

FOREWORD

This is a beautifully constructed book. It is unusual, because it is written in two voices.

The first voice belongs to Para (Paheertharan Pararasasingam). He is a Tamil from Sri Lanka. He came to Australia as a refugee, having suffered extraordinary hardships in Sri Lanka. His story is a painful one, and uncomfortably familiar to anyone who has read about the grotesque mistreatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka during the long struggle for Tamil independence. While the Tamil Tigers engaged in the sort of brutality which desperation produces, the Sinhalese government behaved in ways which are all too familiar when a despised minority fights for its independence: white vans, torture, disappearances, murders. All these were part of the Sinhalese armoury in a terrible civil war which ran for twenty-six years. Most of us will never know civil war. It is not the same as a war between nations:

‘... life can never be normal during a war, particularly a civil war when people often don’t know the enemy, and can’t be sure of the friend.’

Para’s voice gives a first-hand account of the events which shaped his life in war-torn Sri Lanka, and a horrifying account of the brutal treatment he received at the hands of police, when he was taken into custody, on no evidence at all. Anyone who reads his account of what was done to him would understand why he risked everything in a terrible voyage to Christmas Island, on the boat later identified as SIEV 69.

But the second voice is Alison Corke. Ali met Para by letter, while he was detained by Australia on Christmas Island.

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Ali Corke is a grandmother from Apollo Bay who for years has been actively involved in refugee issues. When Para was released from immigration detention, she and her family invited him to live with them. Together, she and Para have told his story. And she captures the essence of a refugee's story:

‘All of us have one thing in common—we have survived only through acts of kindness and compassion.’

Every Australian who has accepted the government's dishonest rhetoric about ‘boat people’ should read this book, so they can understand the horrors which cause people to flee, to leave behind the only culture they know, to risk everything in a dangerous journey across the ocean. For years, the Australian government has tried to persuade the Australian public that boat people are criminals from whom we need protection. It is a lie. Many Australians imagine that boat people come here as a lifestyle choice, but the fact is that boat people risk everything in their attempt to find a safe place to live. The risks they take are a measure of the dangers they are fleeing; a measure of their desperation.

If every Australian could understand the dangers boat people are escaping, they might have a more generous attitude.

They might understand why Ali Corke has done so much to help Para.

They might be prompted to have a more generous attitude to people who come here asking for safety.

They might show kindness rather than indifference or hostility.

This book shows how acts of kindness, great and small, can shape people's lives.

Julian Burnside QC, Refugee Advocate

PROLOGUE

August, 2011. We sit quietly together. Darkness has fallen unnoticed and now, unless the fire flickers, I can barely see the young man across the room. I feel numb after hearing what he has just told me. He spoke first of poverty, hardship and adversity. He then shared stories of steadfastness, generosity and courage. Just now he told me of desperation, terror and torture.

I have no words. Just the age of my own children, he has experienced more horror in his thirty-three years than I could ever have imagined.

We are so silent and still that we can hear the first few raindrops pattering on the iron roof. I imagine them sliding down the window, like my tears. I find I am holding my breath, afraid to speak in case we lose this moment of shared stories, deep-rooted memories and profound, ongoing loss. When someone entrusts you with the events that have shaped their life, it feels like being handed a jewel—it must be protected, but should it be shared or locked away? What should I do with the information that has been so

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carefully, and at times so painfully, recalled and given to me?

I ask, 'What would you like me to do with this knowledge, Para?'

The rain falls more heavily. A log slips in the fire and the flames flicker, casting shadows in the soft glow. After a long, thought-filled silence, the young man shifts in his chair. I worry for him, revisiting those ghastly memories. I wonder what he will say next, now the demons of the past have been resurrected in his mind—but then, I doubt they ever really went away.

Another long silence ensues. I think he is struggling with what he wants to do with these recollections. I think along the lines of vengeance and anger and sorrow and wonder if he will ask me to just tell everyone how terrible his life has been. After so much suffering, what else can he want?

But I underestimate him. There is another long silence.

'I'm thinking back to everyone who helped me,' he finally replies. 'There are so many I would like to reach. I can never see them now, but I want them to know that I remember them and I am grateful. Some people helped me a lot, some people just a little. Many will not even know how they helped, but at the time it meant so much to me. Some saved my life. Some risked their own lives. One almost certainly died for me. I will never forget them. Please, will you help me to thank them?'

We both know that most of the people who helped Para would have little idea of the ripples that would flow from their 'unremembered acts'. Then again, several will remember the moment they played a part in helping him avoid hunger, or ridicule ... or death.

The Power of Good People

Imagine if we could go back over our own lives and track down the people who influenced us in a way that was possibly small to them, but at the time was monumental for us?

A friend, now in her seventies, recently discovered at a school reunion that her high school English and French teacher was still alive. She immediately wrote to him, telling him that she remembered him as a compassionate and caring teacher who had a profound influence on her life.

‘He knew I hated French and could not really master the subject, but I loved English,’ Jane told me. ‘I was a shy child, and spent most of my time reading in the school library. He would come to find me after exams and whisper, “Don’t worry, Jane, I managed to find a couple of extra marks in your French paper. You’ve passed.”’

Jane is now a highly regarded author and illustrator of exquisite and meaningful children’s books, thus passing on the thoughtfulness once shown to her.

‘I had always wished there was some way I could contact him to tell him that the bespectacled, shy student remembered him and his kindness, but by the time I realised the extent of his influence on me I had lost touch with the school, he had retired and I had no idea where to start looking. It was wonderful to write that letter to him—it was like a satisfying closure.’

Para feels the same way.

‘I just want to somehow be able to say “thank you”,’ he says. ‘I know that some of the people are dead now, but even so, I would like to mention them.’

If we are thrown into a life-and-death situation and someone rescues us, we are usually too intent on escape

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and survival to express thanks. All we can do is take the opportunity to say ‘thank you’ if the time ever comes.

There is another thing we can do—pay it forward.

Para is a living example of the philosophy of Stephen Grellet who was captured and sentenced to death during the French Revolution. After managing to escape to Amsterdam, he sailed to the West Indies. When he finally arrived in the United States, aged twenty-two, he could not forget the people who helped him avoid execution and escape. He became a Quaker and devoted the rest of his life to helping people across North America and Europe. These words are attributed to him, although others have claimed them, over the years:

I expect to pass through this world but once; any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now; let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.

Having stared down hardship, terror, torture and death, Para now works tirelessly to help others, without expecting thanks. He supports close and extended family members in Sri Lanka and around the world—for example, when floods struck southern India in 2015, he was the first to find a missing cousin and then help him to re-establish his painting business. He sends money to help people still affected by the war, donates regularly to orphanages in Sri Lanka and India, and sponsors several children through World Vision.

But ‘paying it forward’ is not quite enough—through this book, Para wants to acknowledge and thank those who helped him.

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‘My life has been challenging at times, and I know that many others have had to cope with a much, much harder life than mine,’ he says. ‘We can all find ourselves in difficult places. If we are fortunate, a good person will care enough to help us. In helping someone, people discover they can do greater things than they ever thought possible. That is the power of good people. *Nanri*¹ is the Tamil word for ‘thank you’, and through this book I would like to thank them all.’

The world is a better place for having Para in it. And I have learned that we are more powerful than we realise.

So I begin this book saying *nanri* to Para—I feel honoured that he shared his stories with me and trusts me to help him to tell them. And *nanri* to all the good people who helped to keep Para safe.

1 Pronounced ‘Nandri’.

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THE LETTERS

At the beginning of 2010, Dr Lisa Hartley was coordinating a letter-writing project supporting asylum seekers detained on Christmas Island. She wrote to all Rural Australians for Refugees members, asking people if they could make the time to write to asylum seekers in detention.

‘Over the previous two decades,’ she recalls, ‘successive Australian governments had introduced policies aimed at deterring and punishing the arrival of asylum seekers. Since 1994, this included the policy of mandatorily detaining all asylum seekers who arrived in Australia without a valid visa. This policy saw thousands of people enduring long periods of detention before finally being accepted as refugees.

‘After ten years of governance by the conservative Howard-Coalition party and the expansion of detention centres to remote areas in Australia and the Pacific, the election of the Rudd Labor Government in 2007 was met with cautious optimism by those concerned about the human rights of asylum seekers and refugees. However, with increasing numbers of boat arrivals in 2008, the Labor Government

soon reinforced the indefinite nature of the mandatory detention policy and began to increase the number of Immigration Detention Centres. This included the expansion of facilities on Christmas Island, located in the Indian Ocean, 380 kilometres south of Java and 2650 kilometres northwest of Perth.’

The letter-writing project was established to bridge the gap between Australians and people seeking asylum, and to help asylum seekers improve their English. In November 2009, Dr Michelle Dimasi was living on Christmas Island, conducting field work for her PhD thesis. She established Asylum Seekers Christmas Island in response to the growing number of people detained there; it was difficult for mainland Australians to visit the detention facilities, and the detainees had a growing need for sustained advocacy about their rights. With very limited access to Internet or phones, they needed to know that many Australians supported and cared for them.

I thought this would be an ideal way of practising my skills—having a new Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language—while helping someone improve theirs. I replied to Lisa and a few days later she sent a note with the name and email address of a young man with a long and interesting name.

In my first email, cautiously addressed to ‘Mr Paheertharan Pararasasingam’, I explained that I had been given his contact details by Lisa, that I was keen to help him improve his English through letter writing, and that I was an ordinary Australian person with a husband, three grown-up children and a granddaughter—lots of domestic detail because I didn’t want him to be alarmed by letters from a complete stranger.

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A few days later I received his reply, addressed ‘Dear Madam’. He told me he had arrived on Christmas Island in November 2009, having been rescued by a huge gas tanker when his boat sank off the Cocos Islands after thirty or so days at sea, with the loss of twelve lives. His wife and son were left in India—he missed them greatly, but he had been forced to leave with the others on his boat because of persecution during the Sri Lankan Civil War and the ongoing danger of deportation back to Sri Lanka from India. He suggested I called him ‘Para’ rather than Mr Pararasasingam, apologised for any shortcomings in his English, and asked me to reply.

Para sounded pleased to have heard from me, so I replied, saying that I hoped we would enjoy being penfriends, that I was happy to help him with his English and that, since his own family was so far away, he might think of me as his ‘Aussie mum’.

The next day, his reply pinged into my laptop—‘Dear Mum ...’.

Our journey had begun. I had no idea what extraordinary and at times, harrowing adventures were in store.

A lengthy exchange of emails followed—Para was in detention for nearly two years—until we finally met in August 2011. With daily practice, Para’s English improved quickly. If he made a mistake, I would incorporate a correction in my reply. He absorbed the new knowledge expertly, looking up and writing down unfamiliar words and phrases, and if he could not figure out something, he would ask the detention centre staff.

I had no idea which subjects were off limits or if there were any culturally sensitive issues to avoid, but we muddled along. Our letters also shared news about each other's families, and I found myself looking forward to hearing from him each day. Sometimes Para did not have access to the computers in the detention centre, and then I worried about the silence and hoped everything was okay. Similarly, Para would worry if I was not in touch regularly, and when I told him I was travelling to India to catch up with my daughter he gave me lots of advice and seemed relieved when I arrived safely home.

I learned that Para had a wife, Jayantha, and a two-year-old son, Abilash. As the months passed, I learned about Para's extended family, the friends he had made in detention, the daily routines and the mounting frustrations. No one knew for how long they would be detained, if they would be assessed as refugees or returned to their country of origin, whether they would receive permanent residency, or even if they would ever see their families again.

They all longed to be allowed to settle in Australia and to bring their wives and children, but already Australia was tightening its grip on the borders, and we both saw that the official vocabulary was changing, with 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' giving way to 'illegal immigrant' and 'illegal maritime arrival'—even though it was not then, and is still not, illegal to seek asylum.

Towards the end of his first year on Christmas Island, Para was sad and preoccupied, thinking about the twelve people on his boat who had drowned at sea. With help from some sympathetic staff members in the detention centre, he

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organised a memorial service, complete with service sheets. I had easier access to IT equipment, so together we prepared the content, then I emailed the documents to Para and he managed to get them printed.

I was beginning to realise that this modest and compassionate young man was also extremely intelligent and resourceful. Arranging an official memorial service in a different language from within a remote offshore detention centre that was split into several camps—and bringing together a number of detainees, case managers and church and other representatives—was no mean feat.

The service was attended by all the survivors—all were still in detention—and many staff. Para said it definitely helped them to cope with their personal situations, as they remembered those who had died, and reflected on their own good fortune in surviving. Even though they were still incarcerated with no idea when they may be released, they all had high hopes for the future.

Para's time in detention dragged on, with no end in sight. I started writing to anyone I could think of who might be able to intervene in his case, from ministers (state and federal, in government and in opposition) to case workers, refugee advocates, lawyers ... even the Inspector General of Intelligence and Security, the agency responsible for reviewing ASIO. No one was spared. It was frustrating and disappointing, but my letters led to lasting friendships with some remarkable and inspiring people.

After almost two years on Christmas Island, Para was transferred to Darwin Detention Centre. We began to plan for me to fly up there to meet him. Although he didn't really

want our first meeting to be within the confines of a prison, it seemed to be the only way we would ever meet, as his detention seemed to have no end in sight.

One day I was passing the kitchen radio, arms laden with washing from the clothesline, when through the static, I heard the tail end of an interview with then Immigration Minister Chris Bowen. From memory, it went something like this:

INTERVIEWER: We are hearing that refugees are being held in detention for very lengthy periods, with no indication of when they will be released. Isn't it too harsh to keep them locked up like this?

MINISTER: Yes, they are kept in detention for health and security checks, but once they have cleared these, they could be transferred to live in the community, in a form of community detention.

INTERVIEWER: I suppose the problem there is that most will not know anyone living in the community, so won't be able to organise a placement?

MINISTER: That's true. If an asylum seeker could find a host family in the community, and they have satisfied the Department in terms of security and health checks, then they could move out of detention in a short space of time.

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Since ABC Radio National reception was very poor in Apollo Bay back in 2011, it was extremely fortunate I heard the interview. Unceremoniously dumping the clean laundry onto the

kitchen bench, I was back to my laptop in a flash, emailing Para's case manager to ask if community detention would be an option for him.

Fast forward a few months and many emails, phone calls and head-in-hands moments that included—for reasons we couldn't fathom—Para initially being flown to Brisbane, where he was placed for a few weeks while I negotiated furiously with the department to fulfil his wish to come to Apollo Bay.

My husband Charlie and I were standing with our daughter Georgie and her partner at the arrivals lounge in Melbourne Airport, waiting for Para to disembark.

I couldn't believe we had achieved this—after all those months in detention, Para was finally going to live in the Australian community, with a family. This would enable him to learn the customs, improve his language and relax away from the daily stress of imprisonment. He had been granted refugee status but so far, no visa, so he was not allowed to work, but at that stage we all felt he just needed some peace.

The doors opened and the ground staff cleared the way for the incoming passengers. Out lumbered an enormous man, the size and stature of a large grizzly bear. Georgie caught my eye—we had not seen a photo of Para, although we had sent him plenty of our family photos. Was this him? To my immense relief, the bear-man was quickly greeted by a person so similar that they could only have been brothers, and off they went.

Then a few businessmen emerged, ears glued to phones, racing to their next appointments. Some unaccompanied children bounced through the doors, shepherded by weary

cabin crew. Families, couples and more singles followed; each time a young man appeared, Georgie would glance in my direction—with a cheeky half-smile if he seemed strange.

We had no idea what to expect. Had I done the right thing in inviting a stranger to live with us? But then, Para was not a stranger—our letters had been frequent and candid; I believed we already knew each other well—but I felt anxious.

The rush of people dwindled. There were a few seconds between passengers now. Where was Para? I began to worry—could the Department have changed its mind? Was he lost, or put back in detention somehow?

Finally, a few minutes later, at the end of the line, a young man of medium height appeared. His smile shone with exceptional brilliance against his dark skin. His eyes danced; he looked excited, hopeful and maybe a little uncertain.

I approached him tentatively. ‘Hello, Are you Para?’

‘Hello, Mum? Yes, I’m Para. Thank you for your letters. I think I will be fine now.’