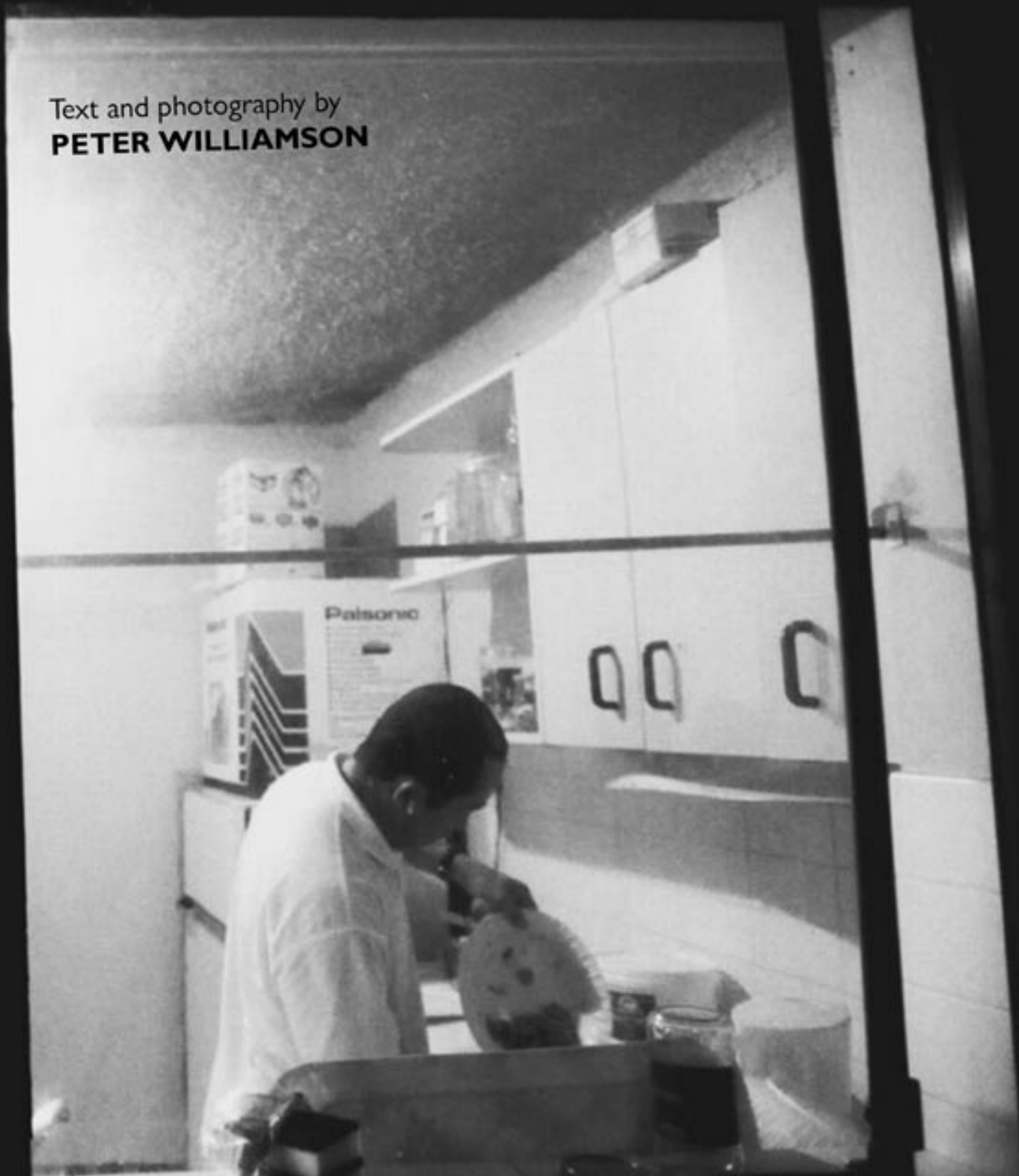


# Living in Limbo



The Australian media are now saturated with stories about asylum seekers and the issue of detention. But what do we know of the lives of those refugees who are released from detention on temporary protection visas? They are permitted to work, but they cannot bring their families to Australia. If they leave the country there is no coming back. And what will happen when their visas expire? Nobody knows. It hasn't happened yet.

Text and photography by  
**PETER WILLIAMSON**





**Talash works six days a week in construction, seven if he is offered work on Sundays. He sends money to his wife and eight children who are refugees in Pakistan.**

When Afghan refugee Ali Oruzgani boarded a fishing boat bound for Australia with twenty-two others seeking sanctuary from war and persecution, he knew it was the beginning of a new phase in his already tumultuous life. Today, after a year lost in detention and unable to see his family who are dispersed from Iran to Pakistan, he shares a flat in Sydney with three other men from his background. All Hazaras, their flat is open to frequent visitors from interstate, looking for work in Sydney or just visiting.

The occasional despair and frequent frustration of fleeing to the end of the earth in search of sanctuary – only to be given a much begrudged temporary visa – at times weigh heavily on the members of this unusual household. As Ali says, the only good thing from coming to Australia is the friendships he has made.

I first met Ali, Zaher, Alimadad

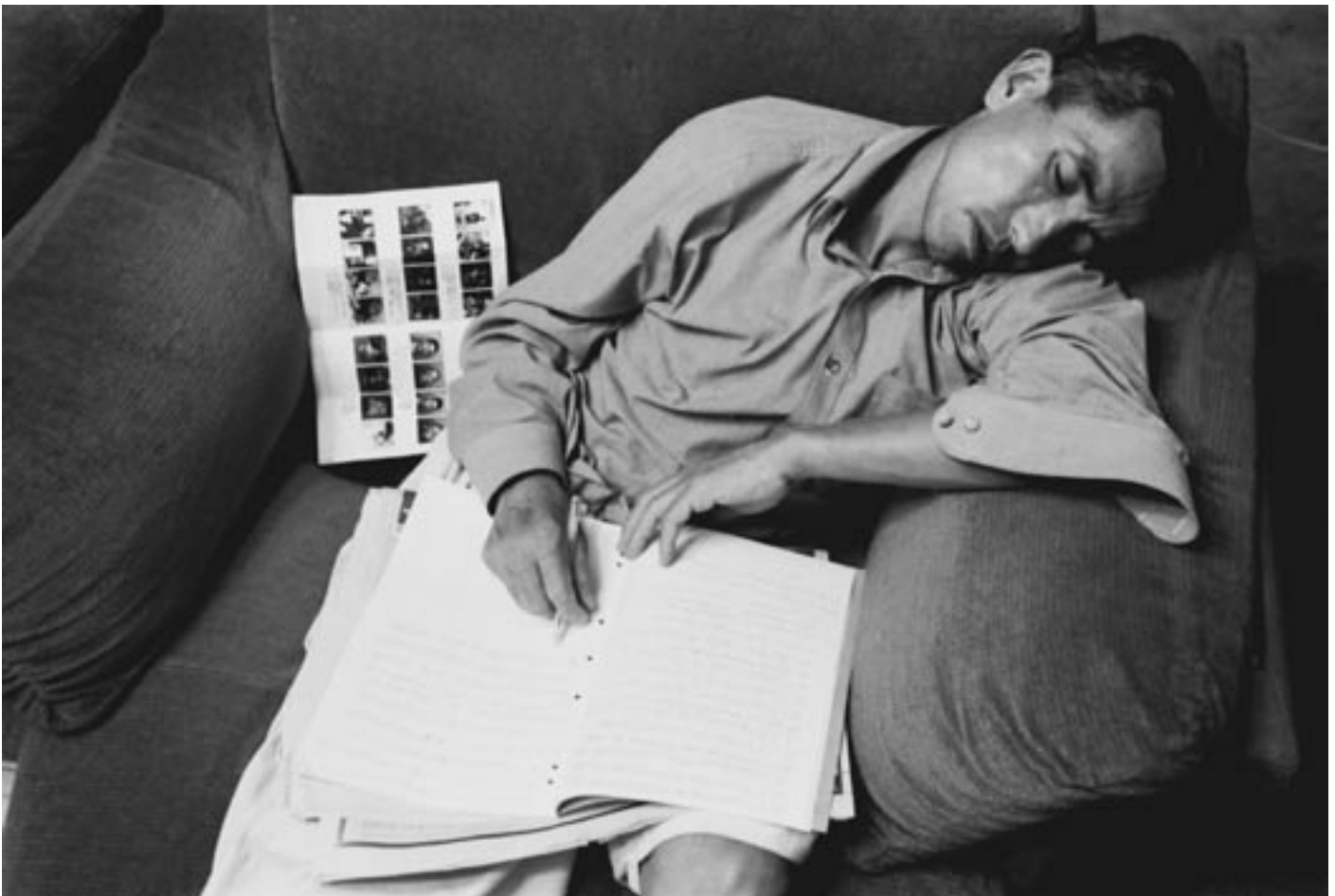
and Talash in a bare flat in Auburn, one of Sydney's western suburbs. Zaher served me tea on the floor and I asked if he would allow me, a stranger, to look into their lives. He agreed.

Talash is one such friend, a 46 year old father of eight and grandfather to two more, with a warm heart and a twinkle in his eye. Every time I visit he implores me to stay and eat – “Don't worry, your girlfriend will wait for you”. An Afghan man struggling with “women's work” - he is now the cook of the household. He does not mind the role, but he was never prepared for it. I like his cooking, and I tell him so. He answers: “If my wife was here, then you could eat real Afghan food”. But she is a refugee in Pakistan, with their six younger children in Quetta.

I naïvely ask Talash if his family is in a refugee camp. They are not. It's too dangerous for women without their husbands, but Talash does not wish to go into details. His eldest son

is in Indonesia, and was hoping to find a boat to Australia, but there is no longer any point. All that would await him is a detention centre and then, at best, a temporary protection visa. The phone companies must be doing well out of the refugees; there are continual calls to Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran, with earnest and hurried discussion as the meter counts out their hard earned cash and arrangements are made for further phone calls and messages to be passed on. Now Talash has persuaded his son to abandon his plans to find a boat to Australia. He is sick of UNHCR camps, people smugglers, and waiting. He asks Talash to send him money to get him home, but his mother, Talash's wife tells Talash from Quetta that it is too dangerous and he should not send the cash. So Talash struggles to keep together his family spread across four countries and measures out his pay in international phone cards.

Ali's wife is also in Quetta with their two children, a boy aged 10



**Talash falls asleep while doing his homework and misses his adult English class.**

and a girl aged 7. The two wives don't know each other, although their husbands have become friends on the other side of the world. Ali's wife lives in a rented house with her brother (who has found some work), his wife and their five children. None of the children are at school because they have no Pakistani ID.

Ali and Talash were members of the PDPA (Peoples' Democratic Party of Afghanistan) which aligned itself with the Russian communists. In their fiercely Islamic country, Ali and Talash had the audacity to declare themselves atheists. Apostasy was considered a crime punishable by death and, even if the laws have officially changed, they continue to be enforced by many of the militia still in control of their patches of the country.

Ali's education also arouses suspicion amongst the Taliban. As a bright young boy from a village background, Ali was sent to Kabul

for his schooling, and then won a scholarship to study engineering in the Soviet Union. On his return to Afghanistan the only opportunity for him was in the Afghan army which was fighting the mujahideen rebels. As an officer on the Communist side, Ali is well-known to those who would kill him and his atheism is no secret either.

Talash also drew attention to himself and was decorated by President Najibullah. He was later arrested and interrogated by the Taliban, and his cell-mates were summarily executed before his eyes. While expecting the same fate, he was recognized by an acquaintance who lied about Talash's identity to help secure his release. The next time the Taliban came for him he knew it was time to flee. The family sold their home and Talash paid the proceeds to a people smuggler to get him to Australia. The rest of the family found their way to Quetta in Pakistan.

The youngest in the household is Alimadad, and the only one not married. Ali, Talash and Alimadad met for the first time on the boat from Indonesia to Ashmore Reef, and were detained together at Curtin Detention Centre. Ali remembers that Alimadad got terribly sunburnt on the voyage. Alimadad has had no contact with his family since he fled Afghanistan in 1999. Whilst in detention, the Red Cross visited and offered to help him contact his family, but he could not bring himself to put pen to paper. "I had a lot of problems with depression and stress – I couldn't write a letter."

Although both his father and brother are literate, there is no tradition of written correspondence in their village community. "Its very strange, very difficult to write a letter", he says. How can he communicate what he has been through in nearly five years since leaving home? How can he explain the flight to Indonesia, the people smugglers and the unseaworthy boats,



Talash has taken on the role of cook, but tells me; “If my wife was here, then you could eat real Afghan food”.

to a family which has never seen the sea and knows only its Afghan home? When it makes no sense to anyone he knows, how can he make sense of the time lost in detention, the bureaucracy of seeking asylum and the convoluted rules now twisted even further by a government besotted with its own rhetoric about maintaining the sanctity of Australia’s borders? Red Cross messages are reserved for brief non-political communications – “I am alive, I am in detention, so and so is sick” - but even such terse communication was more than he could do.

Alimadad concedes that he is also apprehensive about establishing contact. That there is no postal service to the village is a barrier, but not insurmountable. His parents are, or were, farmers in Afghanistan; he has four brothers, one sister. One brother was fighting against the Taliban – the others were at home. He has no idea what may have happened. Not knowing might be better than the

knowledge he might gain. His father once stood in the village mosque and called upon the villagers to defend themselves against the Taliban. This could not have endeared him to a regime known for its intolerance of dissent.

### **If my wife was here, then you could eat real Afghan food.**

Zaher was brought into Port Hedland a few days after the others, having come to Australia on a different boat. Friendships forged in detention must now substitute for family. Like the friendships made at war, they will always have a special meaning for those who were there.

Drawing out the stories from each of the men in the household is a slow process. They do not expect sympathy. Nor do they consider their lives extraordinary. They are simply people with nowhere to go. Since

release from detention, their lives have taken on a superficial order. Over six months their flat has gradually transformed with the acquisition of a second-hand lounge suite and a large, new television set. Ali has enrolled in a computer course at TAFE, and an old computer now sits on the dining table. Talash serves up lentils and Afghan bread with sweet tea. They have found a way to survive for now, buying their food in bulk from Flemington Markets and always cooking at home. Their Afghan news comes off the Internet – in Farsi from the BBC.

But the order glosses over the turmoil beneath. Alimadad’s visa expires in a few months, and he has no idea whether he will be allowed to stay or be forced onto a plane back to Afghanistan. The past months have not gone well. He borrowed \$2000 to buy a car which was stolen four months later. After another month it was found and the police returned it to him, but a week after that he



Ali knows many familiar faces in Auburn, the centre of Sydney's Afghan community.

drove into a bridge, writing it off. The loss of the car led to the loss of his construction job. He was working all over Sydney, general labour and tiling, but could no longer work because he had no transport. Now he is looking for lower paid factory work and still owes over \$1000 on the car.

Zaher finds it hard to sleep. He is anxious and suffers symptoms typical of those like him who were tortured and imprisoned. He has no contact with his wife and children. Sydney has not been kind to him. His first job was in the kitchen of an Indian restaurant in Crows Nest where he was promised he would be trained as a waiter and earn a good wage. After a while his pay was \$40 for a full day's work. When he started asking questions, they told him he was not wanted any more.

Next was a weekend job in a car wash and, again, Zaher was not paid. He was beaten up by two thugs when

he turned up asking for his wages. Despite having a witness who made a statement, the police did nothing. He contacted a lawyer about his medical bills, but the lawyer wanted \$4000 before doing anything. Zaher now works in a foundry, starting at 5am. The wages are low, but he gets home

**'He was beaten up by two thugs when he turned up asking for his wages. Despite having a witness who made a statement, the police did nothing'.**

early and can pay his bills.

While establishing a network of contacts and acquaintances, there is an inner void. A visit to the Royal Easter Show brings both amazement and amusement, but Talash's first reaction was that he wished his

children could be there to see such sights. On a day trip to the Northern Beaches, it strikes me that Sydney has an embarrassment of riches. Boys laze in the sun with their surfboards as a family pours out of a four-wheel drive to buy pies and drinks. The chattering daughters seem oblivious of their affluence and privilege, not so much as casting a glance at the four men almost gaping at such abundance and care-free complacency.

In the car, driving past houses overlooking luxury yachts gleaming in the sun on Pittwater, Ali says that he did not know that such places existed. My new friends are on the outside, looking in at the lives of the chosen people.

The frustration of their situation never evokes anger ... they just quietly continue their lives. They never raise the subject of visa renewals, deportation, their families across the Indian Ocean. Life as a low-paid



Friends drop in for meals and the flat is the site of much interaction

worker factory worker is not easy, but theirs is a struggle to hang on to this most tenuous level of security. There is a struggle to be allowed to be battlers. They ask very little. Not once have I heard them complain about their wages, or their struggles to find work.

There is no dole for TPV holders. And they have never suggested that they wanted it. They want only to be allowed to stay and work, and then hope after that to be allowed to bring their families to live with them.

Ali was pushed once. For the second time he went for his driving test, and was failed on a technicality. He tore up the paper work, not realizing that the certified translation of his Afghan license was inside. But, the struggle to normalise his life in Australia is one which, for the most part, Ali has embraced willingly. He began learning English while in detention and now speaks very

comfortably and with a casual and captivating eloquence.

English is Ali's fifth language, and his weakest; he worked as a translator from Russian into Farsi when first a refugee in Iran. His language skills have been a key to some doors, but his experience has not been easy. In Pakistan he was befriended for his Russian and then abandoned once he was no longer needed. A Tasmanian company wanted to hire him and help him upgrade his engineering qualification, but then withdrew their offer when they found he was 37 years old. Being highly skilled but not able even to find a clerical job is galling.

Ali has concluded that his best prospects are in his own business, but the question of capital is a problem. He has cousin, Mohamed, who has taken the gamble of investing his time and energy and incurring the debt of a dry-cleaning business. On a Sunday afternoon Ali and I find Mohamed

cleaning floors and painting walls in his new shop. I ask Mohamed how he can toil seven days a week with the knowledge that he could be deported in less than six months. What would happen to the business? He shrugs his shoulders: "We hope for the best".

With time running out, Mohamed, Ali, and the others need to put in applications to have their visas extended. What this entails, nobody knows, but it will require lawyers and money. To stay in Australia they must re-apply for refugee status, but the rules have changed and the odds are now stacked against them. Having once proved they are refugees is no longer enough. Mr Ruddock, it seems, has already made up his mind that it is safe to return to Afghanistan.

The Federal Government has offered them \$2000 to drop their claims for asylum and accept repatriation to Afghanistan. They do not consider the offer for a minute



Alimadad and Zaher enjoy a joke while Talash looks on.

– the money means nothing when their lives are at risk.

Afghan refugees are confronted with two arguments designed to stigmatise them. One is that they are “economic refugees”, not seeking refuge, but economic opportunities. In contradiction, the other argument is that many of them are wealthy, and have brought with them large sums of money. All TPV holders have been found to be “refugees”; that is, facing a well-founded fear of persecution. Economic factors are not relevant to the assessment.

Some, like Talash, sold their homes to finance their flight, and did not have enough money to get the entire family to Australia. Ali had to spend his last dollar paying the people smugglers and, yes, they wanted US dollars.

Ali now plays a role in Sydney’s Afghan community, helping to organise the boys’ soccer team. The

team is soundly beaten by the touring Tigers from Brisbane, and the match has attracted some media attention. Dressed for the occasion in a black suit, Ali appears a natural leader and spokesman. For the next few weeks he receives calls from 60 Minutes, the BBC, SBS, a documentary crew.

**Friendships forged in detention must now substitute for family. Like the friendships made at war, they will always have a special meaning for those who were there.**

Refugees are big news, now. But Ali’s values also set him apart from his community. “The first thing they want”, he says, “is to build a mosque”. He is appalled at the idea of raising money to that end. Religion, to his mind, has been the ruin of his country. “I would be happy to give money for a

school, but I will not give one cent for a mosque.”

Speaking freely about his past, Ali sees no shame in using people smugglers. It was the only way to escape. But now, he must justify not having sought refuge in other countries en route to Australia. Pakistan, he says, was out of the question – it was the major international sponsor of the Taliban. The Taliban are all over the country. Then why not Indonesia?

Ali explains that when he engaged the smugglers to get him to Australia, he had no idea of what was involved. He also had no idea of the provisions of the Refugee Convention. He handed over money, and they arranged everything – a forged passport, a flight to Indonesia, the customs, the inevitable bribes, the boats, the transport to the port whose name he still does not know.

The refugees had no idea where





Ali talks to the media after his soccer team has played an Afghan team from Brisbane.



Enjoying a new environment ...  
Afghanistan has no sea and their only experience of the ocean was the journey to Australia on an Indonesian fishing boat.



**Where will it all end? Zaher has no contact with his wife and children.**

they were, what the plans were, who they would travel with, or when. In Indonesia they were put into a cheap hotel and told that if they left they would be arrested. They had no idea what city they were in, and did not speak the language. All they knew, or at least believed, was that if they got to Australia they would be given refuge.

When I ask Ali what he will do if he is sent away, he shrugs his shoulders: “I can’t go back, so I will have to go anywhere that will take me”. Despite Mr Ruddock’s certainty that those who would have killed two years ago him will now welcome him home, Ali sees no possibility.

In a quiet moment, Ali speaks of the Kabul he remembers, his flat, his books, his music, the visits to his brother and the meals with his family. The women did not wear veils at all, some worked as teachers or in offices, and they were free to dress as they liked. Ali remembers that it was safe to be in the streets. Kabul was the

metropolis for him - the center of his culture and his country. I understand suddenly that Ali is not in Australia looking for the good life – he has nowhere else to go. “My dream is to live in Kabul and contribute to the rebuilding of my country. But that is not possible. I can never go home”.

For Alimadad, the luxury of career choice is beyond contemplation for him. Ideally, he would like to study at TAFE to become a chef. He says that he has seen many jobs for chefs in the newspaper. “[As a chef] it is easy to get a job, and is not a big responsibility.” What he’d actually like to do is irrelevant.

The men live from day to day, month to month. Long term plans are impossible – even meaningless. They are all trying to improve their English. Alimadad asks me what is “a bolt from the blue”? Ali has a book about buying a car, which asks him to find a “tame mechanic” to look over a potential purchase. “What does this mean?”

The dictionary confuses things more. There is so much to learn, to uncover, to understand.

Talash is asleep on the lounge, an exercise book on his lap. Working six days a week on a construction site, he is relatively well-paid. He has joined the union and George from the CFMEU tells me that the Afghans are “great workers - very hard working”. Talash works on Sundays, too, if work is available. After all, he has to send money to his family in Pakistan. I wake him up and he is late for his English class at the Migrant Resource Centre. Talash does not say much, keeping his words to himself. I try to draw him out on what he wants from his life. “I hope to bring my family here – my life is my family”. He laughs, but cannot contemplate more. It seems too abstract a question for him to answer, but then he adds that he would like to give his children the chance to study and get educated, and to grow old to see them “lucky and successful”. ■