

The blue eyes that grieve

Zara Al Hosany Al Shara, aged 15

Zeinab Abbas is a sweet, slight and softly spoken girl. She seems just like any other 12-year-old, with beautiful fair skin, a lovely smile, her head covered in the hijab. However, there is something about Zeinab's big blue eyes that disturbs me. They look deep, tired ... perhaps a little older than her 12 years. This is understandable when one realises the pain, suffering and loss that Zeinab has endured in the past year.

Zeinab is a refugee from Iraq. Like many, her father made the decision to flee his oppressive country in the search for peace, freedom and a better opportunity for his large family. However, this dream was to be the beginning of the end. A tragic end for Zeinab's family.

Australia was the destination. A long way to go, but this family of seven had suffered a great deal and lost everything. They had been a happy, wealthy family living in Najaf, a city in Iraq. The conflict between Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi people changed all that.

The Iraqi residents disliked Saddam as their president and wanted to change him. They held a strike that then started a war between Najaf and Karbala, another

city. One of Zeinab's uncles got involved in the war as well. The Abbas family didn't take any action until seven years later, but the constant pressures and insecurity led to Zeinab's uncle deciding to leave Iraq and go to another country, where they could live in peace. Her father was always afraid of Saddam because his brother's family had left Iraq illegally and Saddam didn't know where they were. Zeinab's father was continually threatened in order to try to find out where his brother went. This placed them in even more danger.

Zeinab's family decided to leave Iraq and travel to Iran as refugees. Firstly they drove to Saudi Arabia and from there they caught an aeroplane to Iran. Moving to Iran wasn't a good idea because now they didn't have any money or a place to live and didn't even know Iranian. So they went to a place like the Salvation Army for help. This organisation helped them a lot by providing them with food, clothing and shelter for six months. Finally her father found a job.

He agreed to pay them back when he reached Australia.

Mr Abbas left Iran with his wife and five children. They were so happy that they were jumping for joy. Zeinab remembers how happy her parents were for the first time in a long time. The Abbas family was looking forward to a peaceful life in Australia with no tension or hardship.

Once they arrived in Malaysia it was all arranged. In Indonesia a man came up to them and took them to the boat that was meant to take them to Australia. Zeinab often has nightmares of the old battered boat and the look on her father's face when he saw it. "It was very small and old. It seemed like it would sink at any moment," she says. There were more than 400 people waiting to get on the boat when there was really meant to be half that. Zeinab remembers her father arguing with the man. He said, "I am not going in this boat, it is a derelict boat." The man replied, "Go now or never! You are not getting your money back if you decide not to go. Besides, you'll be safe." So Zeinab's father had no choice but to travel on that shabby boat. He was scared, Zeinab could tell, but they were happy at the same time.

In the middle of the long journey, while they were all sleeping, Zeinab's father woke up. He heard people screaming for their lives and he saw people jumping out of the boat, men, women, children and babies. It was chaos, confusion, hell. Somehow Zeinab's family got separated.

This part of Zeinab's story is quite horrifying and she cries softly when she relives the horror in her mind of that terrible night. Not many people in the boat knew how to swim so they either drowned or held onto pieces of the sunken boat.

Zeinab, who was carrying her five-year-old brother, was holding onto a piece of wood. When her mother saw her she looked relieved but she was scared that Zeinab might drown. So she told Zeinab to hand her brother over. It was this decision Zeinab regrets dearly. Zeinab's mum drowned with her five-year-old son along with the seven-year-old boy she was already carrying. Zeinab remembers screaming and crying when she saw her mum drown with her younger brothers.

Later Zeinab saw her older sister drowning and calling for help. She tried to help but she couldn't. Just metres away she

saw her father drowning with her nine-year-old sister. Within a few horrible minutes Zeinab's family members were swallowed up by the sea forever in front of her eyes. Darkness is all she remembers. When she awoke she saw no one that she knew.

The next morning in a rescue boat there were 25 other desperate faces. She was alone ... lost ... orphaned. She remembers thinking that it wasn't a bad dream. The family ... her beautiful mother ... wonderful father and adorable brothers and sisters were gone. The boat took her back to Indonesia and they printed her photo in the newspapers. Zeinab's uncle saw her photo and requested the Australian government allow Zeinab to come and live in Australia. Fortunately, they accepted her.

Today Zeinab lives with her uncle in NSW, a world away from misery. She doesn't have parents, sisters or brothers. She is completely alone. Zeinab tries to see the positive things in life, but she says the memories and the loss will haunt her forever.

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