

Shamir's Story

At present I am settled in your country. I have been here for several years and now share a flat and am learning a trade at college. I have much for which to thank many people here. But shall my home be here? I do not feel at home in your country. Let me tell you why.

I had a lovely life at home in Afghanistan. My father was a lawyer and much respected. We were comfortably off. My grandfather was a shepherd and I used to spend much of the summer with my grandparents in the mountains. But this changed one day when some men came to our village; their faces were covered and they came to our mosque. They took away my friend, Anwaaraddin, to be a suicide bomber or, as they put it, to be a 'martyr'. They were Taliban and they did indeed send my friend to his death.

I stopped going to the mosque then. But that did not stop masked Taliban one day coming to our house and telling my parents "Your son will be next." When my father protested, they called him an apostate and a rebel against God. They took him away. I have never heard what happened to him, but I have no doubt that he was murdered by them.

My mother said she would seek shelter with her family in the mountains but that I must flee immediately. I was only 12 at the time.

My home was gone; my beautiful life was over. I spent a year traveling through Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey. I was shunted from one people trafficker to another; there were always different people joining and leaving. Sometimes we were as few as ten, at other times we might be as many as a hundred. I did not know any of them.

We walked through rivers, forests and mountains. I remember on one occasion we walked for twenty-four hours through snow in a high mountain. It was a living nightmare; I saw death everywhere. 'I shall never know home again', I thought. 'I shall die in this wilderness.'

Nowhere was I treated as a child. I was caught in Iran and deported. I was imprisoned in Turkey. When I was released I eventually finished up with a hundred other refugees on a boat designed for only fifty people. We were on the boat for nearly fifty hours; by the time we sighted Greece, water had already been coming into the boat and some people had jumped out only to find that the life jackets we had been given were fake. I was worried that if I drowned, my body would be lost and my family would never know what happened to me. Even now when I see reports of refugees drowning at sea, it reminds me of my own journey. I still have nightmares; it still keeps me awake at night. When we arrived in Greece we were trafficked to Bulgaria where I was imprisoned again.

The only country where I found any sympathy because I was a child was Italy. I arrived there hanging on the side of a lorry. It was very dangerous; if I had slipped I could have been killed. I was arrested on the motorway and I expected more trouble. But the first thing the police did was to give me some croissants and a drink. They got me some new clothes because mine were very dirty. I was sent to a children's home. It was the only place where I was treated as a child; and it was the first place where I was able to shower and eat properly, and where I was free from traffickers. The people who ran the home were very kind.

I wondered if I should stay in Italy and make a new life for myself there. But I knew no one in Italy. My elder brother had gone to England a few years before and I had an uncle there as well. I wanted to get to England and find them.

The home did not want to keep me there against my will. They gave me some food and some money to help me on my way. I made my way up through France; the worst part was in the Calais Jungle. I was there for two and half months; it was cold and there was no food and nowhere to wash. I was arrested almost every day by the French police. They knew we had been running

after lorries all night, but after we got back to our make-shift tents to sleep they would come and wake us up. "Bonjour," they would say, then take us away, put cold water on our faces to waken us and then interrogate us.

Then one night someone said to me: "Now you get into this truck. After one or two hours, when you feel it has left the boat, get out when the truck stops. You'll be in England."

I found myself with three others in the back of a lorry carrying bananas. The lorry was stopped in Kent after leaving the ferry and I and the others were found in the back. I had no passport or birth certificate, so the officials at Kent assessed me to be sixteen when, in fact, I had only just turned fourteen. They refused to believe my age or even my nationality. I felt like a trapped animal.

I asked help to make contact with my brother. But there was no help. "There are more than sixty million people in the United Kingdom. How do you expect us to be able to find your brother among that lot?"

Though this was several years ago, I still feel bitter about the way your country was treating unaccompanied migrant children like myself. There was no concern for children. If you were sixteen or over they did not have to send you to a foster family and they did not have to worry about your schooling. It was a cost-benefit analysis for them; by treating children as adults, it benefited them by saving money but at a cost to the children's future.

With difficulty I did get to London and eventually found myself in Ilford where there were other young Afghans like myself. There I started school. The teachers were amazing, as was the school. I had a personal tutor for every class.

They were able to establish my refugee status and I left armed with a bunch of modest GCSEs. I took a year out working as a security guard to make some money and I am now in college doing a building course. With the help of other Afghans in Britain I was able to make contact with my brother and my uncle.

I did try to contact my mother when I arrived in Britain but was not successful. My brother has told me that he did get a message to her through the Red Cross to let her know I was safe. But he says we must be careful; if we try too hard to contact her it could cause waves in Afghanistan and there may be remnants of Taliban who would want revenge for my escape.

Shall I settle here and make a home in the United Kingdom as my brother and uncle have? Certainly at the moment I have much to be thankful for in Britain but my treatment when I arrived still leaves a bitter taste. The outbreak of xenophobic attacks after the 2016 referendum has left me uneasy. I do not feel at home here.

Italy was kind to me and it was the only place on my journey where for a short time I did feel at home. But I miss the mountains of Afghanistan and being a shepherd with my grandfather.

I shall finish my college course and work as a builder and, I hope, make money. Please God, more peaceful times will come to Afghanistan and I shall be able to return home some day before my mother dies. I should like to make my home there.