

Ali's Story: A Journey from Afghanistan

I came from Afghanistan. I was quite happy there with my family all together. I still remember when I was a kid there; there were mountains, a lot of dust, and the houses aren't that rich like England. They've got, like, tents.

There was fighting and war, and it was starting to build up. They were sort of like, taking the good areas; they started to bomb there. Sometimes, when I looked out the window, I felt quite sad.

So then my grandma had decided all of us go to a safer place in Europe. By the time we got to the airport, I remember they let my grandma in, then me, but not my family. They said they didn't have passports, and then they had to go back. We thought that they were on another plane, but when we got in England they weren't there. We thought, you know, something must have happened, they might be alive, you never know.

I had nightmares of my mum picking me up in school and then when my eyes opened up I realised that it was just a dream. It wasn't real. And then every night I was crying, I was always dreaming about them. It's like my bones were broken because I could feel really angry and really sad.

I went to school. I learnt new things there. It was, like, really frustrating that I can't speak English. The only word I know is 'yes'. Sometimes I get embarrassed that I don't know the word. The thing I was doing, like, sitting in the corner doing nothing, watching other people play. Sometimes people came with me to play with me, and then I started to play with them. I found new friends; I started to practice football with them.

Everyone was amazed by my pictures because I was a really good drawer. I had something special to show them every day – pictures of my family, of my mum and dad, me, Spiderman, because I like Spiderman.

Sometimes I was drawing pictures of football because I like football. That made me happy, but then when I, when I keep on, like, imagining my family, I want them to come here.

Four and a half years passed and then we had a phone call. My cousin said that they saw my dad in the mosque praying. And then they handed the phone to my dad, and then I started with talk my dad, my mum and dad, and then I was more happier that time.

My first wish would be my mum and dad coming to this country, because, it feels like its actually going to happen. But I get upset, I wish they could come right now. I can't wait for that day.

Hamid's Story: A Journey from Eritrea

The streets would be full of people selling food, and the food, like, will have, like, if you're selling fruit on the street, it would have, like, flies on it. And on the buses, because it's a really small country and there's lots of people stuffed in it, there's no place to sit. And if you're sat, even if you're a baby, you have to get off the seat for a bigger person. And then the streets had dust in so if the wind blew it would go in your eyes.

I know why the war started. Eritrea, a long time ago, used to be just a big country and then they split it with Ethiopia. But then since we split it from Ethiopia, we got the Red Sea. The war started because they wanted the Red Sea. So then all this war happened, lots of people had to get away and we didn't have lots of airplanes because everybody was just moving and moving.

I remember that... that we had to leave when I was a young age. My dad couldn't come because he knew secrets. Because the guy that's leading us right now is very, very bad and my dad wanted to escape but he couldn't. They said to him, if you tell people of our secrets, we will kill your wife and me so then he told us we had to run.

I remember that we just got on a plane and I slept but I really knew that it was a really long, long journey. And sometimes we took buses and I really fell asleep a lot of times.

And then at the end, we arrived in England it was kind of very hard to fit in with hardly any English.

I started school, and I was like very scared because I didn't have no friends because everybody was, like, had groups. One day this boy, he fell out with a group, so then me and him we said 'why don't we be friends'. Then we joined other peoples groups, so, we were, so we had, made lots of friends.

A few weeks later, I came back from school and there were lots of ladies in my house. And my mum was on the bed and I asked her 'why was everybody crying yesterday?' And then she said: 'Oh, I have something to confess to you. Your dad he died there.' Then I started crying, and then she started crying, and then I told her stop crying, then she said I'll stop crying if you stop crying, so we both ended up stop crying.

For a few days I stopped eating, I only drank a little bit and I couldn't finish my dinner at school. My mum came to me and she says 'you don't have to be very upset because at the end that's why we left home, because it was dangerous'.

I started feeling OK and that it's, it's right that we should have come here. It got really better. I made a lot of friends. We don't talk about how our lives at home. We don't, like, talk about this

stuff. We don't talk about sad things. We talk about good things. We don't mention the sad things, we act like the never happened.

My friend always, when I'm feeling sad, he always comes up with a joke and cheers me up, and when he's feeling sad I come up with a joke and cheer him up.

Juliane's Story: A Journey from Zimbabwe

I was very young when my mum left me. I was three and a half. I don't know why she left me, people trying to kill her or something. People from the church that we used to go to, took care of me and they brought me up. I just learnt to be my own mother, my own father. I thought that I had no father or a mother. But I knew that she was out there somewhere for me.

Like, you'd have, like, about 30 children eating from one plate and, like, it's like a really big plate but you only have, like, a small amount of food, enough to feed, like, one person. And I didn't have anything to eat for a week, the only thing I survived was water and that water wasn't very clean. It had, like, snails and, like, all those dirty stuff right inside it but you had no choice but to drink it. You would watch other kids yeah, walk past you, they'd laugh at you. And they're like saying, "oh yeah you're dumb". Like, when other people are playing I'd just be sitting there by myself so that I'd be reading my book or I'd be just sitting there crying and looking at others.

I left the orphanage, and then I got put in this big massive dark lorry with like about 200 other people. And they started driving me away but because I was the little one I was like right at the, like, end, like close to the door. And then I saw this lady, she had no shoes, all she was wearing was a pair of jogging bottoms and, like, a t-shirt, and she was running and she was screaming my name. So I looked at her and I thought I remember that face. That was my mum. I started crying, and I know it must sound, like, really strange, but I didn't know how or where I got the power but I jumped from the back of the lorry onto her. And then me and her started holding each other, screaming. I could not believe it was surreal, like. And from that point on everything turned around in my life.

My mum, she went to the British embassy. And then the people at the end ended up giving me a visa and we boarded the plane and we arrived in Heathrow.

My first day at school, it was really tough. I mumbled, like, a lot because I was afraid to speak to people and, like, I often got anxious and get panic attacks. There comes a time where I'm just sitting there in class, right, I don't even understand what's going on. There's this, like, click in the back of my mind that says what if I get home and my mama's not there. And, like, that's the

moment where, like, my heart starts pumping really fast, like, I start breathing really fast and then before you know it I just pass out.

In school they have created this special group, like, whenever, like, I'm feeling angry, sad or anxious, I just go there and there'll like always be, someone I could talk to, like, who I could tell what's going on. And they would try and fix it like as much as possible.

And I'm really improving on my socialising skills, but you know what, I'm a fighter and I'm a survivor. No matter how much you go through and no matter how much you suffer, you're always going to be accepted for who you are. One day you're going... you are going to be this, like, shining star, and at the end of every dark tunnel there's always a rainbow.

Rachel's Story: A Journey from a Country in Eurasia

Life in my country was quite distressing. I didn't attend school because my mother was of a particular religion that my country doesn't favour. I could see other children around me experiencing a normal childhood going to school, playing outside with their friends. I just felt very different.

Because in the UK, being a Christian isn't a problem but in my county, which is a predominantly Muslim country, it wasn't a favoured religion or tradition. But my mum kept on going secretly to church on Sundays, and when the police invaded the secret services that they were having, the whole atmosphere was full of, kind of, flames.

It felt like everything was going to burst out and my mum was treated very bad from the local citizens and she felt like she wanted to escape somewhere.

We secretly decided to leave. We didn't let anyone know. I think my father found someone to take us at the back of a lorry I think it was. We were clutched together, we slept and slept and slept, and it was very dark so we couldn't really see whether daylight had come. We lost track of time, it was a kind of journey that we didn't know where it would lead to.

We got to the UK. I had began to experience the childhood I'd been dreaming about. I had friends, I played outside very comfortably and safe. I had a kind of normal family life but then the decision letter came that we'd been rejected leave to remain in this country.

It was the letter that changed everything. This one piece of paper just changed my whole life once again. At 6 o'clock in the morning, these huge men, like huge monsters, they came to our house and they put us in a van and took us to a detention centre. So there's a lot of closed doors banging all the time, huge walls that you can't see from. I always used to look up at the wall and think I wish I could fly and just escape.

I can remember once I held the bars in my hands and I couldn't believe that I was just stuck in a prison in, in the UK for doing nothing, for being a child, for escaping to safety.

We had received good news that we would be let out. And I started living normally once again but with fear that this would happen again, and it did happen again. They had taken us straight to the airport and then we were sent back to our country. They didn't welcome us at all. They looked at us with real hostility and hatred. They just thought, 'Ok why did you go to the UK?' And then my mum fainted because they had hit her across the head.

And then we travelled from place to place searching out some help, but it was obvious that we wouldn't get any help, so it was then that my mum had decided we had to leave once again. And then she found an agent, and then we were brought back to the UK.

We were taken to our new home. The people were very, very kind to us, very welcoming. I felt very safe. I just lived normally but there was also that fear within me that it could happen once again, it could happen anytime.

We had just received a phone call, I thought it was bad news, but when she said I have good news for you, you've been granted leave to remain. I just thought 'yes, finally!'

That was the decision that saved my whole life. Now I'm living a normal life. I've learnt from my experiences of course. And I want to become a lawyer so I can help people who also experience the same thing because I know this problem will never end. People are still suffering everywhere in the world. So hopefully I want to become an international lawyer to save everyone.

Navid's Story: A Journey from Iran

I am 16 years old, I'm a Kurdish Iranian. The reason that we left Iran was my dad disagreed with how things were going, he disagreed with the system, and then I remember my father had to leave the country. Of course his life was in danger when he left.

It was kind of the story of many people against the Iranian government. I suppose my father was lucky that he got away because members of my mum's family, because they were Kurdish, a lot of them were executed. And in the years that followed my mum kept getting questioned about where my father had gone.

I remember the night that we were leaving, everyone was really, kind of, sad. I didn't really understand why they were sad but then eventually when we got to the airport it was that moment that I realised that I'm leaving and then, um, I was upset nearly the whole journey.

In Italy, we had to jump over a fence, which seemed rather scary to me. We got stopped by the police and I was scared of the police dog. It was at night and I think we were going through a little

forest or something, not sure. But I remember the dogs barking that scared me. I remember staying one night inside a cottage. I think maybe it was around Slovenia, I'm not sure. I remember the night that we were leaving outside the cottage. I felt scared because it was at that point I could see the concern on my mum's face.

To get into England, we got into a lorry from France. The lorry was full of iron bars. It was the first time throughout the journey where I was really, really uncomfortable and scared. I really wanted to get off and then when we finally got over to the UK, I remember someone cutting open the back of the lorry, kind of like one of these movies where the sunlight comes in. So then we came out and I remember the British border agency. They were really friendly and then of course it was around that day that I saw my dad after like 2 or 3 years.

And it was the weirdest thing because it wasn't what you'd expect, run to your dad, hug him. At first I didn't recognize who it was. And then after a while he told me how he's my dad and how he's missed me so much. And then I remember sitting in the back and my mum was sitting in the front and I remember it was at night, the whole journey I just kept looking at him trying to figure out what's going on, who he is. And then slowly I got more and more comfortable towards him.

The first few days at school were really hard on me not because of the other students or teachers but not knowing anything, it was just literally being an outsider, that was really scary for me. A memory I have was, school had started and they'd closed the fences and then at break time my mum came to say 'hello' and then when she did come I talked to her and then once the bell rang to start lessons again I remember holding onto the fence as if it was some sort of prison.

You could feel literally not knowing what someone around you is saying. Even though they're being friendly, you could tell with the smiles and facial expressions that they're being friendly, not knowing what they're meaning, it was quite scary for me.

There was a mixed variety of backgrounds and the fact that there were refugee kids at that school and this centre where you'd go to after school to be with other kids, was a great support, so, even though the first few months were really uncomfortable, having that sense of atmosphere was a great help.