

2017 Young Writers Award Entry

Aged 15-17



The Lucky Country

I squeeze my eyes shut as tightly as I can. It's still not enough to escape reality, but it helps.

The cramped little craft stinks like a slaughterhouse, full of fearful sweat and filth, and I grit my teeth against the seasickness. I ache for dry land and my mother's cooking. I've spent the whole voyage in this same miserable reverie: it's been a week, maybe two. I don't know.

All I want is to be home – wherever that may be.

My family lived in Pakistan since the Partition. My grandparents started off as refugees themselves, ejected from their Indian homeland for praying to the wrong God. It took them time to appreciate their new country's strange desert beauty, but I was born on its soil: I could never have imagined straying too far from its borders.

Although they too loved the ancient landscape, my parents always spoke of modern ideas. I had known that we were somehow different to the other families at school, but it didn't bother me. I loved my parents, my big brother. They were all I needed.

When the Taliban swept down from the north and infected Pakistan, my parents knew they were destined to resist. As the contagion spread, we had no choice but to move from town to town, praying for our safety. We had hope that we'd win our country back, someday.

One of my fellow passengers starts an agonised moaning. Nobody moves. She cries most days, and we don't know her name anyway. Dry sobs thump out of her as she rocks backwards and forwards, crying out that she wants water. Nobody moves. We're all thirsty.

My earliest memories are of the big house in the city, where my father would chase me around the hallways as I laughed myself giddy. In the evenings he showed me the world of the *1001 Nights*, and would read to me from whatever book I chose – even the banned ones.

My mother had cardamom hands and honey eyes, and a spectacular wit that made a lot of old-fashioned men uncomfortable. She refused to wear hijabs of a solemn colour and put stacks of bracelets on both arms, so she'd jangle around the house like a happy blaze of light.

She and my father's friends would often visit in the night-time. I would play with the other children in the courtyard while they had their hushed conversations in the lounge, shaking their heads and frowning when they thought we weren't looking.

The boat lurches, and my nausea almost overcomes me. I dig my fingernails into my thigh, almost drawing blood – I'll do anything I can to distract myself. The only way I sustain myself these days is by remembering the stories about the Lucky Country. Every time I retell them in my head, dozens of times a day, that country grows more prosperous, warm, friendly – more like it could be home. I squint at the glary sea, and try to convince myself that we'll arrive at any second.

The days of the big house in the city were numbered, and we soon began our nomadic life. Sometimes my parents wouldn't even unpack everything. Each house was smaller than the last, and my mother had to walk further and further to get water. My father couldn't always find work, and he'd be in black moods for days at a time.

I couldn't go to school in every town, but my parents never let me skip a single night of reading. 'Normal' being a relative term, I got used to sleeping to an artillery symphony, and I no longer bat an eye at the blackouts.

My parents and my brother were always talking about Australia. They talked about it with a strange reverence, so that when I was little, I held it in the same regard as the mythical kingdoms of my storybooks. They told me it was enormous, and clean and beautiful and safe. Especially that it was safe. They said that in Australia, I could be a doctor or a lawyer or even a painter, whatever I wanted, and I'd never have to think about a life as a soldier.

Banging on the cooking pot, our self-professed captain declares that it's time to eat. We only get one meal a day, and my dormant hunger comes roaring back to life.

The captain hands the pot to the boy sitting next to me. It's filled with our communal meal: clumpy rice with a few morsels of lamb to the side. There's barely enough to feed ten people, let alone the twenty-five we have on board. Supplies have been running low.

The boy mutters a little benediction to himself and starts eating with his hands, scooping the food into his mouth. We don't bother with utensils anymore.

I stare balefully at him – he's taking more than his fair share of the meat, and I'm certain that I will die if I don't get any this time. I fix my gaze, trying not to think of my mother's cooking.

When they told me that I would be going to Australia, I wasn't surprised. My parents had been stoic as the Taliban picked off my uncles, but when they finally got my brother, they were broken.

My mother had kept apologising, telling me that it would all be okay, that we'd be a family again, that we'd reunite as soon as possible. They would have come with me, but our savings had been eroded by a lifetime of fleeing, and things were too desperate to dally. The last time I saw my parents, they were bawling like children as they waved goodbye.

I wolf down my meal, barely even chewing the leathery lamb. I'm so hungry that I'm in rapture, and it takes me a moment to notice the other passengers' yelling. I raise my eyes mid-mouthful, and beyond the glare, I can see a huge ship on the very edge of the horizon. It blares a horn in greeting. One of the adults excitedly says it's an Australian ship, he's sure of it. My heart leaps, and I scramble to my feet, waving and yelling with the others. It's the moment I've visualised so carefully for weeks.

It must take twenty minutes before the Australians reach us, but it feels like twenty seconds. Men in camouflage help us to board their ship, handing out blankets and a few bottles of water to share. They almost seem like they were expecting us.

My English is too poor to understand much more than their basic commands, but I hear over and over 'Nauru', that it's the 'closest one'.

Gripped by intuition, I know in my heart that *that* is my new home, a town in the Lucky Country. I try out the two syllables myself. Nau-ru. I'm smiling like a little kid, I can't believe my luck.

I'll make friends with the Australians, they'll like me there. After all my hunger, my tears and my terror, it's finally over. My father laboured, my mother cried, but it's all worth it now.

I'm sodden and starving, but hysterical with joy. I can't wait to arrive.