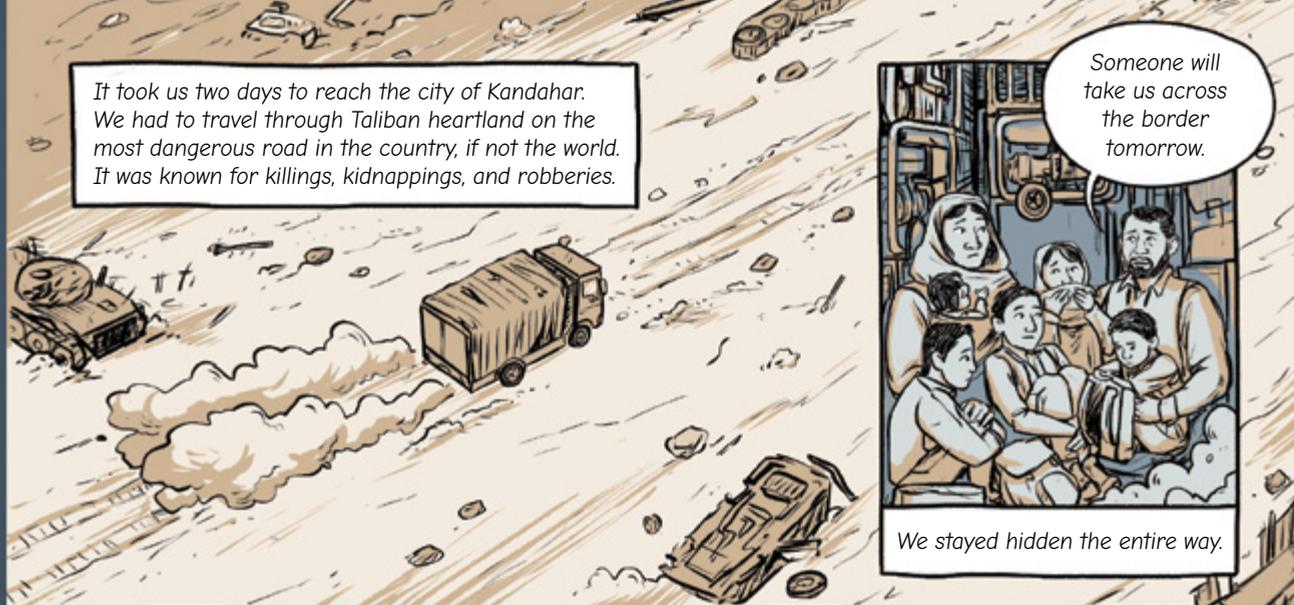
My father's friend picked us up.

My last view of our village was of the silver creek shining amid a cloud of dust.



Our family had lived in Sungjoy for almost a century. My great-grandparents had settled there. They connected the past to the present, and now that link was being broken. Would we ever return to climb these hills, swim in the water, or breathe the fresh air?

It took us two days to reach the city of Kandahar. We had to travel through Taliban heartland on the most dangerous road in the country, if not the world. It was known for killings, kidnappings, and robberies.



Someone will take us across the border tomorrow.

We stayed hidden the entire way.

Our last night in Afghanistan was spent in Kandahar. We drove to the border early the next day. Dad said the guards became grumpy as the day grew hotter.



Let's keep faith.

Inshallah.



We stayed in Quetta, in Pakistan, for many weeks while Dad planned our next move. He'd heard stories about refugees making it to Australia by boat. But first, we'd have to fly to Indonesia. Dad had to find the right people to bribe.



Indian Ocean, August 2001

The moment our boat left the shore, people became seasick. The women and children suffered the most.



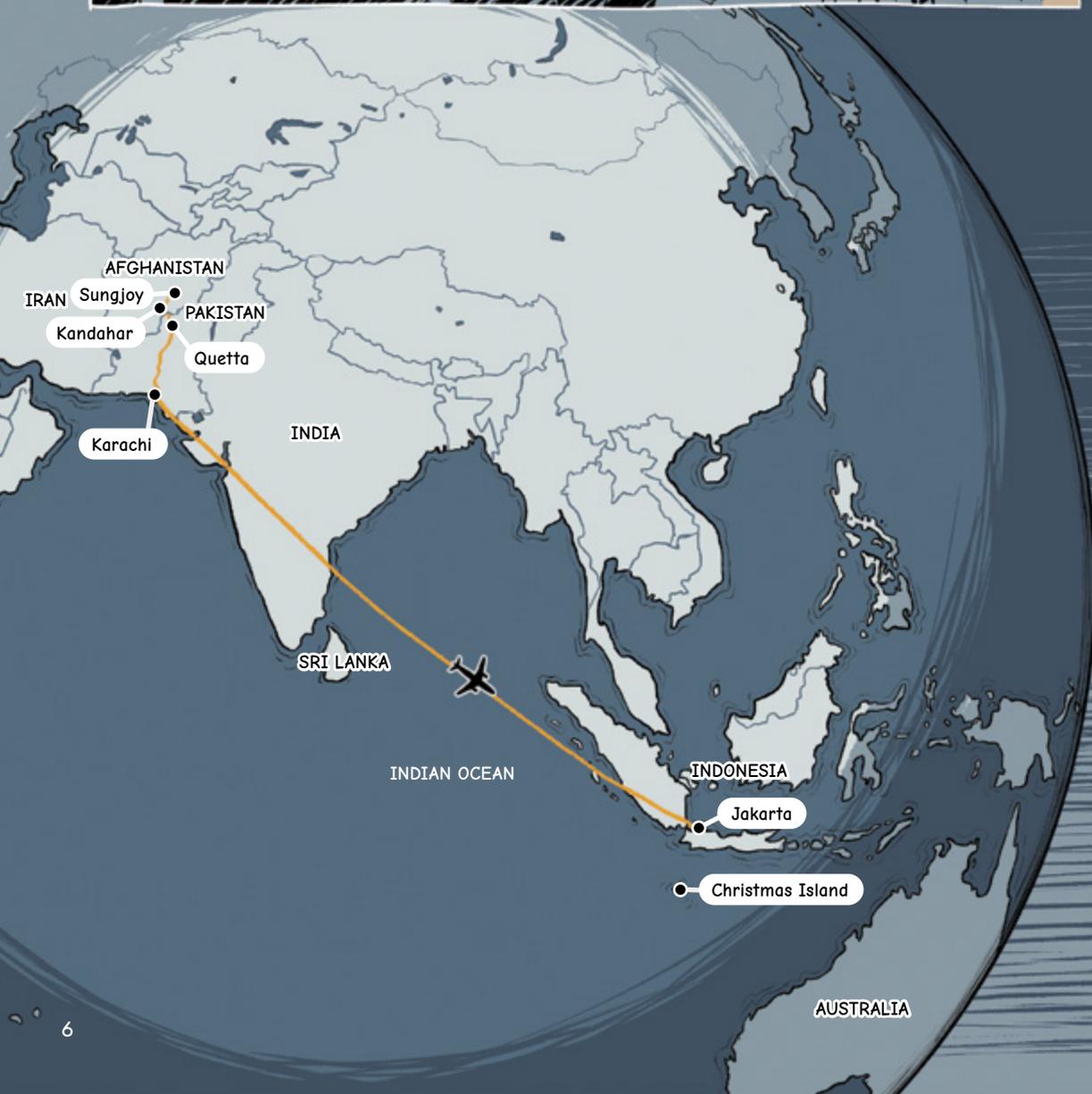
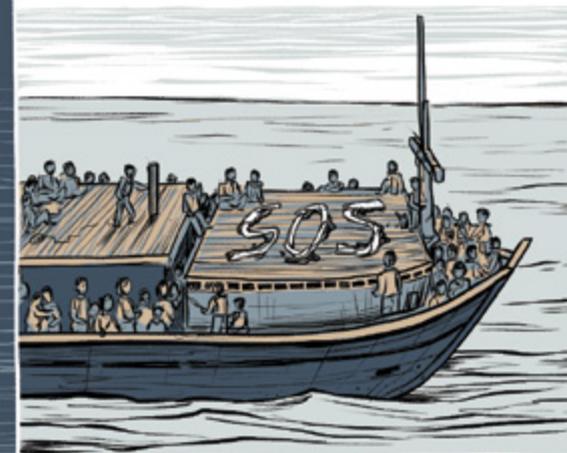
The real trouble started when the engine broke down. We were drifting in the ocean, at the mercy of the waves, with a storm brewing.



The storm was relentless. The boat began to fall to pieces before our eyes. We entered a trance-like state, our prayers drowning the crash of the waves ...



Morning came. By some miracle, we were alive.



Eventually, we were rescued by the Tampa. We took nothing but the clothes on our backs.



We spent ten days on the Tampa – waiting. Australia didn't want us. No one did. We weren't seen as people fleeing the Taliban and death and torture. Then some of us got lucky. New Zealand would take 150 refugees ...

We found ourselves on another bus. This one took us to the refugee resettlement centre in Māngere.



Our days there were busy. After weeks stuck in limbo, we enjoyed the routine.



We were sent to Christchurch. Our house had a white picket fence and a green front lawn. I stared in wonder at the hallway, the windows, the wallpaper. There was so much furniture! And there was a shed in the backyard with boxes and boxes of books.



Our neighbourhood, Ballantyne Avenue, was home to Pākehā, Pacific, Māori, and Asian families. I'd always been with people who were like me. What would we have in common?



My name is Abbas, and I am from Afghanistan, and I like football, and Ali is my brother, and I like food ...

It was a special time for my parents. Neither of them had ever really been to school. My mum had never written her own name ...



But it was all fine. The kids on my street became my friends. With each passing month, my sense of belonging grew stronger.



My family was soon busy with work and school.



All of us kids soaked up everything. We had been carried into our future. We were unstoppable.



In the weekends, we explored Christchurch ...



My mum wants to know if this is local honey.

and spent time with other Afghan families.



In the months and years that followed, I thrived.



It was much harder for my parents. They marvelled at our progress ...



but my mother, especially, got badly homesick. She missed her watan, her homeland.



Come outside. You'll feel better.

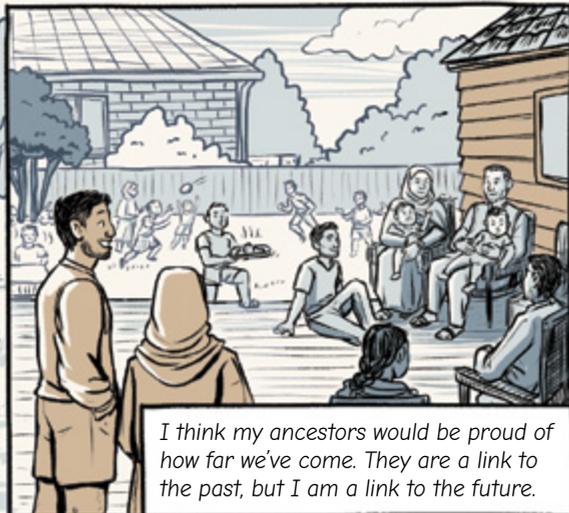
My father struggled, too. He missed Afghanistan – and the land his family had farmed for generations.



Looking back, I see that my parents were floating between two worlds: the old and the new.



I came to understand something. My parents had built the foundations for our new lives, and it was up to me – and my brothers and sister – to build the house.



I think my ancestors would be proud of how far we've come. They are a link to the past, but I am a link to the future.

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