

# Denada's Story

Rosa Brown, aged 12

This is a story about a person, a refugee named Denada, a story about her time in detention, a story about our friendship.

**D**enada left Albania and went to Kosova to flee the war and it was in Kosova where she met and married Mark. Mark had been taken by force to join the Kosova Liberation Army in 1999. For a year Denada did not hear from or see Mark. Then Mark managed to escape from the KLA and would have faced execution if he did not leave Kosova. So Mark and Denada left together and came to Australia. They arrived here on an airplane with fake passports and ID because they hadn't had time to obtain visas. When they left the plane they explained to the guards and thought that they would be helped, but instead they were taken to Villawood Immigration Detention Centre. They spent more than 400 days there. At the end of 2001, Denada and Mark were released and went to live with Denada's uncle in Adelaide.

In June 2001 when I was in year six and lived in Canberra I went to a rally for refugees with my mum. There were six speakers and I found each one of them interesting. One of the speakers was Marion Lé, a migration agent. I had no idea of the terrible conditions refugees were having to face in Australia. I was very moved by the speeches and thought that I would like to help by writing to a refugee. Refugees have already suffered in their home country experiencing war and famine. They make a terrifying escape and then, when they think the journey is finally over having reached Australia, they are taken to an Immigration Detention

Centre for an indefinite amount of time. So at the end of the rally, I approached Marion and told her I would like to be in touch with a refugee in a detention centre. She knew Denada, because she was her lawyer. I wrote to Denada straight away. Denada could already speak and write some English, and I noticed her English improve as we corresponded. I told her about my life and asked her questions about detention, which at the time I knew almost nothing about.

Denada told me about how sad she felt in detention. 'I pray to Jesus to make me free one day, out of this gaol, because this is not detention, detention is just a name; this is gaol.'

Denada told me that it was very bad in detention and that she cried everyday. This made me sad, and want to help her even more, and through our letters we became great friends

The first time I saw Villawood was an aerial shot on the TV news and I had an idea of where my friend was. But the feeling I got the first time we drove into Villawood was sickening. We drove down to see a double layer of wire fencing and razor wire at the top and bottom of the fences. We were escorted into the visiting area by the guards. We were not able to take a camera to have a photo of Denada

and me together. We had to sit in the hot visiting area surrounded by razor wire and guards. It's hard understanding that my friend has spent more than a year of her life in there and that so many others have as well. That night I had nightmares and couldn't sleep. Often on the news I hear about refugees and detention centres and find it disturbing knowing that there are children behind bars.

Denada came to Australia for a better life but here she lost everything, she tells me. She lost her freedom, her identity, her family and friends, her birthplace and home. After being in detention for ten months Denada was starting to feel the strain. Her health was getting bad and she was losing weight, she even started taking depression tablets.

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Denada told me that during the night guards would come into their rooms at random. Even after Denada left a sign on the door asking the guards to knock, they continued to enter without permission. There were musters at very early times of the morning where the detainees would have to get up for a head count.

When Denada was only ten, there were a lot of demonstrations against the communist regime in Albania. Denada's family felt the strain. Every day her parents would remind her and her brother and sister not to tell anyone that they prayed or made the sign of the cross. Her parents said that if they did this they would be in a lot of trouble and could be put in goal for 25 years. They felt they were isolated from the world. During the

*My name is Denada ... Rosa is not just a friend to me, she is my little sister. I'm giving her permission to use my life-experience ..."*

upheavals against the communist regime there was a lot of disruption and often the schools were closed.

When she was about 16, war hit Albania. There were a lot of troubles and the government gave orders for people to stay inside. Bullets were fired into their apartment on the third floor and they would lie on the floor 24 hours a day. So Denada went to Kosova for a safer life, but two years later war broke out again when Serbia began ethnic cleansing against the Albanian Kosovars.

Denada is an intelligent, enthusiastic, kind person, even while she was in detention. She organised the children in there to play games such as hide and seek. When she spoke to them after she left, they told her that they were too sad to play hide and seek any more because she was gone. She won the women's pool competition and is good at table tennis. She was school champion at long jump when she was about 12. She is good at learning languages and can speak fluent Italian, Albanian and English. She taught herself Italian by watching Italian cartoons on TV in Albania. When she was in her teens, she edited the church magazine, and was on the radio once. She won a painting competition for young people called 'Vincent's Friend'.

Denada is now out of detention and doing a TAFE course and has applied for university entrance. She was accepted into university but cannot go because she has to pay overseas fees that she cannot afford. Denada was interviewed by *Cosmopolitan* magazine and asked about her hopes for the future.

'Before I left Albania, I dreamt of studying, going out with friends and shopping – all the things girls do. But I was denied that freedom when I arrived at Villawood. I am taking one day at a time. Ultimately, I want to become a psychiatrist to help other people.'

My friendship with Denada has affected me a lot. I am now more interested in human rights and Denada's experience has made me more aware of how lucky I am. I often think about Denada and refugees and it makes me angry that there are detention centres in Australia.

Denada now lives in Adelaide and gave me her permission to tell her story.