

HUSSAM SARAF (2017)

BETWEEN THE ASHES AND THE STARS

A STORY BY
HUSSAM SARAF (2017)



Between the Ashes and the Stars

A window into the lives of refugee Students

Written by Hussam Saraf, 2017

McGuire College (GSSC Now)

Third edition

Introduction

In a world often defined by conflict, loss, and displacement, one truth remains undeniably powerful: the resilience of the human spirit is both remarkable and unyielding. *Between the Ashes and the Stars* offers a window into the lives of refugee children, young souls whose lives have been ripped apart by war and violence, yet who continue to harbor dreams of a brighter, safer future.

These stories, though drawn from real experiences, are presented with changed names to ensure the privacy and protection of the children who live them. The events shared are real, though their identities have been altered for their safety. The emotions they felt, the pain they endured, and the hope that continues to guide them, these are universal truths experienced by countless children affected by conflict across the globe.

This book serves not only to give voice to these young refugees but also to shed light on the struggles they face on their journey toward survival, adaptation, and rebuilding. It is an exploration of the toll war takes on innocent lives, but also of the incredible fortitude and hope that children possess, even in the face of unimaginable adversity. Through the lives of Ibrahim, Laila, and the many others whose paths are intertwined in this collection, we witness stories of courage, perseverance, and a desire for change.

The aim of this book is to encourage greater understanding and empathy for refugees, particularly displaced children, and to Honor their bravery in the most trying circumstances. These are not just tales of suffering but of survival, of starting anew, and of seeking peace amid chaos. From the ashes of their past, they reach for the stars, holding on to the belief that even after the darkest of days, the future can be filled with hope, opportunity, and the promise of a better life.

As you read their stories, remember that these children, though separated by borders and circumstances, are bound by the shared experience of loss, survival, and an unwavering belief in the possibility of a brighter tomorrow. It is a reminder to all of us that even in the darkest of times, humanity's capacity for hope and healing remains a light that guides the way.

Chapter 1

The Silent Cries of Ibrahim

Ibrahim was only a child when the world around him turned into a nightmare. His family lived in a small town in Syria, nestled between the hills and fields of his mother's olive grove. Life had been peaceful, the air filled with the earthy smell of olive trees, the vibrant colours of the fields in spring, and the laughter of children running in the sunlit paths. Ibrahim would spend hours running with his younger sister, Nour, through the hills, their voices ringing with the joy of shared moments. His mother, a loving and patient woman, took great pride in the olive grove, as it had been in the family for generations. The house, with its red wooden door, was a symbol of the warmth and love that defined their home. There was also a small garden where Ibrahim and Nour planted flowers, vegetables, and herbs together, learning about nature and growth from their mother.

For a while, life felt like it could never be anything other than perfect. But that illusion shattered the night the bombs began to fall. Their once peaceful town, nestled in the quiet hills, became a battleground, as distant thunders of war rumbled ever closer.

Ibrahim's father, a schoolteacher who had instilled a love of books and learning in his children, was caught in the conflict. He believed in the power of knowledge to transform the world, and he passed this belief on to Ibrahim. But the war took him away. The attack that claimed his life was swift, devastating, and left a gaping hole in Ibrahim's heart.

The town they once loved, the place that had been home, was no more. Smoke filled the sky, and the sounds of gunfire and explosions drowned out every other sound. Ibrahim's mother, a woman of quiet strength, decided to flee. She knew it was the only chance they had to survive. One night, when the violence reached its peak, she took her children's hands and led them through the chaos, out of the town they once called home.

Their journey to safety was long and perilous. They crossed fields, rivers, and mountains, often walking for days with little food and fewer comforts. They had no choice but to keep moving forward, knowing that staying in one place would bring certain danger. They finally made it to Turkey, where they sought refuge in a camp. Ibrahim's mother did everything she could to protect them, but the weight of loss was heavy on her. The loss of her husband, their home, their way of life—it was too much to bear alone. Ibrahim, at just eleven years old, understood more than his age would suggest. He could see the toll the journey had taken on his mother. She was no longer the woman who had once tended to the garden with joy. Instead, she was a shadow of her former self, tired, broken, yet still holding on for the sake of her children.

Months in the camp passed slowly. Ibrahim's life consisted of waking up in the same tent, hearing the same conversations in languages he couldn't understand, and trying to find solace in the faces of other children who, like him, had lost so much. He had no friends. He didn't speak to anyone. His once vibrant spirit, shaped by the love of his father and the nurturing of his mother, was buried under the weight of grief.

Finally, after months of uncertainty, they were resettled in Australia. The moment they arrived in the new city, everything felt foreign. The air smelled different. The buildings were taller, and the streets were lined with cars instead of olive groves. The city was clean, orderly, and full of people speaking a language Ibrahim could barely comprehend. There was no warmth in this new place, only silence and an overwhelming sense of isolation.

Ibrahim was enrolled in a local school where he found himself surrounded by children from all over the world. Many of them had stories similar to his, but he could not bring himself to speak to anyone. He spent his days in the back of the classroom, his gaze often fixed on the windows, where he could imagine the rolling hills of Syria. He struggled to follow lessons, his mind often drifting back to the past, to his father's voice, to the warmth of home, to the smell of his mother's cooking.

One day, Mrs. Matthews, his teacher, noticed Ibrahim sitting by himself during lunch. She had been observing him for weeks, noticing the quiet sadness in his eyes. Mrs. Matthews, a kind woman, had worked with many refugee children before, but Ibrahim's sorrow seemed deeper than most. She had an idea.

"Ibrahim," she said gently one day, "Would you like to draw something for me? Something that reminds you of home?"

At first, Ibrahim didn't know how to respond. He was used to being silent, used to hiding behind the walls of his own sorrow. But Mrs. Matthews was kind, and her invitation felt like a lifeline.

She handed him a blank sheet of paper and a set of coloured pencils. Ibrahim hesitated. He wasn't sure what to draw. But as his hand hovered over the paper, memories began to flood his mind, the house with the red door, the olive trees, his little sister laughing in the garden. Slowly, he began to draw. His hand trembled at first, but with each stroke, the image came to life.

When he finished, he looked down at the picture. It was his home, his beautiful, lost home. The olive trees, the red door, the laughter of his sister. And in the background, the ruins of what had once been. He stared at the drawing, tears filling his eyes. He hadn't realized how much he missed those simple things, the life he once had. Mrs. Matthews quietly sat beside him, offering no words, just her presence. Her hand rested gently on his shoulder.

As the days passed, Ibrahim continued to draw. At first, he only drew the past, the things he had lost. But slowly, his drawings began to change. He drew the mountains he used to climb with his father. He drew his little sister, Nour, laughing as they ran through the fields. His drawings were not just memories now—they were dreams. He began to draw what he hoped for, new friends, new experiences, and a new beginning.

The Light of Laila

Laila had always been a dreamer, even when she was forced to leave everything behind. Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, Laila's early years had been filled with love. Her father, a schoolteacher, encouraged her to dream big. He would tell her stories of distant lands and remarkable people, always emphasizing the importance of education. Her mother, gentle and caring, taught her how to grow flowers, cook delicious meals, and take care of her younger brothers and sisters. Life, though difficult at times, had a rhythm to it, one of comfort, safety, and the warmth of family.

But everything changed when the Taliban seized control of Kabul. The city that once felt like home became a place of fear and violence. Laila's father, a kind man who had always believed in the power of education, became a target. He was outspoken against the Taliban's oppressive ways, and for that, he paid a heavy price. His life was taken in a bombing that destroyed their apartment, leaving Laila's family with no choice but to flee.

Their journey took them across many countries, first to Pakistan, where they lived in makeshift shelters, then to Turkey, and finally, after months of uncertainty, to Australia. Throughout their travels, Laila's spirit remained unbroken. Despite the horrors she had witnessed, the violence, the loss of loved ones, she never gave up on hope. She clung to the belief that a better life awaited them, a place where dreams could be nurtured once more.

In Australia, Laila was enrolled in a new school. It was a strange place, filled with children who spoke a language she couldn't understand and whose customs were unfamiliar to her. But Laila was resilient. She didn't let fear keep her from reaching out. She smiled at everyone she met, even when they looked at her with confusion or pity. She wasn't afraid to show kindness, to make friends, to start anew.

One of the first people she noticed was Ibrahim. He sat at the back of the classroom, his eyes distant, his shoulders slumped as if carrying a weight far too heavy for his small frame. He was different from the other children. He didn't speak, didn't join in the activities, and didn't show interest in the lessons. But Laila saw something in him, something that reminded her of herself. She, too, had been broken by the past, but her heart still held a flicker of light.

During recess one day, Laila walked up to Ibrahim. She sat next to him, her bright smile never wavering. "Hi," she said warmly. "I'm Laila. I like to draw. What about you?"

Ibrahim didn't respond at first. He only stared at her with a mix of confusion and wariness. His eyes were like dark windows, reflecting a pain that Laila could not fully comprehend. But Laila, undeterred by his silence, continued with her usual cheerfulness.

"I like to draw flowers," she said, showing him a small sketch she had done on the back of her notebook. "Would you like to draw with me?"

Ibrahim hesitated, his hand trembling slightly as he picked up a crayon from the pile she had brought. He didn't speak, but he started to draw. His strokes were shaky at first, but as Laila gently encouraged him, the lines on the paper began to form a picture. Slowly, he drew a small flower, fragile and hesitant, much like his own heart.

For the first time in a long while, Ibrahim felt something other than sadness. It wasn't a grand change, but it was a moment of connection. Laila didn't push him to talk, didn't ask him to share his story. She simply let him be, allowing him to express himself in the way he felt most comfortable.

Days passed, and Ibrahim's hand grew steadier. Laila would sit with him during lunch or after school, pulling out her crayons and drawing. And slowly, the silence between them became less oppressive, filled with the unspoken bond of understanding and shared experience. Ibrahim began to smile, just a little at first, but it was a start.

One day, during an art class, the teacher gave them a project: to draw something that represented their hopes and dreams. Laila immediately knew what she would draw. She grabbed a piece of paper and began sketching a large tree. The trunk was thick and strong, its roots deep in the ground, while the branches stretched high into the sky, as if reaching for something greater.

"This is my dream," Laila said as she finished the drawing. "A tree that grows with kindness, no matter where we are or how hard the winds blow."

She showed it to Ibrahim, her bright eyes sparkling with hope. He looked at her drawing, studying it for a long time. He didn't speak, but something in his expression shifted. He picked up his pencil and began to draw as well. This time, his strokes were confident, deliberate. When he finished, he showed Laila his picture. It was a house—his house. The red door, the olive tree, the garden where his family used to plant flowers. But in the background, there was something new, other houses, a school, and children playing. It was a symbol of the future he was beginning to imagine, a life not bound by the past, but open to new possibilities.

Laila smiled warmly at him. She didn't need words to understand. They were both reaching for something, something they had lost and something they could still find, hope.

Together We Rise

As time passed, Ibrahim and Laila's friendship blossomed. They began to navigate the challenges of their new lives together, supporting one another through the ups and downs of adjusting to a new culture, a new language, and a new home. Ibrahim slowly began to open up, speaking more to his classmates and even sharing his drawings with his teachers. He was still haunted by the memories of his past, but he learned to balance them with the hope of his present and the possibilities of the future.

Laila, with her unwavering optimism, became a source of light for Ibrahim. She showed him that it was possible to keep dreaming, to hold on to the parts of oneself that made life worth living—even in the face of overwhelming loss. Her kindness was like a soft beacon, guiding him through the fog of his grief.

And together, they learned something profound: the human spirit is indestructible. No matter how shattered the pieces may seem, they can be put back together, perhaps not as they once were, but as something new, something strong, something resilient.

Ibrahim's drawings evolved from memories of loss to images of hope. His red door, once a symbol of a home destroyed by war, became a symbol of a new life, one where he was not defined by his past, but by his ability to rise from the ashes. Laila, too, found peace in her drawings. Her tree, rooted in kindness and love, was a reminder that even in the darkest times, there is always the possibility of growth.

In the end, *Between the Ashes and the Stars* is not just the story of Ibrahim and Laila. It is the story of every refugee who has ever had to leave behind everything they knew, of every child who has been forced to grow up too quickly, and of every person who, despite the odds, has found the strength to rise again.

No matter how fractured the world may seem, there is always hope. No matter how dark the night, the stars will always shine. And even in the ashes of destruction, something new can grow, something beautiful and strong.

Ibrahim and Laila, though their paths were marked by loss, found solace in the bonds they formed. Their friendship was a testament to the resilience of the human heart, the ability to heal, to rebuild, and to continue dreaming, no matter the circumstances. Through each other, they learned that healing is not a solitary journey. It's one that requires the support and understanding of others, and a willingness to reach out, even when the world feels overwhelmingly distant and cold.

Months turned into years. Ibrahim began to speak more, not just in the classroom but also with his classmates, sharing his stories and his drawings. His art became a way for him to process his pain, his memories, and his dreams. Teachers noticed his progress and encouraged him, offering him spaces to express his thoughts freely. Slowly, Ibrahim began to see himself not as a victim of war, but as a young man with a future, a future he was beginning to shape with his own hands.

Laila continued to draw, but now she also shared her work with others. Her kindness was infectious, and soon, she became known for bringing people together. She started a small art club at school, inviting other refugee children to join her in creating. Together, they would draw their hopes, their stories, and their dreams, transforming their pain into something powerful and beautiful.

It wasn't always easy. There were days when both Ibrahim and Laila felt overwhelmed by the memories of what they had lost. Some days, the weight of the past would feel too heavy to bear, and the future seemed uncertain. But they had learned the importance of resilience, of leaning on each other when the world seemed too big and too cold. They had each other, and that made all the difference.

Ibrahim and Laila's bond, forged in the shared fires of their experiences, continued to grow stronger with each passing day. They helped each other discover the beauty of the world once again, through art, through friendship, and through the quiet moments of peace they found in each other's presence. They no longer saw themselves as refugees or victims. They were individuals, strong, determined, and capable of creating their own destinies.

And so, as they walked through the streets of their new home, Ibrahim would sometimes look up at the sky and see the stars. He would remember the olive trees of his home and the laughter of his sister. He would

think of his father, who had believed in the power of knowledge, and his mother, whose strength had carried them through the darkest moments of their journey.

Laila, by his side, would smile and say, “The stars are always there, even when you can’t see them.”

Ibrahim would nod, knowing that no matter where they went, no matter how far they travelled, the stars would always be there, lighting their way. And as long as they kept dreaming, they would never truly be lost.

A New Beginning

The stories of Ibrahim and Laila are not isolated. They reflect the experiences of millions of refugee children around the world who have been forced to flee their homes, to witness the destruction of everything they once knew, and to start over in unfamiliar lands. These children carry with them the scars of war, but they also carry within them the potential for greatness, the strength to rebuild, the courage to hope, and the capacity to love.

As we reflect on the journeys of Ibrahim and Laila, we are reminded of the resilience of the human spirit. No matter the hardship, no matter the loss, there is always the possibility of new beginnings. There is always hope, even in the face of darkness. And most importantly, there is always the power of connection, the bonds we form with others, the way we lift each other up, and the way we share our stories to remind one another that we are not alone.

This book is dedicated to all the children who have had to flee their homes, to all those who have lost their families, their communities, and their sense of belonging. May they find the strength to heal, to dream, and to rise again.

May we all find the courage to do the same.

Chapter 2

The Journey of Ahmed and Samir

The Streets of Baghdad

Ahmed was just a boy when the world he knew began to unravel. His home in Baghdad, Iraq, had always been filled with the sounds of bustling streets, the calls of street vendors, and the warmth of his family gathered around the dinner table. The city’s rich history and culture, from the towering minarets to the bustling markets, had once seemed like a safe haven. But as the war escalated, the familiar sounds of the city were replaced with explosions, gunfire, and the constant threat of danger.

Ahmed’s father, a merchant, had worked tirelessly to provide for their family, teaching Ahmed the values of hard work and perseverance. His mother, a compassionate woman with a heart full of love, had always managed to keep the family grounded despite the growing tensions around them. Life was far from perfect, but it was theirs.

But one fateful day, everything changed. A bombing near their neighbourhood turned Ahmed's world upside down. His father, caught in the chaos of the attack, was taken from them. The family, now shattered, was left with nothing but their memories of a life that seemed so distant. Ahmed, only nine years old, was forced to grow up overnight, his childhood lost in the wake of tragedy.

Fleeing to Lebanon

With no time to mourn or grieve, Ahmed's mother made the decision to flee Baghdad. The situation in Iraq had grown too dangerous, and the family's only hope for survival was to find refuge in a safer place. After days of uncertainty and long nights of fear, they managed to cross into Lebanon, where they sought shelter in a refugee camp.

The camp in Lebanon was crowded and disorganized. Ahmed's mother struggled to find a sense of peace in a place that felt nothing like home. The air was thick with the sounds of many languages, and the people around them all carried their own burdens of loss and displacement. But despite the overwhelming sadness that hung over the camp, Ahmed found solace in the friendships he began to form.

Meeting Samir

Among the other refugee children, Ahmed met Samir, a boy from Lebanon who had lived through his own share of hardships. Samir's family had been affected by the tensions between different factions in the region, and though his home had not been destroyed by war, the scars of conflict were visible in his eyes. Samir was a quiet boy, his words few but his heart full of empathy.

At first, Ahmed was hesitant to speak with Samir. He didn't want to open up, didn't want to share his pain with anyone. But Samir's gentle nature and understanding eyes drew him in. Slowly, they began to talk. They would sit together in the dusty corners of the camp, watching the sunset, sharing stories of their past lives, and discussing their hopes for the future.

One day, Samir pulled out a small notebook from his bag and began to sketch. The drawing was of a tree, strong and rooted deep in the earth, with branches stretching high into the sky. Ahmed watched in silence, captivated by the simplicity and beauty of the image.

"That's my dream," Samir explained, looking up from his drawing. "I want to be like that tree, strong, even when the wind blows hard."

Ahmed was moved by Samir's words. He had never thought of dreams in such a way. To him, dreams were fleeting, something that might have once been possible, but now seemed so far out of reach. But Samir's drawing gave him a glimpse of hope.

The Art of Healing

Days turned into weeks, and Ahmed and Samir's friendship continued to grow. Every afternoon, they would sit together and draw. Ahmed began to sketch his own dreams, his own wishes for a future that seemed uncertain. His drawings were simple images of his family, the streets of Baghdad, the place he once called home. But there were also images of new beginnings, of peace, of hope, of a life that was yet to come.

The act of drawing became a way for Ahmed to process his pain. It was through these sketches that he began to understand that while his past could never be erased, his future was still unwritten.

One afternoon, as they sat together under the shade of a tent, Samir turned to Ahmed with a smile. "What if we showed our drawings to everyone? What if we shared our dreams?"

Ahmed thought about this for a moment. He had never shared his art with anyone, not since the days before the war. But something about Samir's idea felt right.

A Shared Dream

The next day, Ahmed and Samir took their drawings to the camp's communal area. The walls of the camp were filled with messages of hope, resilience, and survival. They added their own drawings to the collection, a tree that stood tall, a house with open windows, a peaceful sky. Their drawings were no longer just their own; they had become a part of something bigger, something that transcended the pain they had experienced.

The other children in the camp began to notice. They stopped to look at the drawings, to ask questions, to share their own stories. In that moment, Ahmed realized that the act of sharing his dreams had connected him to others in a way he hadn't thought possible. The pain he had carried for so long no longer felt as heavy, because it was shared.

New Beginnings in Australia

Eventually, after months of living in the refugee camp, Ahmed's family was resettled in Australia. The new city was a far cry from the streets of Baghdad and the dusty camp in Lebanon. The buildings were tall and modern, and the people spoke a language Ahmed didn't understand. But despite the strangeness of it all, Ahmed felt a sense of possibility in the air.

Samir had been resettled in a different city, and though they were now far apart, the bond they had formed remained strong. They continued to send each other letters, sharing their experiences in their new lives and keeping each other's dreams alive. For Ahmed, Samir's words became a source of strength, a reminder that even in the face of overwhelming odds, there was always the chance to rebuild.

The Power of Friendship

Ahmed enrolled in a local school, where he was welcomed by teachers and students alike. He still struggled with the language barrier, and sometimes the unfamiliarity of it all made him feel like an outsider. But every time he felt lost, he would think of Samir's drawing, the tree that had been a symbol of resilience, of strength, of hope.

As the months passed, Ahmed's drawings began to change. No longer did he draw only the past. Now, he drew scenes of his new life, his school, the friends he had made, and the things he had learned. His art had become a way for him to document the new chapter of his life, a testament to his resilience and his ability to adapt.

One day, as he was drawing in the corner of the classroom, a teacher approached him. "Ahmed," she said gently, "Would you like to share your drawings with the class?"

Ahmed hesitated. He wasn't sure if he was ready. But then, he thought of Samir. He thought of their shared dreams, of the way their art had connected them, even when they were worlds apart. With a deep breath, he stood up and showed his drawings.

The class was silent as they looked at the pictures, images of a boy who had survived war, who had lost everything but had never lost his ability to dream. The teacher smiled, and the other students applauded.

The End of One Journey, the Start of Another

As Ahmed's story unfolded in the classroom, he realized that his journey was far from over. He was no longer just a refugee from Iraq. He was a young man with a future ahead of him, a future he was beginning to shape with his own hands, one drawing at a time.

Ahmed's journey had begun in the streets of Baghdad, continued through the refugee camps of Lebanon, and now found its place in the classroom of a new life in Australia. But no matter where he went, he carried with him the lessons of the past, the power of resilience, the importance of hope, and the unbreakable bonds of friendship.

Through the strength of his drawings and the friendships he forged, Ahmed learned that even in the most challenging of circumstances, there is always a way forward. Like the tree Samir had drawn, he too could grow, strong and rooted, even in the face of adversity.

Chapter 3

The Meeting of Two Worlds The African Sunrise

Amira and Amina had both been born in lands filled with the colours of the earth, the warmth of the sun, and the rhythm of life. Yet, their worlds were vastly different. Amira came from a village in the heart of North Africa, where the sand stretched endlessly beneath the bright, hot sun. Her family was Arabic, and their lives were shaped by the traditions passed down through generations. The calls to prayer echoed through the

streets, and the scent of spices filled the air. In her village, life had been calm and steady, bound by the rhythms of the land and the unspoken rules of their community.

Amina, on the other hand, grew up in the lush green landscapes of East Africa, where the sun rose over wide savannahs and dense forests. She was Swahili, her roots grounded in the culture of the Swahili people who lived along the coast, near the Indian Ocean. The sounds of the ocean waves lapping against the shore had always been a lullaby to her, and the vibrant markets filled with traders from many lands were a reminder of her people's long history of exchange and migration. Despite the beauty of the landscape, the weight of violence and political unrest had cast a shadow over her childhood, pulling her family into a whirlwind of uncertainty.

The Tides of Change

Both Amira and Amina's lives were upended by forces beyond their control, forces that would alter the course of their futures.

For Amira, it started with whispers of war on the horizon. The political landscape of her country had become increasingly unstable, and the once-thriving village that had been home to her family for generations became a battleground. Her father, a teacher, had always encouraged her to value education, and her mother, a seamstress, had taught her the importance of community and connection. But all that seemed to fade away as violence surged, and the very land that had once been a safe haven became too dangerous to remain in. Amira's family was forced to flee, leaving behind the only life they had known.

Amina's life was torn apart by a different form of violence. She had never known the safety of peaceful days, for her childhood was spent amid the noise of warfare. Her village, though beautiful, was caught in the crossfire of civil conflict. Amina's family had faced unthinkable hardship, losing many loved ones along the way. Yet, despite the death and destruction that surrounded her, Amina held onto hope through her love for her younger brother and her determination to give him a better future. When the situation grew unbearable, her family too was forced to flee, searching for a place where they could begin anew.

A Shared Struggle

Amira and Amina's journeys would eventually bring them together in a refugee camp in Kenya, a place where people from all corners of Africa sought refuge from the chaos of their homelands. The camp was a place of loss and survival, where people found themselves connected by the shared experience of displacement, yet separated by the differences in their backgrounds and languages. The camp was a melting pot of voices, some speaking Arabic, others Swahili, French, and English. The constant hum of conversations blended together, but the pain and uncertainty hung in the air like a dense fog.

Amira and Amina's first meeting were by chance. They were both standing in line for food, the long queue winding around the makeshift tents of the camp. Amira noticed Amina's eyes, which were filled with a mixture of sadness and strength, but it was the quiet resilience that seemed to emanate from her that caught her attention.

"I don't think I've seen you here before," Amira said, her voice hesitant but curious.

Amina turned to her, her expression softening. “I just arrived,” she said in broken English. “It’s hard, but it’s better than what I left behind.”

Amira nodded, understanding all too well. “Yes, it is.”

The Beginning of a Friendship

Despite the barriers of language and culture, a connection began to form between the two girls. They shared their stories, each revealing the pain of losing their homes, the grief of loved ones lost, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead. But it wasn’t just their struggles that brought them together, was their ability to see beyond the surface, to recognize that despite their differences, they both held onto something that transcended the circumstances they found themselves in.

In the evenings, when the sun began to set, the two girls would sit together on a patch of dry earth. Amira would teach Amina a few Arabic words, and Amina would teach Amira phrases in Swahili. They laughed as they stumbled over the unfamiliar sounds, their voices carrying the weight of a shared understanding.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, Amira pulled out a small notebook and began to draw. She had always been an artist, and even in the most dire circumstances, her sketches brought her a sense of peace. Amina, watching her, was intrigued.

“What are you drawing?” Amina asked.

Amira smiled and held up the notebook, showing her a picture of a tree, its branches reaching out towards the sky. “It’s a symbol of hope,” she said softly. “No matter how hard the storm, the tree stands tall.”

Amina’s eyes shone with recognition. “I understand,” she said. “In my village, we had a tree like that. It was the heart of our community.”

A Healing Bond

Days turned into weeks, and their friendship grew stronger. They spent more time drawing, talking, and sharing their dreams for the future. Both girls had lost so much, but they began to understand that, through their art and their shared experiences, they could help heal one another.

One day, the camp held a gathering where refugees from different countries shared their stories and talents. Amira and Amina decided to participate. Amira drew the tree that had become their symbol of strength, and Amina recited a poem in Swahili about resilience and unity. Though their words and images were different, the message they shared was the same: no matter where you come from, no matter what you’ve lost, there is always hope for a new beginning.

When their performance ended, there was silence. Then, slowly, applause broke out from the crowd, a gesture of recognition for the strength they had shown. The applause was not just for the girls but for every person in the camp who had found the courage to keep moving forward, despite the darkness of their past.

The Future Ahead

As time passed, Amira and Amina found their lives slowly shifting. Their families had been given the opportunity to resettle in different States in Australia. Amira would go to a new life in Victoria, and Amina would head to the New South Wales. Despite the distance that would separate them, they knew that their bond, forged in the crucible of hardship, would never break.

Before they left, the two girls made a promise to each other: that they would always carry the lessons they had learned in the camp, of strength, of friendship, and of resilience, and that one day, they would meet again. No matter where their journeys took them, they would always find each other.

The Power of Shared Stories

Amira and Amina's friendship was not just an act of healing for themselves; it was a testament to the power of shared stories, the beauty of cultural exchange, and the strength found in the unity of humanity. Their paths may have been different, but the common thread of hope and resilience ran through both of their hearts. Through their art and their friendship, they discovered that no matter how far apart they were, they were always connected by the stories they carried with them.

The journey of two girls, from Africa and from different cultures, became one of shared dreams and the knowledge that even the smallest spark of hope can light the way for a brighter tomorrow.

Chapter 4

The Journey of Meera and Priya From India to Shepparton

Meera and Priya were twins, inseparable not just by blood but by the special connection that only twins share. Born two minutes apart, they had spent every day of their lives side by side, laughing, playing, and dreaming together. Growing up in a small town in India, the sisters had always felt at home in the bustling streets, surrounded by the colourful sights and sounds of their community. The scent of spices in the air, the calls of street vendors, and the laughter of family gatherings were part of the rhythm of their lives.

But as the political unrest spread, the warmth and joy of their home began to crumble. The once-friendly streets turned dangerous, filled with protests and the echoes of violence. Their father's small business, which had once been a source of pride, was no longer safe, and the world they knew was falling apart. The peaceful days of childhood were replaced with fear, uncertainty, and loss.

Their parents, desperate to protect their daughters, made the difficult decision to leave their beloved home behind. They had no choice but to flee. Meera and Priya, although too young to fully understand the depth of the situation, could sense the weight of the moment. The world they knew, everything from their

neighbourhood to the warm kitchen where their mother cooked, was slipping away. The thought of leaving felt like the loss of everything that made them who they were. But the girls stuck together, their shared bond offering comfort in a time of great upheaval.

The Road to Safety

The journey from India to the refugee camp was long and gruelling. Meera and Priya, though young, carried the weight of their family's hopes on their small shoulders. They crossed borders, moving from one unfamiliar place to the next, always searching for a safer home. The camp where they eventually arrived was overcrowded, and the harsh conditions left the girls longing for the familiarity of their past lives.

But even in the midst of uncertainty, Meera and Priya leaned on each other. They played games to pass the time, telling each other stories about their childhood, about the festivals, the sound of temple bells ringing in the distance, and the joy of playing in the rain. They didn't need words to communicate; their connection was so strong that just a look, a shared smile, was enough to convey everything.

One night, as they lay on the hard ground in their tent, Meera whispered, "Do you think we'll ever go back home?"

Priya, ever the optimist, squeezed her sister's hand. "Maybe not back to our old home, but we'll find a new place. Somewhere where we can be happy again."

A New Beginning in Shepparton

After what felt like an eternity in the camp, Meera and Priya's family received the news they had been waiting for, resettlement. They were to move to Australia. The girls' hearts raced with excitement and fear as they boarded the plane, uncertain about what lay ahead. Australia was a place they had only heard of in stories, vast, distant, and completely unfamiliar. How would they fit in? What would their new life look like? Could they ever truly belong in a place so different from everything they had ever known?

When they landed in Shepparton, a quiet town in regional Victoria, the girls felt like they were stepping into another world. There were no crowded markets, no honking horns, no bustling city sounds. Instead, Shepparton was peaceful, surrounded by wide open spaces and farms stretching as far as the eye could see. The houses were big and spread out, and the streets were so empty compared to the vibrant chaos of India. It was beautiful, but strange.

Adjusting to a New Life

The first few days in Shepparton were overwhelming for the twins. The language was different, the food was different, and everything about their new life felt so foreign. Meera and Priya were enrolled in the local school, where the language barrier was immediately apparent. The children around them spoke English so quickly that it felt like a blur of sounds. While Meera was always a little more cautious and reserved, Priya's

curious nature helped her make friends faster. She smiled at everyone she met, even when she didn't fully understand what they were saying.

But the struggles didn't end there. The school was big, and the rules were different. Meera and Priya found themselves feeling isolated at times, unsure of how to make connections. But through it all, the sisters found strength in each other. They spent time together, whether it was playing games in the park, drawing pictures of their life in India, or practicing their English in private, away from the watchful eyes of others. Their bond, already unbreakable, became their anchor in this new world.

One day, after weeks of feeling out of place, Priya turned to Meera and said, "Maybe we can't go back to what we had before, but maybe this place can be something good, too. We just have to make it ours."

Meera smiled and nodded. "We can make a new home. Together."

Finding a Sense of Belonging

As the months passed, the twins began to adjust. The language barrier slowly started to fade as they practiced their English more and made new friends. Meera, who had always loved reading, began to bury herself in books, using them to explore new worlds and ideas. Priya, who had always been passionate about art, found a new outlet for her creativity, drawing pictures of their old home in India and of their new life in Shepparton.

One afternoon, Meera and Priya were sitting under a big tree in the schoolyard, sketching together. Priya's picture was of their old house, surrounded by bright flowers and the big mango tree that had been their favorite place to play. "Do you think we'll ever go back?" she asked quietly, her pencil still in hand.

Meera put her arm around her sister. "I don't think we'll go back. But we'll carry a piece of home with us, and we'll make new memories here. This place... it can be home, too."

The Future Ahead

With each passing day, Meera and Priya grew more comfortable in their new life. They learned the language, made new friends, and found joy in their new experiences. The bond between them only deepened, a reminder that no matter where life took them, they would always have each other. They had lost so much, but they had gained a future filled with possibilities.

Meera and Priya's journey had begun in the streets of India, continued through the uncertainty of a refugee camp, and now, in Shepparton, they were learning to build a life from scratch. And as they walked forward, side by side, they knew that no matter what came next, they would always face it together, with the strength of sisterhood and the hope of a better tomorrow.

Chapter 5

The Journey of Mustafa and Kadir from Refugee Camps to Shepparton

The Refugee Camp: A New Beginning

Mustafa had always been proud of his roots. Born in a small village in Turkey, he had spent his early years surrounded by the rich cultural heritage of his people, the scent of freshly baked bread, and the sounds of bustling markets. He had never imagined that his world would one day be torn apart by war. But when violence erupted in his hometown, his family had no choice but to flee. The life they knew vanished overnight, replaced by the uncertainty of life in a refugee camp.

Kadir, on the other hand, came from a similar background in Albania. His village, too, had been filled with the warmth of family and the serenity of the mountains. But when conflict disrupted their peaceful lives, Kadir and his family were forced to make the difficult decision to leave. For both Mustafa and Kadir, their childhoods were forever changed in the chaos of fleeing their homes.

In the refugee camp, life was harsh. The air was thick with the stench of overcrowded tents, and the constant feeling of uncertainty weighed heavily on everyone's shoulders. Mustafa had heard about Albania from the older refugees, stories of a place where people were kind, and the fields were lush with crops. And for Kadir, Turkey was a land of rich history and culture. But despite these shared experiences, the two boys hadn't met yet.

It wasn't until a warm afternoon in the camp that their paths crossed. Mustafa was sitting near a group of other children, trying to play a game with a ball, when he noticed a boy his age, sitting alone under the shade of a nearby tree. The boy had dark brown hair and a sombre expression. His name was Kadir.

At first, Mustafa wasn't sure what to make of Kadir. He seemed distant, and the language barrier made communication difficult. But something about Kadir's quiet nature piqued Mustafa's curiosity. So, with a simple wave and a smile, he approached.

A Bond in the Midst of Struggle

It took time, but the two boys slowly began to form a bond. They would sit together, attempting to communicate with broken words and hand gestures. They shared stories about their homes, Mustafa told Kadir about the vibrant markets and the stunning landscapes of Turkey, while Kadir spoke about the rolling hills and quiet forests of Albania. Despite the language differences, their shared experience of displacement brought them closer. Both had witnessed the destruction of their homelands, and both were living in limbo, far from everything they once knew.

One day, Mustafa pulled a small drawing from his pocket, a sketch of a landscape from his hometown. It was a simple image of a hill with a small house, but it carried so much meaning. Kadir smiled and showed Mustafa his own drawing, a picture of a river that ran through his village. Without understanding each other's words, they shared something deeper, a connection through art, memories, and the shared longing for a place they could never return to.

Days turned into weeks, and Mustafa and Kadir became inseparable. They played together, drew together, and even helped each other with the language barrier. For a while, the camp became a temporary home, and the two friends provided each other with the only thing that could make it bearable companionship.

A New Journey: Two Different Paths

But as the months passed, both Mustafa and Kadir's families were given the opportunity to resettle in different countries. Mustafa's family was accepted into Australia, while Kadir's family was offered a place in the United States. The news was both exciting and heartbreaking. They had been each other's only constant in the camp, and now, they would have to say goodbye.

The day they parted was filled with sadness. Mustafa promised Kadir that no matter where they went, they would always keep in touch. Kadir nodded silently, knowing that the distance between them would never change their friendship. The camp, where they had found solace in one another, now felt empty. But with their families now moving forward, both boys tried to focus on the possibilities ahead, even though it was hard to imagine life without the other by their side.

New Beginnings in the United States and Australia

Time passed, and Mustafa settled in Shepparton, Australia, where life was both exciting and intimidating. The streets were quiet, and everything felt new and foreign. He struggled to fit in at first. His English was broken, and there were days when he felt isolated, but he remembered his promise to Kadir. He threw himself into his studies and tried to build a life in this new country.

Meanwhile, Kadir found himself in a small town in the United States, adjusting to life in a new culture, far from the familiarity of his homeland. He had also worked hard to learn the language and adapt, but the feeling of homesickness never fully went away. The memories of the camp and his days with Mustafa stayed with him, fuelling his determination to succeed in his new life.

A Reunion in Shepparton

Years went by, and the two boys lost touch. Letters became fewer, and life in their new countries filled their days with new challenges and responsibilities. Mustafa continued to draw, creating pictures of his new life, trying to express the feeling of being torn between two worlds. Kadir, too, had become passionate about art, using it as a way to cope with his own struggles.

One fateful day, as Mustafa walked through the local park in Shepparton, he spotted a familiar face, a face he hadn't seen in years. It was Kadir.

For a moment, both boys just stood there, unsure if it was really him. Then, slowly, as if the years of separation melted away, they approached each other. There was a shared smile, followed by an embrace that spoke louder than any words could.

“How did you find me?” Mustafa asked, still in disbelief.

Kadir laughed. “I’ve been looking for you. I never forgot our promise.”

The two boys sat on the park bench, exchanging stories of their lives, of the families they had built, the challenges they had faced, and the memories of the camp that still haunted them. They spoke in a mix of broken English and their native languages, filling the gaps with laughter and understanding. It was as if no time had passed at all.

Reconnecting and Reflecting on the Journey

That afternoon, Mustafa and Kadir walked through Shepparton together, reminiscing about their days in the refugee camp. They spoke about how far they had come; about the strength they had gained and the bond they had maintained despite the years of separation. Though they had travelled to different corners of the world, they had both found their way to the same place, where their friendship could bloom once more.

As they parted that evening, they promised to stay in touch and never let the distance between them grow so vast again. They had made it through the toughest of times, and now, they had a chance to build new memories together. In Shepparton, a place they had once thought of as foreign, Mustafa and Kadir had finally found their way back to each other.

Their journey, from refugee camps to different countries and finally back together, was a testament to the resilience of friendship, no matter the distance, no matter the years, true bonds could never be broken.

Chapter 6

The Friendship of Noor, Ayesha, and Zahra

From Three Different Camps to One Shared Dream

The Loneliness of the Camps

Noor’s days in the refugee camp in Pakistan were long and silent. It was a vast place, crowded with people from different regions and backgrounds, but despite the numbers, she often felt alone. Her family had fled their home in Afghanistan after a devastating attack had torn their village apart. Noor, at only 12 years old,

carried the weight of the loss of her home, her school, and the vibrant life she once knew. She tried to keep her spirits high, but the uncertainty of living in a camp with no clear future wore her down. Most of the children around her spoke languages she didn't understand, and the isolation made it even harder to make friends.

Far across the border, in a similar camp in India, Ayesha's life was just as lonely. Ayesha's family had been forced to leave their home in Kashmir after a series of violent conflicts engulfed the region. The camp she found herself in was loud, chaotic, and crowded, yet it felt eerily empty at the same time. Ayesha missed her home, her friends, her school, the green fields she used to run through. But now, in the refugee camp, the days blurred into one another, and it seemed as though the world had forgotten the children who lived there.

Meanwhile, Zahra's camp in Afghanistan was even more desolate. The war had ravaged much of the country, and Zahra's family had been caught in the middle. Forced to flee their village after a bombing left their home in ruins, Zahra had found herself in a camp filled with other displaced people. Her family was small, but the emotional toll of the loss weighed heavily on them. Zahra spent most of her days wandering through the camp, feeling like an outsider, disconnected from everyone. In all the chaos of the camp, she longed for something, anything, that could give her a sense of belonging.

Though each girl lived in different parts of the world, their lives were bound by the same sense of loss and longing. The loneliness they experienced in the camps was not just physical but emotional. They had been separated from everything familiar, and despite being surrounded by people, they all felt as though they were invisible.

A New Beginning in Shepparton

Life, however, has a way of surprising people. After months, even years, of living in the refugee camps, Noor, Ayesha, and Zahra were each given the opportunity to start fresh in Australia. They arrived in Shepparton, a small town that would become their new home, far from the places they had once known.

It was here that fate would finally bring them together. All three girls, each with their own pasts filled with hardship and loss, found themselves enrolled in the same language school. Shepparton, with its green fields and wide streets, seemed like a different world altogether. The school was a safe space, a place where new beginnings could start. But for Noor, Ayesha, and Zahra, it was more than just a place to learn English, it was the first chance they had to truly connect with others.

A Meeting of Strangers

Noor sat in the back of the classroom; her eyes glued to the notebook in front of her. The room was filled with children of different ages and backgrounds, all struggling with the same challenge, learning a new language in a new country. She was nervous, unsure of what to expect, but she had made up her mind to give this opportunity her all. It had been a long time since she had felt like she belonged anywhere, and she hoped that this new chapter would bring her closer to a sense of peace.

Ayesha sat a few seats away from Noor, nervously looking around the classroom. This wasn't her first time in a new school, but it was the first time she had been surrounded by so many different faces. She missed the

friends she had left behind, but she knew that starting over was the only choice. She tried to focus on the lesson, but her mind often wandered back to the camp in India, to the life she had left behind.

Zahra, sitting in the front row, stared blankly at the teacher as she spoke in a language she still couldn't fully understand. She had been in Shepparton for a few weeks now, but it felt like a dream. A better dream than the one she had lived in the camp, but still distant and unfamiliar. She had trouble speaking, and she hated that feeling of being lost in a crowd. Sometimes, she wondered if she would ever feel like she belonged here.

The three girls exchanged occasional glances, each of them silently wondering if the others felt the same sense of isolation. It wasn't until one fateful break in the class that their paths crossed. They all found themselves sitting at the same table in the schoolyard, hesitant and unsure.

The Start of a Friendship

It was Zahra who broke the silence first. She turned to Ayesha, nervously pointing to the sandwich she had brought from home. "Do you... want some?" she asked, her voice shy but kind.

Ayesha smiled, surprised by the gesture. "Thank you," she said quietly. "It looks really good."

Noor, who had been sitting silently nearby, saw the interaction and decided to join in. "I have some biscuits," she said, offering a small tin she had brought with her. "You can try these, if you like."

The three girls exchanged shy smiles, each grateful for the connection, however small. In that moment, they realized they weren't so different after all. They had all come from faraway places, each carrying with them the pain of their past, but they also carried something else hope. Hope for a future where they could start anew, where they could heal and find joy in the company of others.

Days turned into weeks, and the friendship between Noor, Ayesha, and Zahra blossomed. They started sitting together every day during breaks, practicing their English and sharing stories from their pasts. The more they talked, the more they realized just how much they had in common. They all missed their homes, their families, and the lives they had lost, but they also knew that together, they could face whatever challenges lay ahead.

Shared Dreams of the Future

One afternoon, as the three girls sat together in the schoolyard, Noor spoke up. "I think we should have a dream," she said, her eyes shining with newfound determination. "A dream for the future. Something that we can work towards."

Ayesha nodded. "Like... a goal?" she asked, her voice hopeful. "A goal for when we leave this school."

Zahra smiled softly. "Maybe we can become something important. Something that makes our families proud."

Together, they began to talk about the things they wanted to accomplish, about the education they wanted to pursue, the careers they dreamed of, and the places they wanted to visit. They shared their ambitions with one another, building a future full of possibilities.

The more they spoke, the more they realized how much they could achieve, not just individually but as friends. The friendship they had found in the midst of their loneliness had given them strength, and they knew that no matter where life took them, they would always have each other.

A New Chapter, Together

For Noor, Ayesha, and Zahra, the language school in Shepparton became more than just a place to learn English. It became the starting point of a new chapter in their lives, a chapter full of friendship, hope, and shared dreams. No longer would they be alone in a foreign land, separated by the walls of their past. Together, they had found a place where they could grow, not just as individuals, but as sisters in spirit, united by their journey and the strength they drew from one another.

As they continued their education, the three girls promised themselves that they would never lose sight of their dreams. The pain of the past could never be erased, but the future was theirs to shape. And with their friendship, they knew there was nothing they couldn't overcome.

Chapter 7

The Journey of the Five Siblings From the Streets of Iraq to the Shores of Australia

Life in Iraq Before the Storm

The Al-Fahim family had once been like any other family in Iraq, with a home filled with laughter, love, and the promise of a future. The parents, Samir and Layla, had worked hard to provide for their five children. Ahmed, the eldest son at 16, was protective and thoughtful, always looking out for his younger siblings. Ranya, his 14-year-old sister, was a dreamer with a fierce sense of independence. The three younger children, Karim (10), Zaynab (8), and little Ali (5), were full of joy and energy, their innocent lives untouched by the heavy hand of war that loomed over their country.

But everything changed one night. A bomb had exploded too close to their home, taking away not just their house but the sense of safety they had once known. The streets of Baghdad were no longer bustling with life but filled with fear. The family could no longer live the life they had once taken for granted. The uncertainty of war pressed down on them, and Samir and Layla knew they had to leave if they were to survive.

Fleeing Iraq: A Journey of Survival

The decision to leave was not an easy one. It meant abandoning the life they had known and stepping into the unknown. With heavy hearts and a sense of urgency, Samir and Layla gathered their children and set out on a perilous journey. First, they made their way across the border into Iran, hoping for a brief respite. But

even there, the family faced challenges. Life in Iran was different, and the constant threat of being sent back to Iraq haunted them.

With no way of knowing what the future held, they decided to continue their journey, heading towards Malaysia, where they hoped to find more stability. In Malaysia, they found themselves in yet another camp, struggling to find a sense of normalcy. The camp was crowded, the air heavy with a mixture of hope and despair. It was a place where many had found temporary refuge, but it felt nothing like home.

Singapore: A New Hope, A Sudden Loss

After months of living in Malaysia, Samir and Layla received news that they would be moved to Singapore. The family held on to the hope that in Singapore, they would find peace, or at least the chance to start over. But as they journeyed through the crowded streets of Singapore, their lives would take yet another tragic turn. The family was separated, as the father, Samir, and mother, Layla, were told they would be relocated to a different camp in Indonesia.

The news was devastating. The children, already weary from the long journey, were now faced with even more uncertainty. Still, they held on to one another. Ranya, though young, had already stepped into the role of caretaker for her siblings. Ahmed, too, had always been the protector, and now more than ever, he had to become the anchor for his younger brothers and sisters. But no matter how strong they tried to be, they could not shake the feeling that something was wrong.

The Tragic Sea Crossing

The family's journey reached a fateful moment when Samir and Layla made a final decision to escape by boat to Australia. The boat, overcrowded with refugees like themselves, had set out with hope but soon found itself battling treacherous waves. The storm that came without warning capsized the boat, throwing everyone into the merciless sea.

In the chaos of the waves, the family was torn apart. Samir and Layla, the pillars of their family, were lost to the ocean. Despite their desperate attempts to hold on to the boat, the storm claimed them. Ahmed, Ranya, Karim, Zaynab, and Ali were among the survivors, but the loss of their parents weighed heavily on their hearts. For the first time, they felt utterly alone.

A New Beginning in Australia

The siblings were eventually rescued by an Australian vessel and brought to the safety of a refugee camp in Indonesia. From there, they made their way to Shepparton, Australia. The once hopeful thoughts of finding a new life in a safe country now felt hollow. They had arrived in a new land, but without their parents, the future seemed uncertain.

Life in Shepparton was different. The city was quiet, and the people were kind, but the memories of their parents' loss were always there, like an unspoken shadow that followed them everywhere. The older

siblings, Ahmed and Ranya, knew that the weight of responsibility had fallen on their shoulders. They had to be the parents now, guiding Karim, Zaynab, and Ali through this new chapter of their lives.

The Burden of Responsibility

Ahmed had always been protective of his siblings, but now, at just 16, he was forced to take on more than anyone his age should have to. He enrolled in the local high school in Shepparton, but balancing his studies with the care of his younger siblings was difficult. Ranya, though only 14, stepped up as well, helping with everything from preparing meals to comforting the younger ones during their darkest moments.

Karim, Zaynab, and Ali tried to adjust to their new life, but the pain of losing their parents never fully went away. Each day felt like a struggle to find normalcy. Karim missed his father's stories, Zaynab missed the way her mother's voice soothed her at night, and little Ali couldn't understand why his parents had never come back.

But even in the face of such hardship, the bond between the siblings grew stronger. They were no longer just a group of children from Iraq they were a family, determined to stay together no matter what.

Finding Strength in Education

The siblings enrolled in the local high school, and though the language barrier was tough at first, they were determined to make the most of their new opportunities. Ahmed threw himself into his studies, hoping that education could provide a way out of the pain. He dreamt of becoming a lawyer, someone who could fight for the rights of those like his family, people who had been displaced and lost everything. Ranya, too, found solace in learning, imagining a future where she could help others, maybe as a doctor, someone who could heal both the body and the soul.

Though they were still grieving, the siblings found a sense of purpose in their studies. They realized that while their parents could no longer guide them, they had each other. Together, they could overcome anything.

The Power of Family

In the years that followed, Ahmed, Ranya, Karim, Zaynab, and Ali continued to grow, not just as individuals, but as a family. They supported one another through the highs and lows of their new life in Australia. The memories of their parents were never far from their minds, but they no longer allowed the tragedy of their loss to define them.

In their hearts, Samir and Layla were always with them, watching over them as they built their future. And as they sat together in the evenings, studying or sharing a quiet meal, they knew that no matter what the world threw their way, they would face it together stronger than they had ever been before.

Chapter 8

A Classroom of Many Journeys Unity in Diversity

The First Day at the Language School

It was the first day of school at the Shepparton Language School, a place where people from all corners of the world came to find a common language: English. The classroom was filled with a buzz of nervous excitement. The walls were adorned with posters of English grammar rules and phrases, while a large map of the world hung on the front wall, a symbol of the many countries represented in the room.

In the front of the class stood Mrs. Harris, the teacher, a warm woman with a gentle smile who had seen many students from many different places. She welcomed the students, her eyes gleaming with the excitement of what lay ahead. "Today is a new beginning for all of you," she said in a kind tone. "In this room, we are all connected, not just by the language we're going to learn, but by our stories and our journeys. Let's share them with each other."

The students took their seats, some excited, some shy, but all with the same goal: to learn a language that would open doors to a new life. As they looked around, they realized they were not alone. They were part of something much bigger, an international family bound by the shared experience of migration, hope, and a desire for a better future.

The Students and Their Stories

The class was a melting pot of diverse backgrounds and experiences. There was Zainab from Pakistan, whose family had fled the violence of her homeland. She had vivid memories of the day she left everything behind, unsure of whether she would ever see her childhood home again. Beside her sat Amira from Syria, her eyes filled with quiet strength. Amira's story was one of survival, having fled the horrors of war and finding refuge in Lebanon before eventually arriving in Australia. Despite the trauma she had experienced, Amira still held on to hope, and the thought of learning English brought a smile to her face.

Across from them sat Anwar from Afghanistan, a young boy with a quiet demeanour. His family had crossed treacherous borders in search of peace, and now he was here, determined to build a future. Next to him was Maria from El Salvador, whose family had come to Australia seeking protection from the violence in her country. She had always dreamed of a safer life, and now she was taking the first step toward it, sitting in a classroom with strangers who had become her new family.

In the back of the class, Ahmed from Iraq sat next to Priya from India. Both had experienced the loss of family members in their journeys, but they carried on with the resilience of those who had survived the worst. Ahmed had arrived in Shepparton with his younger siblings, and though he now had a place to call home, the memories of his homeland were never far from his heart. Priya, on the other hand, had made the long journey from her home in southern India, hoping that education would offer her the chance to escape the cycle of poverty she had known.

At the far corner of the room sat John from Kenya, whose family had lived through the challenges of displacement in refugee camps. John had always dreamed of becoming a doctor, and despite the hardships, he was determined to make his dream a reality. He shared the room with Ekaterina from Russia, who had left behind the frozen streets of her home city and was now learning how to communicate in a new language.

The Power of Sharing

As Mrs. Harris encouraged her students to introduce themselves, the room fell quiet. Each student spoke in turn, sharing a piece of their story. Some were hesitant at first, unsure of how their English would sound. But as each student spoke, something beautiful began to happen, connections were formed. The barriers of language began to fade away, replaced by empathy and understanding. Each person, no matter where they came from, had faced struggles. Yet, all were here with one thing in common: the desire to create a new life, to learn, and to grow.

Zainab stood up first, her voice trembling slightly. "I am Zainab from Pakistan," she began. "I fled my country because of the war. I don't want to remember the violence, but I remember the hope. I hope that I can one day help my family back home by learning English."

Amira followed; her eyes briefly clouded with memory. "I am from Syria. I lost everything when I left, but I carry my hope with me. I hope one day I can return to my country, but for now, I am here, learning English, so I can make a life for myself."

Maria smiled softly as she spoke. "I came from El Salvador. The journey was long and difficult, but I found a place here in Shepparton. I hope to go to school, learn English, and become a teacher so I can help others."

One by one, the students shared their stories, some of joy, others of sorrow, but all with a spirit of perseverance that resonated in the room.

A Common Thread

As each student spoke, it became clear that the classroom was more than just a place for learning a language. It was a sanctuary for those who had been through so much. Here, they were not refugees or immigrants; they were individuals with stories to tell, people with dreams, and voices that deserved to be heard.

Ahmed, sitting at the back with Priya, reflected on what he had just heard. He had once felt like he was the only one struggling, the only one carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. But in that room, surrounded by people who had travelled from far and wide, he realized that their pain was shared. The fears, the hopes, the longing for a better life, they were all intertwined, woven into the fabric of their collective journey.

Priya caught his eye and smiled. "We are not so different, are we?" she said quietly.

Ahmed nodded. "No, we're not."

The First Lesson

Mrs. Harris, who had been listening attentively, clapped her hands together, breaking the silence. "Now, let's begin," she said with enthusiasm. "Your stories are important, and they are what will help you learn. Today, we start with the basics, introductions, greetings, and getting to know each other better."

But the students knew that this was just the beginning. They had learned something far more valuable in that first lesson than any grammar rule or vocabulary word. They had learned the power of connection, the strength that comes from sharing their experiences with others who truly understood.

As the class began their first lesson in English, the room felt lighter. There was a sense of unity that transcended the language barrier. Each student, no matter their country of origin, was part of something greater, a collective journey of resilience, hope, and the pursuit of a better life.

The Journey Ahead

For these 20 students, the path ahead would not be easy. There would be challenges, moments of doubt, and struggles to communicate. But one thing was certain: they would face it together. In that classroom, they were not just learning English, they were building a community, a family of their own, united by the strength of their shared experiences.

And as they continued their lessons in English, they knew that the greatest lesson of all had already been learned: no matter where you come from, no matter the hardships you've faced, there is always room for hope and a chance for a new beginning.

Chapter 9

The EAL Classroom: A Global Tapestry Learning Through Differences

The First Day of High School

It was the beginning of a new school year at Shepparton High School, and the EAL (English as an Additional Language) class was buzzing with nervous anticipation. This class, like no other, was a mosaic of cultures, backgrounds, and stories, each student a unique thread woven into the fabric of the classroom.

Mrs. Davis, the EAL teacher, stood at the front of the room, smiling warmly as the students trickled in, finding their seats. Her classroom was filled with colourful posters of the English alphabet, vocabulary words, and motivational quotes, reminders that every step taken in learning was a victory. She had taught EAL for many years and knew that beyond the English lessons, her students were embarking on a much greater journey: learning to understand themselves and each other in a world that was often divided by borders, language, and history.

There were 24 students in total, each one arriving from a different corner of the globe. Some were eager and excited, others uncertain and shy. Mrs. Davis had seen it all before. The challenges of learning a new language were heavy, but the rewards were even greater. She began the class with a simple yet powerful question: "Can each of you share your name, where you're from, and one thing you hope to achieve this year?"

As the students took turns introducing themselves, it quickly became clear just how diverse this group was.

A Classroom of Many Journeys

There was Aisha from Nigeria, her bright eyes shining with a sense of purpose. She had come to Australia with her family in search of a peaceful life, away from the conflict in her home country. She wanted to study medicine one day, hoping to use her education to help those back home.

Next was Javier from Mexico. His family had fled poverty and violence, hoping to start anew in a country where he could build a future. Javier had always dreamed of becoming an engineer, but the language barrier had made it difficult to express his aspirations. He was determined to overcome it.

Fatima from Somalia sat quietly, her hijab framing her face with quiet dignity. She had arrived in Australia only a few months before and still felt the sting of being far from home. She was unsure of what the future held but hoped that learning English would give her the chance to make friends and feel more comfortable in her new environment.

Ali from Afghanistan, tall and confident, had spent most of his life in refugee camps. His family had made a long journey across borders, and although he had learned a few words of English along the way, he still struggled with the language. Ali was determined to prove to himself, and to his parents, that he could succeed in this new country.

Across the room, Maria from El Salvador sat next to Rina from Nepal. Maria's story was one of hardship; she had left her home country due to gang violence that had claimed her brother's life. Rina, on the other hand, had come from Nepal in search of better educational opportunities. They had only just met, but both shared the same hopes: to learn English and to find a path to brighter futures.

There was also Adnan from Syria, who had lost his parents during the conflict. Now living with his older sister, he had come to Australia to escape the war and find peace. And there was Hana from Vietnam, whose family had come seeking better economic opportunities after years of struggle. Hana was shy and reserved, but her curiosity and desire to learn shone through.

The class also included a pair of twins from South Sudan, Amira and Jamal, who had been separated from their parents during their journey across Africa. They had only recently been reunited with their family in Australia. Both had witnessed immense hardship but remained strong and optimistic. They dreamed of becoming teachers so they could make a difference in their communities.

In the back of the room sat Keiko from Japan, whose family had relocated to Australia after the devastating earthquake that had ravaged their homeland. Keiko had a natural gift for language, but her shyness made her hesitant to speak. She wanted to be a translator one day, helping people like her family bridge the gap between cultures.

Shared Stories, Shared Strength

As the students took turns introducing themselves, they began to realize something important: despite their different backgrounds, they were all united by a common purpose. They all wanted to learn. They all wanted to build lives in a new country. And, most importantly, they all carried stories of resilience, courage, and hope.

Mrs. Davis watched as the students exchanged knowing looks. Some of them smiled at one another, while others nodded, acknowledging the shared struggle of adapting to a new life. They may have come from different corners of the world, but they were more alike than they had ever imagined. It was a realization that would bond them together throughout the year.

The Language Barrier

As the class began, Mrs. Davis focused on helping the students overcome one of their biggest challenges: the language barrier. She knew that learning English would not be easy, especially for students whose native tongues were so different from English. But she also knew that language was more than just words, it was a bridge to understanding one another.

The first lesson of the day was centred on greetings and introductions. Simple phrases like "How are you?" "What's your name?" and "Where are you from?" were taught and practiced. Some students hesitated, unsure of how to pronounce the words correctly, while others spoke with confidence, eager to practice.

Amira and Jamal were initially shy, but when they found out they could communicate in basic English, they began to help each other. They quickly realized that they weren't alone in their struggle, everyone in the class was facing the same challenge. As they practiced together, they shared their frustrations and triumphs, offering each other encouragement along the way.

Keiko, who had a good grasp of English, often helped her classmates with pronunciation. She had been taught English in Japan, but the Australian accent was a new challenge for her. Still, she was patient with herself and others, eager to improve.

Rina and Maria formed a study group, helping each other with vocabulary words and grammar. They bonded over their shared experience of leaving their countries behind and the hope that learning English would open doors for them. Rina dreamed of becoming a doctor, while Maria aspired to be an architect.

Building Friendships and Connections

As the weeks passed, the class began to feel more like a family. They supported one another through the challenges of learning a new language, and they celebrated each other's progress. Mrs. Davis encouraged her students to share stories about their countries, their cultures, and their hopes for the future. Slowly but surely, the classroom became a space where each student's voice was heard.

One afternoon, as they practiced speaking in pairs, Ali turned to Aisha and smiled. “When I came to Australia, I didn’t think I could make any friends,” he said. “But now, I feel like I have a family here.”

Aisha nodded, her eyes sparkling. “Yes, I feel the same way. We may be from different places, but we share the same dreams.”

The Path Ahead

By the end of the year, the students in the EAL class had not only improved their English, but they had also forged friendships that would last a lifetime. They had learned that while language might be the barrier they needed to overcome, their shared humanity would always be the foundation of their connection.

Mrs. Davis looked at the class with pride. She had seen these students grow, not just in their ability to speak English, but in their confidence, their empathy, and their resilience. They had learned to bridge the gap between cultures, creating a community of support and strength.

As the students left the classroom at the end of the school day, they knew that their journeys were far from over. There would be more challenges ahead, more obstacles to overcome. But together, they had proven that no matter where they came from, no matter the language they spoke, they were capable of learning, of growing, and of achieving their dreams.

And in that shared space, they had discovered the true power of unity: the ability to learn from one another, support one another, and build a future together.

Chapter 10

The EAL Teachers: Guiding Lights in a World of Change

A New Beginning in the Classroom

Shepparton School’s EAL (English as an Additional Language) classroom had always been a place of transformation, a place where students from different corners of the globe came together, sharing their stories, dreams, and struggles. But while the students were the ones navigating the challenges of a new life in Australia, the EAL teachers were quietly becoming the guiding lights of their journey.

The EAL teaching team was as diverse as the students they taught. Each teacher brought their own unique background, experiences, and perspectives. There was Mrs. Thompson, a teacher originally from England, who had spent years teaching in refugee camps around the world before settling in Shepparton. Her passion for supporting students in their journey to find their voices in a new language was evident in every lesson. Then there was Mr. Khan, a former refugee from Pakistan who had moved to Australia as a teenager. His personal journey of adapting to a new language and culture resonated deeply with his students, and he always made it a point to connect with them on a personal level. Mrs. Rodriguez, a teacher from Colombia, had worked with immigrant students in several countries before coming to Shepparton. Her bilingual abilities allowed her to communicate with students who spoke Spanish, helping to bridge the language gap

for those from Latin America. Lastly, there was Ms. Lee, a teacher from China, who had spent years working with students from East Asia, focusing on the challenges they faced when learning English as a second language. She understood the complexities of learning a new language while trying to preserve one's cultural identity.

Despite their differences, the teachers shared a common goal: to help their students thrive in their new environment by providing them with the tools they needed to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

A Diverse Classroom, a Shared Mission

Every day, as the EAL teachers entered the classroom, they were reminded of the unique privilege and responsibility they held. The room was filled with students who had experienced trauma, displacement, and uncertainty. They came from war-torn countries, refugee camps, and impoverished neighbourhoods, and now they were in a foreign land, struggling to learn a new language, adapt to new social norms, and build a future.

For Mrs. Thompson, it wasn't just about teaching English. It was about creating a safe space where students could express themselves, feel heard, and begin to heal. She had seen firsthand the transformative power of education in refugee communities. She knew that for many of her students, learning English wasn't just a way to pass the time, it was a lifeline.

Mr. Khan understood this on a deeply personal level. Having arrived in Australia as a refugee, he had faced the same struggles as his students. He had once sat in classrooms unsure of how to ask for help or communicate his needs. Now, as a teacher, he worked tirelessly to ensure his students never felt that sense of isolation. He used his own story as a source of strength, telling his students that no matter how difficult the journey, they could make it through with perseverance and hope.

Mrs. Rodriguez brought her warmth and compassion to the classroom every day. Her ability to speak Spanish allowed her to connect with many of the Latin American students, helping them feel seen and heard. But beyond the language, it was her deep empathy that made her such a beloved teacher. She always took the time to listen to her students' stories, offering advice when they struggled and celebrating their successes, no matter how small.

Ms. Lee, who had grown up in China and moved to Australia as an adult, was a constant source of encouragement for her students. She knew what it was like to leave behind the familiarity of one's home country and try to adjust to a new life. Her experience as an immigrant made her especially sensitive to the challenges her students faced, and she took every opportunity to help them build confidence in both their language skills and their sense of belonging.

Navigating Cultural Sensitivity

One of the greatest challenges the EAL teachers faced was navigating the cultural sensitivities of their students. Each student came from a unique cultural context, and what worked for one might not work for another. The teachers learned quickly that their job wasn't just about teaching English, it was about

understanding their students' stories, cultures, and backgrounds, and adjusting their teaching methods accordingly.

Mrs. Thompson recalled a time when one of her students, Ahmed from Iraq, had been particularly withdrawn in class. She soon realized that Ahmed's hesitation was not because of a lack of ability but because of the trauma he had experienced during the war. Mrs. Thompson worked closely with him, creating a safe space for him to express his fears and frustrations. It was through their conversations and her patient guidance that Ahmed began to open up. Over time, he became more confident in his English, and the classroom became a space where he could grow both academically and emotionally.

Similarly, Mr. Khan took the time to learn about the cultural backgrounds of his students. One of his students, Fatima from Somalia, had a deep respect for her religious practices and often struggled with participating in activities that conflicted with her beliefs. Mr. Khan made sure to be mindful of her needs, offering her alternatives and ensuring that she felt respected. In return, Fatima's trust in him grew, and she began to thrive in the classroom, excelling in her English studies and developing new friendships.

The teachers also recognized the importance of teaching their students about Australian culture while respecting their own. Ms. Lee made sure her students understood not only the English language but also the nuances of Australian slang, customs, and traditions. However, she never discouraged them from maintaining their own cultural practices. Instead, she celebrated the diversity in her classroom, encouraging her students to share their traditions and stories with one another.

Building a Sense of Belonging

While academic progress was important, the EAL teachers also knew that creating a sense of belonging was crucial. They understood that for many of their students, the classroom was more than just a place to learn, it was a refuge, a space where they could build relationships and find a sense of community.

Mrs. Thompson often organized group activities that encouraged students to work together, fostering collaboration and friendship. These activities not only helped with language acquisition but also allowed students to learn from one another's experiences. As they shared their stories, they began to understand that despite their different backgrounds, they were all navigating similar struggles.

Mr. Khan also emphasized the importance of community. He encouraged his students to participate in school events, sports, and extracurricular activities, helping them feel more connected to their new environment. He knew that when his students felt included, they were more likely to succeed.

Through their work, the EAL teachers helped their students build the confidence they needed to step out into the wider world of Shepparton. The language barrier, while significant, was no longer the insurmountable obstacle it had once been. Thanks to the tireless efforts of these dedicated teachers, the students had learned not just the language, but the skills to navigate the complexities of their new lives in Australia.

A Shared Journey

As the school year drew to a close, the EAL teachers reflected on the progress they had made together. It wasn't just about teaching English; it was about helping these students become the best versions of themselves, strong, resilient, and full of hope for the future.

For the students, the teachers were more than just instructors; they were mentors, friends, and guides. They had been there through the toughest moments and the brightest victories. The journey hadn't been easy, but together, they had built something powerful, a community of learners who supported each other, celebrated each other's successes, and found strength in their shared experiences.

As the final bell of the school year rang, the students filed out of the EAL classroom, a little more confident, a little more capable, and a little more ready to face the world outside. The teachers, watching them leave, knew that their work wasn't done. They would continue to guide these students, not just through language lessons, but through the journey of life in a new country.

In the end, the story of the EAL class in Shepparton wasn't just about learning English. It was about resilience, empathy, and the power of community. It was about the unbreakable bond between teacher and student, a bond built on mutual respect, understanding, and the shared goal of building a better future, together.

The End

About the Author

Hussam Saraf is a passionate advocate for the rights of refugees, displaced families, and children who have been forced to leave their homes in search of safety and stability. With extensive experience working with humanitarian organizations, Hussam has witnessed firsthand the hardships faced by refugee families, particularly the emotional and physical toll that displacement has on children. His personal experiences and professional background have fuelled his commitment to raising awareness and sharing the stories of those affected by conflict.

Hussam's writing seeks to amplify the voices of refugees, giving them the opportunity to share their experiences with the world. He believes that through storytelling, we can foster empathy, understanding, and solidarity, breaking down barriers between cultures and creating a more compassionate world. By giving a platform to those who have been silenced by the ravages of war and displacement, Hussam hopes to inspire action and encourage a global community to offer support to those in need.

Originally from a small town in Iraq, Hussam's life was transformed by the challenges of war and displacement. After arriving in Australia in 2009, he found his calling in working with refugees and multicultural communities. Hussam's journey in education began as a teacher's aide, where he helped newly arrived students from diverse cultural backgrounds navigate the complexities of language barriers and adjust

to their new environment. His dedication to fostering an inclusive, supportive learning environment has extended to his work with multicultural students across various schools.

In Shepparton, Hussam continues to support refugee and multicultural communities through his work in education. As a volunteer, he has worked closely with students from diverse backgrounds, helping them find their place in Australia's educational system. Through his dedication to ensuring that multicultural students receive the support and guidance they need to thrive, Hussam helps create a more inclusive environment where all students, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background, can succeed. His efforts are focused on making education accessible and equitable for everyone, contributing to the creation of a more understanding and compassionate society.

A photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a young girl wearing a pink hijab and an orange cardigan sits at a green desk, looking directly at the camera. Next to her, a young boy in a dark blue school sweater also sits at a green desk, looking at the camera. Behind them, another girl in a blue and white patterned hijab and a boy in a dark blue sweater are seated at their desks, looking down. In the background, a chalkboard has the names 'Ibrahim' and 'Laila' written on it. The room is lit by natural light from a window on the right.

Ibrahim

Laila

BETWEEN *THE* ASHES AND *THE* STARS

HUSSAM SARAF IN 2017