

**The Dream Boat**  
*By Luke Mogelson*  
November 2013

It's about a two-and-a-half-hour drive, normally, from Indonesia's capital city, Jakarta, to the southern coast of Java. In one of the many trucks that make the trip each month, loaded with asylum seekers from the Middle East and Central Asia, it takes a little longer. From the bed of the truck, the view is limited to a night sky punctuated by fleeting glimpses of high-rise buildings, overpasses, traffic signs and tollbooths. It is difficult to make out, among the human cargo, much more than the vague shapes of bodies, the floating tips of cigarettes. When you pass beneath a street lamp, though, or an illuminated billboard, the faces thrown into relief are all alive with expectation. Eventually, the urban pulse subsides; the commotion of the freeway fades. The drooping wires give way to darkly looming palms. You begin to notice birds, and you can smell the sea.

In September, in one of these trucks, I sat across from a recently married couple in their 20s, from Tehran. The wife, who was seven months pregnant, wore a red blouse stretched over her stomach; the husband a tank top, thick-rimmed glasses and a faux hawk that revealed a jagged scar (courtesy, he said, of the Iranian police). Two months had passed since they flew to Jakarta; this was their fourth attempt to leave. Twice, en route to the boat that would bring them to Australia, they were intercepted, detained and paid bribes for their release. Another time, the boat foundered shortly after starting out. All the same, they were confident this trip would be different. Like everyone else's in the truck, theirs was a desperate kind of faith. "Tonight we will succeed," the husband assured me. They were determined that the child be born "there."

Our drive coincided with a violent tropical downpour that seemed to surge, under pressure, more than fall. Each asylum seeker had brought a small bag with spare clothes and provisions. Those who packed slickers dug them out. The storm was amusing at first, then just cold and miserable. The children, who earlier delighted in our clandestine exit from the city, now clung to their parents. An old man, sitting cross-legged beside me with a plastic garbage bag on his head, shivered uncontrollably, muttering prayers.

Around 3 in the morning, the truck braked and reversed down a rutted dirt road. The rain had stopped as abruptly as it started. No one spoke. We knew we had arrived. The rear hatch swung open, and we piled out. A second truck was parked behind us; people were emerging from it as well. We were in a dense jungle whose tangled canopy obstructed the moon. Several Indonesians corralled the crowd and whispered fiercely to keep moving. "Go! Go!" they urged in English. The road led down a steep hill and ended at a narrow footpath. As people stumbled in the dark, the Indonesians prodded them along. At the bottom of the footpath was a beach. It appeared as a pale hue through the trees, its white sand giving off a glow. The asylum seekers, 57 of them, huddled at the jungle's edge.

We were in the shelter of a wide bay, its arcing headlands, dotted with lights, repulsing the windward waves. Two open-hull skiffs with outboard motors idled offshore, bobbing

gently in the swells. Behind us, the clamor of the truck grew distant and was gone. Suddenly, the Indonesians began pushing people toward the sea.

“You, you. Go!”

Two at a time, the asylum seekers raised their bags above their heads and waded out. The cool water rose to waists and armpits. It was a struggle to climb aboard. Whenever someone had to be hauled up, the skiff pitched steeply, threatening to tip.

We were ferried to a wooden fishing boat: a more substantial vessel than the skiffs, though not much. About 30 feet long, with open decks, a covered bow, a one-man cockpit and a bamboo tiller, it was clearly not designed for passengers. Noting the absence of cabin, bridge, bulkheads and benches, I wondered whether anyone else shared my deluded hope: that there was another, larger ship anchored somewhere farther out, and that this sad boat was merely to convey us there.

With frantic miming, the two-man Indonesian crew directed us to crowd together on the deck and crouch beneath the bulwarks. They stretched a tarp above our heads and nailed its edges to the gunwales. Packed close in the ripe air beneath the tarp, hugging knees to chests, we heard the engine start and felt the boat begin to dip and rise.

Our destination was an Australian territory, more than 200 miles across the Indian Ocean, called Christmas Island. If the weather is amenable, if the boat holds up, the trip typically lasts three days. Often, however, the weather is tempestuous, and the boat sinks. Over the past decade, it is believed that more than a thousand asylum seekers have drowned. The unseaworthy vessels are swamped through leaky hulls, capsize in heavy swells, splinter on the rocks. Survivors sometimes drift for days. Children have watched their parents drown, and parents their children. Entire families have been lost. Since June, several boats went down, claiming the lives of more than a hundred people.

I first heard about the passage from Indonesia to Australia in Afghanistan, where I live and where one litmus test for the success of the U.S.-led war now drawing to a close is the current exodus of civilians from the country. (The first “boat people” to seek asylum in Australia were Vietnamese, in the mid-1970s, driven to the ocean by the fallout from that American withdrawal.) Last year, nearly 37,000 Afghans applied for asylum abroad, the most since 2001. Afghans who can afford to will pay as much as \$24,000 for European travel documents and up to \$40,000 for Canadian. (Visas to the United States, generally, cannot be bought.) Others employ smugglers for arduous overland treks from Iran to Turkey to Greece, or from Russia to Belarus to Poland.

The Indonesia-Australia route first became popular in Afghanistan before Sept. 11, mostly among Hazaras, a predominantly Shiite ethnic minority that was systematically brutalized by the Taliban. After the Taliban were overthrown, many refugees, anticipating an enduring peace, returned to Afghanistan, and for a while the number of Afghans willing to risk their lives at sea declined. But by late 2009 — with Afghans, disabused of their optimism, fleeing once more — migration to Australia escalated. At

the same time, Hazaras living across the border in Pakistan, many of whom moved there from Afghanistan, have also found relocation necessary. In a sectarian crusade of murder and terror being waged against them by Sunni extremists, Hazara civilians in the Pakistani city of Quetta are shot in the streets, executed en masse and indiscriminately massacred by rockets and bombs.

In 2010, a suicide attacker killed more than 70 people at a Shiite rally in Quetta. Looming directly above the carnage was a large billboard paid for by the Australian government. In Dari, next to an image of a distressed Indonesian fishing boat carrying Hazara asylum seekers, read the words: “All illegal routes to Australia are closed to Afghans.” The billboard was part of a wide-ranging effort by Australia to discourage refugees from trying to get to Christmas Island. In Afghanistan, a recent Australian-funded TV ad featured a Hazara actor rubbing his eyes before a black background. “Please don’t go,” the man gloomily implores over melancholic music. “Many years of my life were wasted there [in detention] until my application for asylum was rejected.” In addition to the messaging campaign (and the hard-line policies it alludes to), Australia has worked to disrupt smuggling networks by collaborating with Pakistan’s notorious intelligence services, embedding undercover agents in Indonesia and offering up to \$180,000 for information resulting in a smuggler’s arrest. The most drastic deterrence measure was introduced this July, when the Australian prime minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, announced that henceforth no refugee who reaches Australia by boat would be settled there. Instead, refugees would be detained, and eventually resettled, in impoverished Papua New Guinea. Several weeks later, the resettlement policy was extended to a tiny island state in Micronesia called the Republic of Nauru.

Since then, there have been more boats, more drownings. In late September, a vessel came apart shortly after leaving Indonesia, and dozens of asylum seekers — from Lebanon, Iran and Iraq — drowned. That people are willing to hazard death at sea despite Australia’s vow to send them to places like Papua New Guinea and the Republic of Nauru would seem illogical — or just plain crazy. The Australian government ascribes their persistence partly to misinformation propagated by the smugglers. But every asylum seeker who believes those lies believes them because he chooses to. Their doing so, and continuing to brave the Indian Ocean, and continuing to die, only illustrates their desperation in a new, disturbing kind of light. This is the subtext to the plight of every refugee: Whatever hardship he endures, he endures because it beats the hardship he escaped. Every story of exile implies the sadder story of a homeland.

It’s surprisingly simple, from Kabul, to enlist the services of the smugglers Australian authorities are so keen to apprehend. The problem was that every Afghan I spoke to who had been to Indonesia insisted that no Western journalist would ever be allowed onto a boat: Paranoia over agents was too high. Consequently, the photographer Joel van Houdt and I decided to pose as refugees. Because we are both white, we thought it prudent to devise a cover. We would say we were Georgian (other options in the region were rejected for fear of running into Russian speakers), had sensitive information about our government’s activities during the 2008 war (hence, in the event of a search, our cameras and recorders), traveled to Kabul in search of a smuggler and learned some Dari during

our stay. An Afghan colleague of mine, Hakim (whose name has been changed to protect his identity), would pretend to be a local schemer angling for a foothold in the trade. It was all overly elaborate and highly implausible.

When we were ready, Hakim phoned an elderly Afghan man, living in Jakarta, who goes by the honorific Hajji Sahib. Hajji Sahib is a well-known smuggler in Indonesia; his cellphone number, among Afghans, is relatively easy to obtain. Hakim explained that he had two Georgians — “Levan” and “Mikheil” — whom he wished to send Hajji Sahib’s way. Hajji Sahib, never questioning our story, agreed to get Joel and me from Jakarta to Christmas Island for \$4,000 each. This represents a slightly discounted rate, for which Hakim, aspiring middleman, promised more business down the road.

A few days later, we visited Sarai Shahzada, Kabul’s bustling currency market. Tucked behind an outdoor bazaar on the banks of a polluted river that bends through the Old City, the entrance to Sarai Shahzada is a narrow corridor mobbed with traders presiding over stacks of Pakistani rupees, Iranian rials, American dollars and Afghan afghanis. The enclosed courtyard to which the corridor leads, the exterior stairwells ascending the surrounding buildings, the balconies that run the length of every floor — no piece of real estate is spared a hard-nosed dealer hawking bundled bricks of cash. The more illustrious operators occupy cramped offices and offer a variety of services in addition to exchange. Most of them are brokers of the money-transfer system, known as hawala, used throughout the Muslim world. Under the hawala system, if someone in Kabul wishes to send money to a relative in Pakistan, say, he will pay the amount, plus a small commission, to a broker in Sarai Shahzada, and in return receive a code. The recipient uses this code to collect the funds from a broker in Peshawar, who is then owed the transferred sum by the broker in Sarai Shahzada (a debt that can be settled with future transactions flowing in reverse).

In Afghanistan, where many people have family living abroad and lack bank accounts, the hawala system mostly facilitates legitimate remittances. It also, however, offers an appealing space for illicit dealings. In 2011, the U.S. Treasury Department blacklisted one of Sarai Shahzada’s main businesses for laundering millions on behalf of Afghan narcotics traffickers. The Taliban, as well, are thought to get the bulk of their donations, from Persian Gulf and Pakistani patrons, via hawala transfers.

The refugee-smuggling business is conducted almost entirely through hawala. Hajji Sahib’s man, Mohammad, keeps a third-story office overlooking the courtyard in Sarai Shahzada. When we got there, we found Mohammad sitting behind a desk papered with receipts pinned down against a squeaky fan by half-drunk glasses of tea. With long unkempt hair, bad posture and acne, Mohammad looked as if he could still be in his teens. Other young men lined the walls, hunched in plastic chairs, working cellphones and calculators. When Hakim introduced himself as an intermediary for Hajji Sahib, they all glanced up from their computations, stiffening a little.

Mohammad immediately gave a spirited endorsement of Hajji Sahib’s integrity, as well as of his own. He was eager to assure us that we were in capable hands. “We represent

lots of smugglers,” Mohammad boasted. “For Australia and also for Europe. Every month, dozens of people give us their money.” He picked up a black ledger and waved it in the air. “Look at this notebook! I write every customer’s details in here.”

We gave him our fake names and origins. (“Gorjestan?” we were asked for the first but by no means the last time.) Then, a bit reluctantly, I counted out \$8,000 in cash. In return, Mohammad handed me a scrap of paper with our hawala codes scribbled in pen. Levan: 105. Mikheil: 106. Mohammad would withhold the money from his counterpart in Jakarta until we reached Christmas Island. This, theoretically, would preclude Hajji Sahib from retrieving it prematurely. It would also ensure he would not get paid if our boat sank or if we drowned.

Most asylum seekers bound for Australia arrive in Jakarta by air. The day after we landed in the sprawling capital, I called Hajji Sahib and arranged to be picked up the next morning at a 7-Eleven on a busy intersection. Joel and I were sitting outside the 7-Eleven when an Indonesian man in a Hawaiian shirt appeared at the appointed time. He eyed us doubtfully, then handed me a cellphone.

“You will go in a taxi with this guy,” Hajji Sahib told me. “He will bring you to a safe place.”

We drove in silence, for about an hour, to the northern edge of the city, where gated communities vied for waterfront with ramshackle slums on the garbage-heaped banks of Jakarta Bay. We pulled into the parking lot of a massive tower-block apartment complex and took an elevator to the 23rd floor. Midway down a poorly lit hallway, our escort knocked on a metal security door. A young girl in a dress decorated with images of Barbie let us in. An Iranian man sat at a glass table, tapping ash from a cigarette into a water-bottle cap. A small boy lay on a bare mattress, watching cartoons. “O.K.?” asked the Indonesian, and before anyone could answer, he was gone.

The man, Youssef, had been living in the apartment for a couple of weeks with his 8-year-old son, Anoush, and 6-year-old daughter, Shahla. (All the names of the asylum seekers in this story have been changed for their protection.) Youssef had been a laborer in Tehran, refurbishing building exteriors. In order to pay Hajji Sahib, he had sold all his possessions and gave up the house he was renting. He left his wife with her parents, planning to bring her to Australia legally once he and the children were settled there. “In Iran, there is no work, no life, no future for these children,” Youssef told me, nodding at Anoush and Shahla. “I want them to go to school so that they can get a position.”

We were sitting at the table, in one of the apartment’s three rooms. A TV and refrigerator stood against the far wall, opposite a sink and counter, with a two-burner camping stove. Whereas Youssef, plainly, was less than thrilled to have new roommates (there were only two beds, one of them a narrow twin), Anoush and Shahla were competing to one-up each other with hospitality. After Shahla complimented Joel and me on our “beautiful beards,” Anoush set about preparing us a lunch of chicken-flavored instant noodles. Shahla said, “People become thieves there, in Iran.”

“In Australia, I want to be a policeman,” Anoush announced. “I want to arrest thieves, and say, ‘Hands up!’ ”

Youssef seemed to disapprove. “They will study,” he said.

On different floors throughout the tower block, other apartments housed about 30 more asylum seekers. Some were Hajji Sahib’s; some belonged to rival smugglers. A majority, I was surprised to discover, were not Afghan but Iranian. Most were from cities and the lower middle class. They were builders, drivers, shopkeepers, barbers. One man claimed to be a mullah; another, an accomplished engineer. Their reasons for leaving varied. They all complained about the government and its chokehold on their freedoms. A few said they had been targeted for political persecution. They bemoaned the economy.

International sanctions — imposed on Iran for refusing to abandon its nuclear program in 2006 and later tightened — had crippled their ability to support their families. They were fathers who despaired of their children’s futures, or they wanted children but refused to have them in Iran. The most common word they used to describe their lives back home was na-aomid — hopeless.

Shortly after we settled into the apartment, an Iranian named Rashid stopped by for a visit. Rashid had the sickly, anemic look that I would soon come to associate with asylum seekers who languished in that place for two months or more — a combination of malnourishment and psychological fatigue. As he collapsed into a chair, elbows propped on knees, chin propped on palm, he seemed to lack even the most basic gravity-resisting vigor. After a month in Jakarta, Rashid told me, he got aboard a boat bound for Christmas Island. The engine promptly failed, leaving them adrift for days. In lieu of a bilge pump, Rashid and the other men had to use buckets to bail out the water splashing into the hull and seeping through its wooden planks. They ran out of food and water. People might have begun succumbing to dehydration if the tide hadn’t carried them to a remote island. There they were arrested and obliged to pay the Indonesian police before they could be freed.

“We came back to this place,” Rashid said. “The smuggler said, ‘Don’t worry, we will take you again soon.’ ”

I glanced at Joel. Over the phone, while we were in Kabul, Hajji Sahib urged us to get to Jakarta as soon as possible, saying the next boat was ready to depart.

“Our smuggler told us we were leaving tomorrow,” I said.

Rashid laughed. “Yes, they say that.”

The waiting was brutal: doing nothing became the most onerous of chores. The fact that your smuggler could call at any time, day or night, meant that you were forever suspended in a state of high alert. It also meant you couldn’t venture far. Most of the

asylum seekers, additionally fearful of police, never left the building. Generally, they spent their days sleeping as much as possible, smoking cigarettes and rotating through one another's rooms — for a change of scenery, presumably, though they were all identical. Everyone was broke, and meals, in our apartment anyway, consisted of instant noodles, once or twice a day, on occasion served with bread. To sleep, Youssef, Anoush and Shahla shared one of the two beds, while Joel and I alternated between the other and a thin mattress on the floor. Mattress nights were coveted, because it lay at the foot of the refrigerator, which you could open for a brief but glorious breath of cool air when you woke drenched in sweat, and because, compared with the bed, it was relatively free of fleas.

Although many of the asylum seekers in the building had children, only Youssef had brought his with him. (The others expected to be reunited with their families in Australia.) It's difficult to imagine how Anoush and Shahla processed the whole experience. My sense was that the thrill of the adventure eclipsed its hardships and hassles. With nothing and no one, except each other, to play with, they kept themselves remarkably well entertained. A feather duster found beneath the sink made for a superb tickling instrument; plastic grocery bags were turned into balloons; the hot-sauce packets, included in every ration of instant noodles, could be squirted on the tabletop to create interesting designs. There was also much to explore. The tower block was a kind of self-sufficient microcity, its four lofty wings flanking a private courtyard with shops and fish fries servicing outdoor tables clustered around a concrete bandstand. Every night, wizened Indonesian men belted out karaoke covers of John Denver and Johnny Cash. There was a Muslim mosque, a Christian church, a Buddhist temple. There were giant roaches and tailless cats to chase. And most delightfully, there was a pool.

As neither of the kids had swimming trunks or a spare pair of clothes, underwear had to suffice. Applying their talents for improvisation, Shahla found a used dish rag they could both share for a towel, while Anoush, with a kitchen knife, removed a length of flexible tubing from the back of our air-conditioner (which was broken anyway), repurposing it as a snorkel. Their resourcefulness continued at the pool itself: each day, they seemed to come into possession of some new equipment — a pair of goggles, a bar of soap, an inflatable flotation ring.

While Youssef made the rounds of the rooms, Joel and I would end up watching them at the pool. We were both distressed to see that neither Anoush nor Shahla could really swim.

When I asked Anoush, who had never been on a boat before, whether he was nervous about the journey, he clucked his tongue. "I have no fear," he said. "I'll be smiling."

Their father was less carefree. Not long after we joined them, it became clear that Youssef had no money, and if Joel and I didn't buy food and water, they would simply go without. Whenever the fleas or heat would wake me in the night, I would find Youssef sitting by the window, staring out at the fires — bright islands of flame and eerily colored smoke — where the slum dwellers were burning trash. Everyone was stressed; the strain

of two kids and no cash, however, rendered Youssef especially edgy. He was given to fits of anger and with the slightest provocation could fly into rages at Anoush, as well as at the other asylum seekers, many of whom avoided him.

Then one day Youssef's family wired money. I was sitting with him in the apartment, smoking, when he got the call. The news transformed him. Beaming with joy, Youssef leapt into the air and began to sing and dance.

That night Joel and I found him in the courtyard drinking with Rashid. Anoush and Shahla ran from shop to shop, swinging bags of candy. When he saw us, Youssef insisted we sit down, then shouted loudly, at no one in particular, for more beer. A group of elderly Indonesian men, playing dominoes nearby, regarded him impatiently. Youssef didn't notice. He was slumped over the table, doodling on its surface with a permanent marker.

Rashid seemed embarrassed for his friend. "His head is messed up," he explained. "Waiting here, with his kids, not knowing when we'll go. It's hard."

Youssef nodded glumly.

"My head is messed up, too," Rashid said. "I'm going crazy. I have two sons in Iran. I haven't seen them or my wife in a year."

Rashid said that before Australia, he tried to get to Europe via Greece. He made it from Turkey to Athens, where he was fleeced by a smuggler. Rather than return to Iran, he came to Indonesia. "Every day, they tell us, 'Tomorrow, tomorrow,'" Rashid said. "But tomorrow never arrives."

Anoush and Shahla appeared and asked Youssef for money. They wanted chips. Youssef pulled out a wad of bills and threw some in their direction. Several fluttered to the ground.

"Beer!" Youssef yelled at a woman passing by. Then he looked guiltily at Rashid, and added: "Please! Thank you!"

Australia's decision to send all boat people to Papua New Guinea or the Republic of Nauru only compounded everyone's anxiety. Although no one allowed himself to take it seriously (if he did, he would have no option but to do the unthinkable — give up, go home), the news was never decisively explained away. "It's a lie to scare people so that they don't come," Youssef told me when I brought it up. Another man became agitated when I asked him what he thought. "How can they turn you away?" he demanded. "You put yourself in danger, you take your life in your hand? They can't." A third asylum seeker dismissed the policy with a shrug. "It's a political game," he told me.

In many ways, he was right. It's hard to overstate how contentious an issue boat people are in Australian politics. From an American perspective, zealotry on the subject of



immigration is nothing unfamiliar. But what makes Australia unique is the disconnect between how prominently boat people feature in the national dialogue, on the one hand, and the actual scale of the problem, on the other. Over the past four years, most European countries have absorbed more asylum seekers, per capita, than Australia — some of them, like Sweden and Liechtenstein, seven times as many. All the same, for more than a decade now, successive Australian governments have fixated on boat people, making them a centerpiece of their agendas.

In the summer of 2001, a Norwegian freighter, the MV Tampa, rescued 433 asylum seekers, almost all of them Afghan, from a stranded fishing boat. Rather than return them to Indonesia, the captain of the Tampa, Arne Rinnan, consented to their demands to be taken to Christmas Island. Australia forbade the ship to enter its territory, and the standoff that ensued led to Australia's threatening to prosecute Rinnan and Norway's complaining to the United Nations. John Howard, a conservative prime minister, who, in the midst of a re-election campaign, was trailing his opponent in most of the polls, declared, "It remains our very strong determination not to allow this vessel or its occupants to land in Australia." When Rinnan, concerned over the welfare of the asylum seekers on his ship, proceeded toward the island anyway, Howard dispatched Australian commandos to board the Tampa and stop it from continuing. The impasse was resolved only when New Zealand and Nauru agreed to accept the asylum seekers instead. Howard's action was widely popular with voters, and two months later he was re-elected.

Diverting boat people to third countries for processing — albeit with the possibility of someday being resettled in Australia — was subsequently adopted as an official strategy. Under an arrangement popularly known as the Pacific Solution, asylum seekers trying to get to Christmas Island were interdicted by the navy and taken to detention centers on Nauru and Papua New Guinea (both of which rely heavily on Australian aid). The Pacific Solution was denounced by refugee and human rights advocates, who criticized the harsh conditions of the centers and the prolonged periods of time — many years, in some cases — that asylum seekers had to spend in them while their applications were considered. Depression and other mental disorders proliferated; incidents of self-harm were common. In 2003, detainees on Nauru protested with a weeklong hunger strike, during which some of them sewed their lips together. Last September, Arne Rinnan, the captain of the Tampa, told an interviewer that he had recently received a letter from Nauru, written by one of the Afghans he had rescued. According to Rinnan, the man said that "I should have let him die in the Indian Ocean, instead of picking him up."

After the Labor Party regained control of Parliament in 2007, and the new prime minister, Kevin Rudd, abolished the Pacific Solution — his immigration minister condemning it as "neither humane nor fair" — the U.N. and just about every other organization involved with refugees lauded the move. Rudd lost his leadership of the Labor Party in 2010, and his successor, Julia Gillard, resurrected the offshore-processing strategy. When Rudd returned to power in 2013, apparently having learned his lesson, he kept Gillard's policies in place. It was in the context of another re-election bid in July that Rudd eliminated the possibility of any boat person ever settling in Australia. "I understand that

this is a very hard-line decision,” he acknowledged in a national address. He seemed anxious to make sure that voters understood it too.

Rudd’s conservative opponent, Tony Abbott, would not be outdone. One of the two rallying cries that had come to define Abbott’s campaign was “Stop the boats!” (The other, referring to carbon-emissions penalties, was “Axe the tax!”) Proclaiming the influx of boat people a “national emergency,” Abbott proposed an even tougher scheme than Rudd’s, dubbed “Operation Sovereign Borders.” Among other proactive measures, this militaristic plan called for deploying warships to turn asylum seekers back at sea, before they reached Australian shores.

The elections were scheduled to be held less than a week after the night I found Youssef and Rashid drinking in the courtyard. Whichever candidate prevailed, one thing was certain: neither Youssef nor Rashid, nor Anoush nor Shahla, were going to get to the place they believed they were going. Rashid would never be reunited with his wife and sons in some quaint Australian suburb; Youssef would never see his children “get a position” there; Anoush would never become an Australian policeman; Shahla would never benefit from a secular, Western education. What they had to look forward to instead — after the perilous voyage, and after months, maybe years, locked up in an isolated detention center — was resettlement on the barren carcass of a defunct strip mine, more than 70 percent of which is uninhabitable (Nauru), or resettlement on a destitute and crime-ridden island nation known for its high rates of murder and sexual violence (Papua New Guinea).

How do you tell that to someone who has severed himself utterly from his country, in order to reach another? It was impossible. They wouldn’t believe it.

Joel and I were walking along the bay, where dozens of residents from the slums had gathered to watch backhoes on floating barges scoop refuse out of the shallows and deposit it onto the banks, when Youssef called my cellphone and shouted at us to get back to the tower — we were leaving. In the apartment, we found two young Iranian women, Farah and Rima, sitting at the table with large backpacks, while Youssef hurriedly shoved dates and lemons — thought to alleviate seasickness — into a canvas messenger bag. I noticed, too, that he was bringing the inflatable flotation ring Anoush and Shahla had found at the pool.

An Iranian man named Ayoub appeared and told us our car was waiting. By the deferential way Youssef and the women treated him — and by his assertive self-possession, in contrast to our rather panicky excitement — I gathered that Ayoub was a smuggler. He wore a military haircut and a handlebar mustache, and his sleeveless shirt displayed the words “Life is hard” tattooed in English across an impressively sculptured left deltoid.

We all crammed into a new car with tinted windows, driven by a squat Indonesian man with long rapier-like pinkie nails that tapered into points, who belched every couple of minutes and chain-smoked flavored cigarettes. Anoush and Shahla were elated. As we

pulled onto the highway, they could not stop talking about the boat and the sea. The women adored them instantly. Farah hauled Anoush onto her lap, while Rima set to braiding Shahla's wild hair. The kids received this affection like sustenance, with a kind of delirious gratitude and appetite. It made me remember that since arriving in Jakarta, they had not only been without their mother but without any mother.

We stopped at three gas stations along the way and linked up with other drivers. By the time we made it out of the city, several hours later, we led a convoy of six identical cars, all packed with asylum seekers. It seemed a bit conspicuous, and sure enough, as we climbed a narrow, winding road up a densely forested mountain, people came out to watch whenever we passed a shop or village. It was maybe 8 or 9 at night when our driver got a call that caused him to accelerate abruptly and career down a side road that led into the woods. The other cars followed. Pulling to a stop, shutting off the lights and engine, our driver spun around and hissed: "Shh! Police."

He got out to confer with his colleagues, and when he returned, it was in a hurry. Recklessly whipping around blind turns, we retreated down the mountain in the direction from which we came. Emerging from one sharp bend, we encountered a dark S.U.V. blocking the way. A siren whined; blue lights flashed. We slammed to a halt. A police officer in civilian clothes and a black baseball cap approached the driver's side. He peered in through the open window, registering the women and children. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he reeled back and smacked our driver hard and square in the face. With the S.U.V. behind us, we returned to the turnoff for the side road. The other five cars were there, surrounded by several police vehicles and a four-wheel-drive truck. A crowd had gathered. It was hard to tell what was happening. Some of the officers were taking pictures of the license plates and asylum seekers, others appeared to be joking affably with the drivers. Everyone was making calls on cellphones. At one point, our driver stuck his head in the window and rubbed his thumb and fingers together. "Money, money," he said. But the next instant he disappeared again.

Eventually, with a police car ahead of us and the truck bringing up the rear, we continued along the road. It was useless to try to get an explanation from our driver, who, in a torpor of self-pity, only muttered to himself and stroked a red mark on his cheek. When Rima got hold of Ayoub, he said not to worry, Hajji Sahib was taking care of it.

We were taken to a police station, in the city of Sukabumi. There, an older, bespectacled man in army fatigues and a beret seemed to be in charge. Once more, all the drivers were pulled out of their cars, pictures were taken, phone calls were made. After about an hour, with the same escort in front and behind, our convoy was on the move again. It's hard to say for how long we drove or where we finally stopped: all I could make out were a couple of shuttered storefronts on an otherwise empty road. Curiously, when I looked out the rear window, every police vehicle save one was turning around and heading back toward Sukabumi.

The sole remaining officer, a young man in a tan uniform, leaned against a chain-link fence, smoking a cigarette, apparently uninterested in us. Soon the asylum seekers began

getting out of their cars. After the officer watched with indifference as a group of Afghan teenagers briskly walked away, everyone started flagging down trucks and hopping into communal passenger vans. When a large commuter bus happened by, the officer signaled for it to stop. Those of us who hadn't yet absconded piled on.

I found myself sitting toward the front of the bus with an Iraqi family from Baghdad — a young woman in a hijab, her husband, father-in-law and three children.

“Where are we going?” the Iraqi woman said in English.

“I don't know,” I said.

Someone asked the driver.

“Bogor,” he said.

“Where's Bogor?” the Iraqi woman said.

“I don't know,” I said.

It turned out to be the end of the line. When the bus stopped, about 30 asylum seekers from Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan got out. No one quite knew what to do. It was nearly dawn, and everything in Bogor was closed. We all walked to the highway — a motley, exhausted crew, carrying backpacks and plastic bags with food and clothes — and started hailing taxis. Youssef, the children, Rima, Farah, Joel and I managed to persuade a commuter with a minivan to take us back to the tower block for \$20. The sun was coming up by the time we got there. The apartment was still filthy. It still stunk. It was still hot. Youssef lit a pot of water for the noodles.

A few days later, Joel and I were on our way to one of the shops downstairs when a young Middle Eastern man we had never seen before approached us. “Come with me,” he said.

We followed him to the courtyard, where we found Ayoub sitting at one of the tables, absorbed in a hearty lunch.

“Get your bags and the apartment key,” Ayoub told me, dropping a chicken bone onto his plate and loudly sucking the grease off his fingers, one at a time, from thumb to pinkie. When we got up to the apartment and I told Youssef the news, he only nodded. The reaction was not what I expected. “Ayoub is here,” I repeated. “We're leaving.”

“Did he say us too?” Youssef asked. “Or just you?”

I didn't understand. “We're all going together, of course.”

Youssef seemed unconvinced and made no move to pack. A few minutes later, Hajji Sahib called me. I stepped into the hall.

“Are you with the Iranian family?” he said.

“Yes. We’re almost ready.”

“Ayoub is already gone,” Hajji Sahib said. “You have to take a taxi to another place. And you have to leave the Iranians there. They can’t come. There is a problem with their money.”

Back in the apartment, I found Youssef at the stove. He had put Shahla in the shower. Anoush was watching cartoons.

“What’s going on?” I said.

Youssef shook his head. When I told him Joel and I had to go alone, without them, there was no objection or rebuke; however miserable, Youssef was reconciled to what was happening, and I realized he must have seen it coming. He lit a cigarette and lay down on the mattress. Shahla was still in the shower. Anoush, I could tell, hadn’t missed a thing. His eyes, though, stayed fastened on the TV.

We took a taxi to a much nicer building on the opposite side of Jakarta. A tall, skinny Iranian in his early 20s met us in the lobby and took us to the top floor. In the apartment, we found Farah and Rima sitting with three Iranian men around a coffee table with a row of cellphones on it. The women greeted us warmly and introduced one of the men, Siya, as the “boss.” Muscular and shirtless, with intricate tattoos of feathered wings spread across his chest, Siya was busy fashioning a sheath for a long wood-handled knife out of folded magazine pages and rubber bands.

Noticing me notice the knife, Farah said, “For security.”

Siya told us to put our cellphones on the table and informed us that we would no longer be allowed to use them.

“Who told you to come here?” he asked.

“Hajji Sahib,” I said.

“Who introduced you to Hajji Sahib?”

“Hakim. From Kabul.”

“Hakim from Kabul?” Siya nodded knowingly. “O.K., good.”

After a while, a middle-aged man and his son joined us. Siya embraced each of them for a minute or more. The father, Amir, was a shop owner from the Iranian side of the border with Iraq. He and Sami, a pudgy 9-year-old with glasses, were two of the friendliest people I met in Jakarta. Although he was older than Siya, Amir's meek nature relegated him definitely subordinate: a somewhat awkward dynamic that Amir, loath to make anyone uncomfortable, deflated by clicking his heels and saluting the boss (who, in turn, ordered him to execute a series of squats and lunges, counting out the sets in a mock drill-sergeant voice). Later, when Siya asked to inspect his weapon, Amir reached into his pocket and produced a flimsy steak knife.

It was around midnight when Siya got the call. He gave us back our phones, and we took the elevator to an underground parking garage, where another caravan of new cars with tinted windows was waiting. Every vehicle was already packed beyond capacity. We were all greatly relieved when, a few miles down the highway, our driver pulled into an alley, stopped behind the truck and told us to get out.

After the hard rain on the way to the beach, and wading out chest-deep to the skiffs, everyone was drenched. It was still dark out when the two Indonesian crew members pulled back the tarp they had nailed over our heads. The coast was a vague shadow growing vaguer. The Indonesians distributed life vests: ridiculous things, made from thin fabric and a bit of foam. The youngest children, including a girl in a pink poncho who appeared no older than 4 or 5, were directed with their parents to a small square of open deck in the stern. The reason for this was that the farther aft you went, the less violent was the bucking as we plowed into the swells.

As the sun broke, we got our first good look at one another. Rashid had made it, as well as several other men from the tower block. There were nine children and more than a dozen women. Aside from one Afghan man, from Kunduz Province, everyone was Iranian. Most of the elderly crowded into the covered bow or leaned against the bulwarks. The rest fit where they could on the open deck. The sea was choppy enough so that each time the boat crashed from a peak into a trough or hit a wave head-on, large amounts of water splashed against us.

The first person to become sick was Siya. It was still early morning when he started throwing up. He was a natural leader, that man, and almost everyone soon followed suit. By late afternoon, we'd lost sight of land completely, and the swells grew to a size that blocked out the horizon when they loomed above us. Some people bent over the gunwales, some vomited into plastic bags. It quickly became apparent that there were not enough bags to go around: rather than toss them overboard, full ones had to be emptied, rinsed and reused.

Siya would not be cowed. Peeling off his soaking tank top, revealing his tattooed wings — seeming to unfold them, actually, as he threw back his shoulders — he began to sing. Others joined in, breaking now and then to retch.

It was slow going. The Indonesians took turns manning the tiller and hand-pumping water from the bilge. One was older and taciturn and wore a permanent scowl; the other looked to be in his teens, smiled enough for the both of them and called everybody “brother.” The tremendous racket of the engine belied its less-than-tremendous horsepower. Like the rest of the vessel, it was built for neither such a heavy load nor such high seas. Our typical speed was four to five knots, less than six miles per hour, and at times we seemed to make no headway whatsoever against the strong southeasterly trade winds, which whipped up white caps on the waves and kept us all alert with stinging gusts of spray. Depending on the direction of the swells, the Indonesians would signal the men to consolidate themselves on the starboard or port side of the deck and thereby mitigate our listing — which, now and then, felt alarming.

The sea was still big when the sun went down, taking with it the warmth. Those of us who had spent the day on our feet now began staking claims on places to try to sleep. The deck became a claustrophobic scrum of tangled limbs. Few could recline or stretch their legs. Each time someone tried to reposition a foot or knee, say, to restore some circulation, the movement would ripple out in a cascade of shifting and grumbling as the surrounding bodies adjusted to the new configuration.

The tarp was unfurled. There was not enough of it to cover everyone. If you found yourself on an edge or corner, someone from the opposite side would invariably pull it away the moment you relaxed your grip. In any case, it was too worn and porous to do much. The water ran down its folds and creases, streaming through the many tears along the way.

In the morning, everyone looked different. Sallow. Haggard. Reduced. Amir and Sami slouched limply against each other, passing between them a bulging plastic bag. The man with the faux-hawk was curled up in a fetal ball: he stayed that way the rest of the trip. His pregnant wife sat cross-legged near the bow, pale and wet and trembling. Rima was clutching Siya’s arm, as if it were a lifeline. Their eyes were squeezed tightly shut, but they were too ill to sleep.

Another problem arose. There was no toilet, and absent any railing to hold on to, going over the side was too risky. The men urinated on the hull, the women in their pants. The Indonesians had brought a box of sealed plastic cups of water, but hardly anyone could hold them down. Siya continued to sing and puke. Although a couple of the children had begun to cry, none complained. In the afternoon, two dolphins appeared and spent the better part of an hour playfully showing off. As they darted under the boat, and launched into the air, the spectacle cheered up everyone, adults and kids alike. Even Amir and Sami rallied from their stupor to watch. A few grown men became positively gleeful, vying to be the first to spot the gray shadows flitting from the deep.

That night, several of us tried to sleep atop the engine room, trading the shelter of the hull for a little extra space. It was a poor call. Every 10 minutes or so, a bucket’s worth of cold water took your breath away or you were pitched against a hot pair of vertical pipes spewing noxious smoke and sparks. There was nothing to do but lie there, bracing for one

or the other, admiring the magnificent array of stars and the phosphorescence glowing in the wake.

With first light, despite the sleep deprivation, dehydration, seasickness and filth, the asylum seekers were energized by the fact that, according to the Indonesians, we would likely reach Australian territory before nightfall. Although there was still no land in sight, the arrival of birds circling overhead was unanimously interpreted as a sign that we were getting close. The sea had also calmed: no more waves crashed upon the deck. Initially, this was an enormous relief. For the first time, the sun dried us out. As it crept higher, however, it proved to be far more powerful than during the past two days, and soon, without a single cloud in the sky to blunt the blistering rays, everyone was longing for the same frigid breakers we previously cursed.

The tarp was brought back out. While blocking the sun's glare, it also trapped its heat. A couple of people, desperate for fresh air, cut up the box of water cups, which was almost empty, and made visors from the cardboard. One of the fathers in the stern, wearing a Qatar Airways sleeping mask to protect his face, found a length of string and rigged up some sheets and scarves for shade. The bow — the only covered part of the boat — reeked dizzyingly of vomit and urine. None of the dozen Iranians who rushed to fill the space when we embarked had since dared to leave it. Now they were suffering. An argument arose between them and their comrades on the open deck. The tarp was obstructing the entrance to the bow, it seemed, and smothering its already rank and humid air.

“Please,” one woman begged. “We can't breathe in here.”

There was little desire among the deck dwellers, however, to endure direct exposure to the sun for the comfort of those who had thus far enjoyed comparatively plush accommodations.

Presently, the heat finished off anyone who might have been bearing up. The pregnant woman's condition bordered on critical. She was flushed and drenched in sweat and heaved dryly, with nothing left to give. Sami was weeping. Amir lay supine. His eyes drooped catatonically, and when I tried to make him drink some water, he weakly gripped my ankle.

“I need help,” he said. “Call for help.”

That decision seemed to be up to Siya. There was a satellite phone onboard: Siya said the plan was to contact the Australian authorities once we were well within their waters. The navy would then bring us ashore. In the past, asylum boats often made it all the way — but the landing can be treacherous (when one boat smashed on the cliffs in 2010, 50 people drowned), and now it's standard practice to request a “rescue” before reaching Christmas Island. Although Australian rescuers, when responding to distress calls, venture much farther north than where we currently were, Siya wanted to be sure. I think it was Amir's pitiful entreaties that finally persuaded him to make the call.



An Iranian man who knew some English — the one who in Jakarta told me he was an engineer — spoke to the dispatch. The Indonesians had brought a hand-held G.P.S. device; neither they nor the asylum seekers, however, knew how to work it. Eventually, someone offered his iPhone, and the engineer read out our coordinates.

While we waited to be rescued, the Iranians set about destroying their passports. “So they can’t deport you,” Farah told me. Clearly, though, the task also carried some symbolic weight. Rather than simply jettisoning them, the asylum seekers painstakingly ripped out each individual page, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it to the wind. A pair of scissors was passed around. The burgundy covers, emblazoned with the Iranian coat of arms, were cut into tiny pieces. The work was accomplished with flair and relish. Only one man seemed hesitant. Moving closer, I saw that the passport he was disposing of was his son’s. When the scissors came his way, he carefully cut out the photo on the first page and slipped it in his wallet.

Soon, on the horizon, a ship appeared. A government airplane buzzed above us, swooped low and made a second pass. The asylum seekers waved shirts in the air, crying out in jubilation. The younger Indonesian performed a dance atop the engine room; he seemed amazed we had made it. Some of the men emptied their pockets, thrusting on him all the cash they had. The Indonesian beamed. “Thank you, brothers!”

Two skiffs broke off from the battleship and motored our way. Each carried six Australians in gray fatigues, riot helmets and sidearms holstered on their thighs. The Indonesians cut the engine (and after three days of its unrelenting clamor, the silence that replaced it was startling). The skiffs maneuvered abreast of us, one on each side.

The Australian sailors all looked like fresh recruits. One of them held a manual of some kind. He read from it in a loud voice. “Are there any English speakers?”

The engineer stepped forward.

“Does anyone onboard require medical assistance?”

When the engineer translated this, nearly everyone raised his hand. The pregnant woman was helped to her feet and presented. Her head hung heavily. She was almost too weak to stand.

While the Australian with the manual recited more questions — including some in Indonesian addressed to the crew, who shook their heads dumbly, refusing to answer — his fellow sailors passed to the asylum seekers new life vests, a couple jerrycans of fresh water, some bags of frozen tortillas, bottles of honey and a tub of strawberry jam. “We’re going back to the ship now,” one of them told the engineer. “You have to turn the engine back on and keep going. We’ll be behind you.”

This information was met with disbelief. Once again the pregnant woman was raised up and displayed. “Can you take her with you at least?” asked the engineer. The sailors exchanged embarrassed looks. Plainly, they wished they could.

We still couldn’t see land — and not long after the skiffs left us for the battleship, it, too, was lost from view. The return of the empty and limitless ocean, not to mention the incessantly pounding sun, was incredibly demoralizing. To make matters worse, we no longer had any means of communication. When they first glimpsed the plane and ship, all the asylum seekers, following Siya’s example, threw their cellphones overboard. For some reason, amid the exultation, the satellite phone and G.P.S. system had also gone into the water.

There was nothing to do but heed the Australian’s command and “keep going.” It was four or five hours after we made contact with the first ship when a second, smaller patrol boat materialized. Two more skiffs of sailors came out to meet us. This time they immediately boarded the boat, moving people aside, herding everyone forward. The officer in charge announced that he was taking control of the vessel.

After the officer spotted Joel’s camera, we were both summoned to the stern, at which point we identified ourselves as journalists. While a big Australian with a bushy beard worked the tiller, the officer went through a list of prewritten questions with the crew, each of whom either couldn’t read or declined to. (Unless it’s their second offense, or someone dies, the Indonesian fishermen who bring asylum boats across are often not prosecuted.) The officer was polite to Joel and me. He said we had been lucky with the weather. If we had left a few days earlier, the boat would have capsized.

It inspires a unique kind of joy, that first glimpse of land. The sun was low, and you could almost mistake it for some play of light and shadow. As rousing as it was to see, the presence of a fixed object against which to mark our progress also made you realize just how slowly we had been going. It was late at night by the time we reached Christmas Island. The Australians guided our boat into the shelter of a shallow cove, beneath sheer cliffs draped in vegetation. After tying up on a mooring, the officer revealed that we would stay the night here and disembark tomorrow. When the engineer relayed the complaints of the asylum seekers — who, consolidated in the bow, had even less space now than before — the officer responded: “Are you safe? Are your lives in danger anymore?” He seemed to be losing patience, and, noticing a wrapper floating by the stern, angrily reproached the Iranians: “You’re in a nice country now.”

It rained fitfully throughout the night. The next day, we were all ferried by a push-barge from the mooring to a jetty around the point. The jetty was swarmed with customs and immigration officials, federal police and employees of a private company that runs the island’s detention centers. Joel and I were welcomed to Australia, given water, coffee and a ride to a surprisingly luxurious hotel. Everyone else was interned. Later that afternoon, while walking into town, I saw our little boat being towed out to sea. There, the officer had told me, it would be lit on fire.

The families and minors were taken to a relatively comfortable facility, with access to an outdoor soccer field and recreational area. The single men went to a place resembling a maximum-security prison. None of the asylum seekers would stay at either location for long. While I was on the island, flights full of detainees were leaving almost every night for Papua New Guinea and the Republic of Nauru. By now, most if not all of the people from our boat have been transferred to one of the two island nations. If they were sent to the detention center on Papua New Guinea, they are probably living in the tent city that was erected there as part of its expansion. If they were sent to the detention center on Nauru, they are probably living in the tent city that was erected there after rioting asylum seekers in July burned the buildings down.

Because the governments of Nauru and Papua New Guinea lack the capability to process refugee claims — Australian officials are still training them to do so — the asylum seekers have a long wait ahead of them. Some might not be able to hold out: already, dozens of Iranians, after seeing the conditions at the Papua New Guinea facility, have asked to be sent back to their country. Among those who decide to tough it out, it's most likely that few will be found to have valid cases. Moreover, unlike with Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, no agreement exists between Iran and Australia allowing for the forcible repatriation of asylum seekers whose applications are unsuccessful. This means that the Iranians who are denied asylum by Nauru or Papua New Guinea, and who decline to voluntarily return to Iran, will enter a kind of limbo, in which they can neither be resettled on those islands nor sent to the Australian mainland nor sent home. Absent another solution, these people could be flown back to Christmas Island and detained indefinitely.

We reached Australia one day after Tony Abbott was elected prime minister. In keeping with his Operation Sovereign Borders policy, Abbott has since directed the navy to send back to Indonesia, whenever possible, asylum boats intercepted at sea. So far this has happened twice, in late September, when two boatloads of asylum seekers were turned over, offshore, to Indonesian authorities. The second transfer took place the same day that a boat full of Lebanese asylum seekers broke apart less than a hundred yards off the Java coast near Sukabumi, the Indonesian city whose police station Joel and I briefly visited. More than 20 bodies, many of them children, washed ashore, and more remained missing.

I saw our little boat being towed out to sea. There, the officer had told me, it would be lit on fire.

According to a Lebanese community leader interviewed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, most of the dead came from a small village near the border with Syria. One asylum seeker, who managed to swim to safety, lost his sister-in-law, his brother-in-law, three of their children, his wife and all eight of his children. The community leader said there were many more Lebanese fleeing the Syrian border who had already paid smugglers and were on their way to Indonesia.

When I got back to Afghanistan, I met with several men preparing to go to Australia. One of them, Qais Khan, opened a small auto-parts shop in Kabul in 2005. Qais told me that for years, while Afghans from the provinces came regularly into the city, he did very well. Since 2010, however, the deteriorating security situation in the rural areas adjacent to the capital had stultified commerce and ruined many retailers. Last year, Qais's shop went out of business; now he was struggling to feed his wife and two children.

A couple of months ago, 15 of Qais's friends paid a smuggler at Sarai Shahzada and left for Indonesia. Among them was Qais's next door neighbor, a driver for a member of Parliament, who decided to flee after receiving three letters from the Taliban threatening to kill him. Qais told me he was waiting to hear whether his friends were successful — in which case, he would go as well.

“And if they're not?” I asked. “If they're sent to Papua New Guinea or the Republic of Nauru?”

Qais thought for a moment and then admitted he would probably go anyway. In fact, he had already taken out the necessary loans to pay the smuggler. “At least there you have a chance,” he said. “At least there is a possibility.”

I felt obligated to tell him he was wrong. “You won't get to Australia,” I said.

Qais didn't seem to hear. The words simply didn't register. “Australia, Europe, America,” he said. “They're not like here. You have a chance.”