

# Auckland

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a text for theatre

by

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## Auckland

SHAHWALI: My name is Shahwali Basiri but you can call me Shah. For short. You can also call me Wally but I would prefer Shah. I am thirty two years old. I have a wife Akimeh, and three children - two strong boys, Mahdi and Hadi, and a beautiful little girl, Lila. I come from Vardak.

I am Hazari. I am also a Muslim. When they took our country in 1996 Hazaris were denounced as Heretics. They are fundamentalists and although we are also Muslims we were seen as too liberal. In 1998 thousands of Hazaris were killed. Thousands more were beaten and tortured. They say you could hear the screams a hundred miles away. In Vardak we knew we were next. They gave us a contract which every adult male had to sign. It said we were safe for now but if anything did happen all the young men would be taken. In March that year something did happen. Fighting broke out and my brother Fahir was killed. We knew we were next so myself and my two remaining brothers went into hiding. They came to our house and beat my father but he did not tell them where we were. For three months we hid, my wife and children left at home. Alone. But for us to be killed, slowly, stage by stage. To leave my family without anybody to look after them. I decided to get out but finding a new life is expensive. To get money my father sold his house and one of his shops. It was just enough to buy five hiding places on a lorry. Enough for me and my family and one of my brothers but my youngest brother was forced to stay behind. On the first night we hid in the back of the truck as we drove slowly along the bumpy road. It was a warm, still night and we were very scared as we could see trucks passing by us full of fighters. If they stopped us it would mean instant death. We stayed in a house in the city the next night and then we were put into a minibus. This part was safer and with better roads but we were still in great danger. We were given false passports and the next day we walked across the border into Pakistan and away from our home. When we realised we were in Pakistan we cried for joy. I had no idea then how awful our journey would be and that we would face even more danger, greater even than those we had left behind. The sea is a formidable foe. From Peshawar we travelled in an old bus right across Pakistan to Karachi, a trip that took many days. The children were tired and hungry. Then we were put on a plane to Kuala Lumpur and finally Jakarta. The agents had cleared our path very well. At no time were our travel documents ever questioned. In Jakarta we were taken to the countryside where we stayed for over three weeks.

It seemed to be a popular holiday destination and it felt strange to walk along the beach - we escaped Hazaris - amongst the tourists and holiday makers - enjoying their summer break. There were a lot of people there from many different countries so they were not

SHAHWALI: (CONT) suspicious of my little family. Then, one Tuesday, we were suddenly dragged from our house around midnight. No warning was given. We climbed into eight buses and we and over four hundred others made the six hour journey to a beach on the western side of the main island. Then we walked for a mile or so down a jungle track and there before us stood a little fishing boat - the KM Palapa. It sat quietly in the water, swaying gently from side to side, waiting to take us to the edge of death.

The first day wasn't too bad. There was a bit of water coming into the boat but the sea was calm. The agent had told me it would take only thirty hours to reach Christmas Island. There was no food on the boat, and only a little water, so each family was told to bring enough food. Enough at least for such a short journey. But soon the food had run out and I began to realise the agent had lied. Then the engine stopped.

We drifted for another day and another night. No food, no water. There was nothing left for us except waiting to die. Then the next day a plane passed overhead. We were hopeful. It went around two, then three times. Someone signalled with a red jacket. Someone else poured fuel on a white cloth and soon - a flame. But the plane did not return or any other planes. A day passed and the sun disappeared behind clouds. At first we were grateful to be spared the burning heat but now a storm was coming. The wind was wild and more and more water started to come in. We were praying but we thought we had no hope. We were sure the boat would sink and we would just go down. At the front of the boat some men tied their children to the mast to stop them being washed overboard. We huddled together in the rear of the boat with the captain and crew. They were now as helpless as us. Then someone shouted for us all to go down to the bottom of the boat and sit together on one side to stop the boat from tipping over. Everyone was now very scared. We were all praying, asking god to help us.

"Allah akhbar Allah Akhbar". "God is good God is wise".

There was no time to look after others. Everybody was just looking after their own family. Then some men broke up some pieces of wood to try to row the boat. I knew it would not help but I rowed to. It was just to give the other people some hope. The Captain kept saying: "Keep on going. We are getting closer. Closer." He was not too blame. He told me he had just got married and he too had been deceived. We were angry with the agents. They are cruel and don't care if you die. That boat had four hundred and fifty people on it. If there were less than three hundred - as they promised - we would not have got into trouble in the first place.

On the fourth day, in the morning, we saw another plane. Quickly we made the word SOS on the deck with a large piece of cloth. The plane circled and every time it came back I took Lila up to the top and held her above my head so they could see that this was a boat

SHAHWALI: (CONT) with woman and children and they must help us. Then the plane disappeared. Again we were alone, waiting to die. But about an hour later we saw something in the distance. It was just a small thing on the horizon but it kept coming closer, growing bigger and bigger. Then it was along side us and we could read the name - Tampa. Everybody was congratulating everybody else for their new life. That little boat, at any time it could have sunk. There was no hope without the Tampa. A few hours later once everyone was safe another storm came and we stood on the side looking down, watching our little boat disappear into the waves. The Captain said he was going to Singapore. But if we wanted to go to Christmas Island then he would take us there. No one ever threatened him. He did it because he was a good man and he saw we needed help.

So he changed course and we sailed towards our new home. I thought we would be there in a few hours and I was happy and relieved. There was talk of showers and hot food waiting for us. My family was safe.

But we never made it to that Island. The Tampa was to become our new home. We stayed on that boat for ten days. Didn't they understand that for almost a week no one had anything to eat. Everyone was sick and tired. Some people were unconscious. This boat in the middle of the sea was not the place for them. I didn't believe that when they accept refugees for the humanitarian side they didn't accept us. We didn't believe that any human being wouldn't do something for the children. That they would reject them. From the beginning of our journey we knew we were going to Australia. We knew of Australia, that they believed in the humanitarian side. That they looked after people. We know people in Sydney. We have a letter. They say we can stay with them. Why won't they let us go there ? My daughter was sick. She could not eat or drink. She may die if we are not saved soon. She survived that journey but she could not last much longer. Please help me ! Will you let her die ? You have taken refugees from Afghanistan before. Why not us ?

Then I remember when the soldiers came. They had camouflage paint and these huge rifles. Did they think we were going to attack them ? We all just lay there and watched as they walked among us. Everybody was too exhausted to even speak. Then at last - I saw the doctors. I picked up Lila in my arms and called: "Please ! My daughter ! She is very sick ! Please. " One of the soldiers turned towards me gun raised.

He looked at me for a moment. Was he going to shoot me for asking for help for my child ? But then one of the doctors saw Lila. She walked straight passed the soldier, pushing his gun away. She took Lila from my arms. At last - my child would be safe. Then the exhaustion hit me like a wave and I passed out. (BEAT)

SHAHWALI: (CONT) We live in West Auckland now. Before I left Vardak I had only heard of New Zealand in school. All I knew was there was a country off the side of Australia and that the Queen of England was also their queen. The people here has been very kind to us - they gave us this house and some money to "get started." They made us official refugees. Now we must try to help New Zealand. My wife and I take English classes and the children go to school. I am a shoemaker. Soon I hope to find work. I know our new life will not be easy but if any opportunity comes along, we will grab it. People ask me if I will ever go back. I tell them we have lost everything. There is nothing left there for us. They killed a lot of people. My brother was one of them. They have no respect for any human being. Then people say "But haven't you heard ? They are defeated. Your country is free." I smile and nod. I know they will never be defeated. They are just hiding, waiting for their chance to come out again. I have heard nothing about my brother and father. I pray everyday that they are still alive.

I have still never been to Australia. We hear a lot about it and we saw the fireworks on our TV that Ian gave us. The lights were so bright that the TV almost exploded.

It's like a lot of things you hear about Australia. It sounds like the greatest thing on earth - but deep down you don't know because you never saw it for yourself. Perhaps, one day we will go there on holiday.

Thank you for listening to my story. If you hear anything about my brother and father please write to me. I will give you my address.

FADE.