

# *In shadows*

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In a mirror of steel the eyes look crazy. He washes his face with water tea-brown. Like a knife Ali holds his anger, telling himself that maybe he only dreams this secret city.

Sunlight stripes his wrists, from bars. Spider webs make nets. Four beds jam together, blankets thin as paper.

Ali grips his knife unseen. They have no right.

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Old Yusuf looks sick yellow. He cannot get out of bed, his pillow a pool of tears. Chewing fingernails, the old man speaks only to say *salat*. Yusuf clutches his *Qur'an* with thumbs flat as a carpenter's pencil, tilting his head as if listening to notes from the page. In the yard sometimes he sings. With him a granddaughter sits, picking lice from his hair.

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Ali must do something besides hate.

On his wall hangs a calendar, one year out of date. He makes the calculation, keeping track of days. He's somewhere in a place of shadows, dying one day at a time, folded into back streets of a city. This country he knows only from pictures. He has not seen a kangaroo.

The room has a radio. Voices in English make jokes and offer to sell things that Ali would not buy even if he needed them. Four nations squeeze into this room. Radio callers cannot know his anger.

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Calculation tells Ali he has been in a cage ten months and, before that, another cage in wilderness where the guards would wave at flies. He gave his mother's money to a man who promised to help, who smuggled him to Pakistan and then a plane to Indonesia. Ali thought the Muslim country would be his new home. Instead he hid from police in shadows. At last the fishing boat sailed, one hundred believers trusting God and the men with guns. He prayed for rescue from waves big as mountains. He saw fishing boat pirates unable to get closer than a man's shout because of current. Rain soaked the boat. He tipped closer to God. A little girl died. Her mother begged to die too. Men dirtied, losing their shame.

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In the hidden city there is a library but Ali has no interest in books of crime or Christian romance in English, though he can read and write the language. Each day other men ask him to translate from a newspaper. They want to know what is happening outside. He turns pages, reading words he knows and puzzling over others he does not. Ali has found no writing about a secret city behind factory streets. He reads letters to the editor. Often these anger the men. People who live in houses and walk to shops write about fairness, using the words *Muslim* and *Arab* as if these are

the same. Australians do not understand what separates the prisoners and what unites them. They do not see behind concrete. They speak another country, with free speech and libraries. They treat their animals better than they treat Ali. His shadow thins. He is beginning to forget shapes of home.

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Red in their faces and blue in their eyes, the guards watch Ali and friends seated alone or in pairs. Groups are not allowed. He studies diamond shadows made by wire fence, like a mosaic in cement, and overhears talk from the guards. They work for a company that supplies warders to prisons.

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If his counting is correct, it is two years since he landed. Sailors plucked him from a boat already sinking. He had no papers but he was stronger. He had muscle. Now his brothers would not know him. At home they were arrested and jailed, one by one. His mother knew what would happen to Ali. With two friends from school he ran. They stole bikes and horses. Ali sometimes wonders where his friends finished: in America maybe, or England, where cricket is played.

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He used to dream of leaving home to travel. He studied English and he studied computers. He can use the PC in the common room but it is off-line. He plays solitaire. He listens to guards talk. They fear that the prisoners might communicate with terrorists or learn how to make a bomb out of vegetables and spoons. Fat mouths mutter. Stomachs bulge behind belts.

Ali is beginning to disappear. Some days he forgets boyhood, and the faces of his father and his brothers. It is so wrong. He writes in English, a private shadow. If guards discover it, they will find only thoughts that refuse prison.

*In sadness we make, he writes. That is nature. A woman can not give birth with out sufering. And i pray for freedom but our city is hiden like my words keeping dark in a place under a floor tile the crack invisable. Words look hard and thin like my arms. Words need air too for breathing. So i make this record. May be i hope for a reader even if just a gaurd. They can not lock up words*

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With Iranians and Sunnis he sits at peace in the exercise yard. They pray together, giving worship to God and thanks to the Prophet Muhummad. *Peace be unto him*, writes Ali. At home he would not speak with a Sunni. He might pass robed men beating a woman or bending on prayer mats or punishing children. Here he shares a shadow. Hope beats outside, in the wings of a bird. Men keep hate behind their eyes.

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Not all stay silent. Some burn like a steam kettle, spitting and hissing. Their arms look hard as rifles.

One, a proud spirit called Hamid, tried organising a breakout. He fell tangled in wire, setting off alarms. From hospital the guards brought Hamid back, locking him

in the solitary wing. He might still be there, or in a desert jail, or with God. Ali feels the shame of silence.

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He has not yet taken pills but other men do. Doctors give them out, to keep men calm, to help with sleeping. Some collect their pills and hide them away, for a time when they have given up all hope. Anger pulls his soul like a glassmaker, puffing and stretching. He cools but he will smash easily. If the doors suddenly flew open he could not go home. Where Ali was born, young Hazara are being forced to clear land mines. Those who refuse are shot. That is not a life.

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From mouths of children he hears English words. There is no school, only TV. Some kick a football on the brown lawn but most are too sad. Girls watch TV or pray. Outside the shadow city other girls play on real grass. They sit in classrooms. Ali has seen them on TV. They walk without an uncle or brother at their side. Some even sleep with men that are not their husbands, if TV stories are true. Newspapers forget. Letter writers forget. They talk about Iraq and Olympics.

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One boy cut his wrists. Ali and some others saved him. The boy watches TV at night. He sleeps all day. Another tried to hang himself but the cord was not strong enough. He cannot talk. Dangling from sharp wire hangs a hat stolen from a guard. In the wind it moves, out of reach. Ali watches a shiny band catching sunlight, like laughing.

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His boat would not last another day at sea, up and down. A devil drank and spewed ocean. A metal shell stank of petrol and seasickness. He blinked away flies until he was almost blind. The sun rose, sometimes a colour of blood, sometimes in a sky cracked silver and black. He talked to fish, to stars. He thought the moon was a coin of fire. He thought a boat was following. There were pirates. He screamed. They were coming for him. Another man hit him in the face, saying he talked crazy. Ali could not cry when a baby died. A woman wrapped it to bury the body overboard. They had no Imam. An older man said prayers, calling on the Prophet. They held down the mother, who rocked in madness. Then Ali was blinking at white uniforms of Navy men who arrived as the boat began to sink. Other men, in dark uniforms, took him to a helicopter. Soldiers searched him above the clouds. Ali fainted, too weak to stand. When his eyes opened he was in a bus, driving towards jail.

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*We have no future, he writes. On the floor is a spill of human heart.*

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Guards begin the muster. Men shuffle outside, standing washed in the rain of God's tears. Guards search rooms. They do not find his words. A city stays secret.

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Another day, another search. Old Yusuf collapses. Guards take him to hospital, locked in handcuffs. He has done nothing but to come without permission. From what Ali reads in newspapers, he believes they do not mean to be cruel. But already he hates this land. His friends learn to hate one another.

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A boy stole a knife from the kitchen then spent weeks in the solitary wing. Where Ali grew up, that boy would have lost his hands. Guards say he is lucky. In the hidden city there is a doctor but no one has told the guards. Aref escaped home because he would not cut off the hands of thieves. His children were bullied. Men spat on his friends. He ran with his wife and daughters. Aref's eyes flutter when he speaks. He worries what might happen to his parents.

*Our secret city is a dying man, writes Ali. Its halls are narrow. we have no trade. The harvest is people. China and Somalia. India and Syria. Palestinian Cambodian Turk. Kept alive by anger. Waiting results of appeal to the minister.*

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Through iron window stripes he's seeing another city: clock towers, spires and green parks. Smoke twists from rooftops behind an empty depot and razor wire. The room sleeps four men. For a time there was a boy but little Abdul had to go back to the desert. His crying kept the men awake. Abdul saw his mother die in a football stadium, executed for letting her hair be seen. His father escaped, only to die beside the boy at sea. Ali prays for Abdul, growing to be a man inside cages.

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Elbows dig a ridge on his window. The building he watches must be apartments. A young man with eyeglasses plays a flute. Another rides a bike to nowhere. A third makes love to women. Ali sees distant shapes leaving to walk the city or ride bicycles to real places. Men drive cars and sit in public libraries. Ali is learning to despise his English.

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Ears trick him. He thought he heard a muezzin lifting up the voice for *adhan*, calling the faithful to perform *salat*. Unrolling mats, they bend like reeds in the wind. But it's only a bell for evening meal, an electric sob.

Ali moves his spoon around a plastic plate: boiled meat fit for dogs. The fruit is turning black. The bread has blue spots. He will not eat rice that crawls.

*some try to starve, he writes. that is giving in. i eat if it is food. not dog scraps. i tell the men what gaurds say. a company manages us. we keep costs down. i hear gaurds talk how the jails makes a profit but pays men wages. we are the margin for profits. goverment pays a company to keep us hidden.*

On the wall someone has flung coffee. Its stain curls like a smile. Ali grins back.

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Some days all he hears are the stories of other men. When he reads the newspaper for them, this is his only true meal. Men assist by holding his paper open.

Ali says they are part of a movement, running from persecution. Men try to convince him that living in fear at home is better than sitting in prison at the bottom of the world.

*not easy to bring light in the head of a sad man. some are all ready crazy. one killed himself with a razor. i hear the stories of brothers and freinds hiding in ship containers. lucky ones choke. stories come like words on the pages. i try to write with out tears for women who cling to underneath of jets and children tied to ropes under a floor of trains. i can not stop these stories. but i start to forget who i am. where i come from. rooms of home sink in shadow of other men.*

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Smugglers warned that he could not go out. He spent days in Sumatra without fresh air and wept for people he had not loved enough. Police were looking for him and the others. The escape route had to be changed. Ali began to vanish.

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Through window bars his dust is a waterfall. There's a church steeple, a school bell and loudspeakers, but it's too far to make out words. Some nights he hears music. He imagines the dancing and alcohol and fighting. He hears football crowds and ambulance sirens and roadworks. One day there was excitement in the yard when a helicopter began descending to a platform. Cheering turned to panic. What if men were seen in photos? They hid their faces from satellite pictures, which could be used to torment family. Shadows crept from sleeves to shield the beards and eyes.

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From a north wall he hears market day sounds. Breeze dies, trapped in the wire. He wonders what could happen if each prisoner shouted a great word louder than guard noises and the electric bell.

When wind blows he breathes in the cooking smells: fried onion and forbidden meats. Ali has cloud for a garden.