



THE JOURNEY

by Alexandra Kania

Priyanga's Story...

**A real-life account of her journey
from Sri Lanka to Australia**





Priya was only 5 years old when in July 2012, her father was murdered by the Tamil in Sri Lanka for not doing what they wanted him to.



Knowing her family was unsafe Priya's mother packed a small backpack and hid the gold the family owned in a part of her scarf and left for the port to find a way to leave SriLanka to get her four young children to safety.

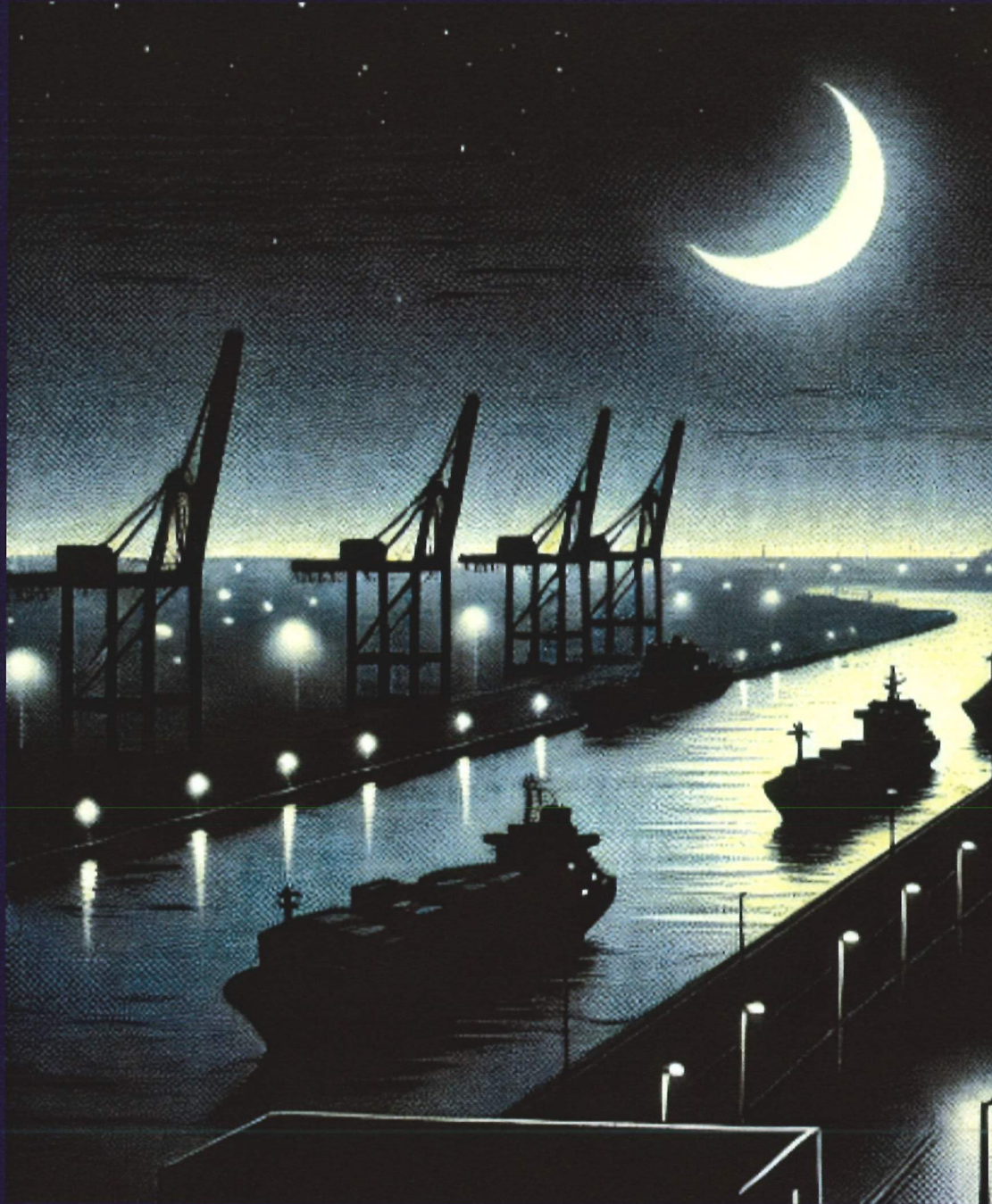


The people smugglers at the port wanted to take advantage of the desperate people fleeing the civil war in Sri Lanka. The young mother was made to pay \$US20 000 in gold for a spot for herself and her four young children on a boat.



The port was loud and busy. Priya's family was told to hide until midnight when they would be taken to the boat.

They had no idea where the boat would go. They just knew it would be to safety and that's all that mattered to them.



It was very dark in the port
as they boarded.

The moon was new and the
harbour lights had been
turned off.

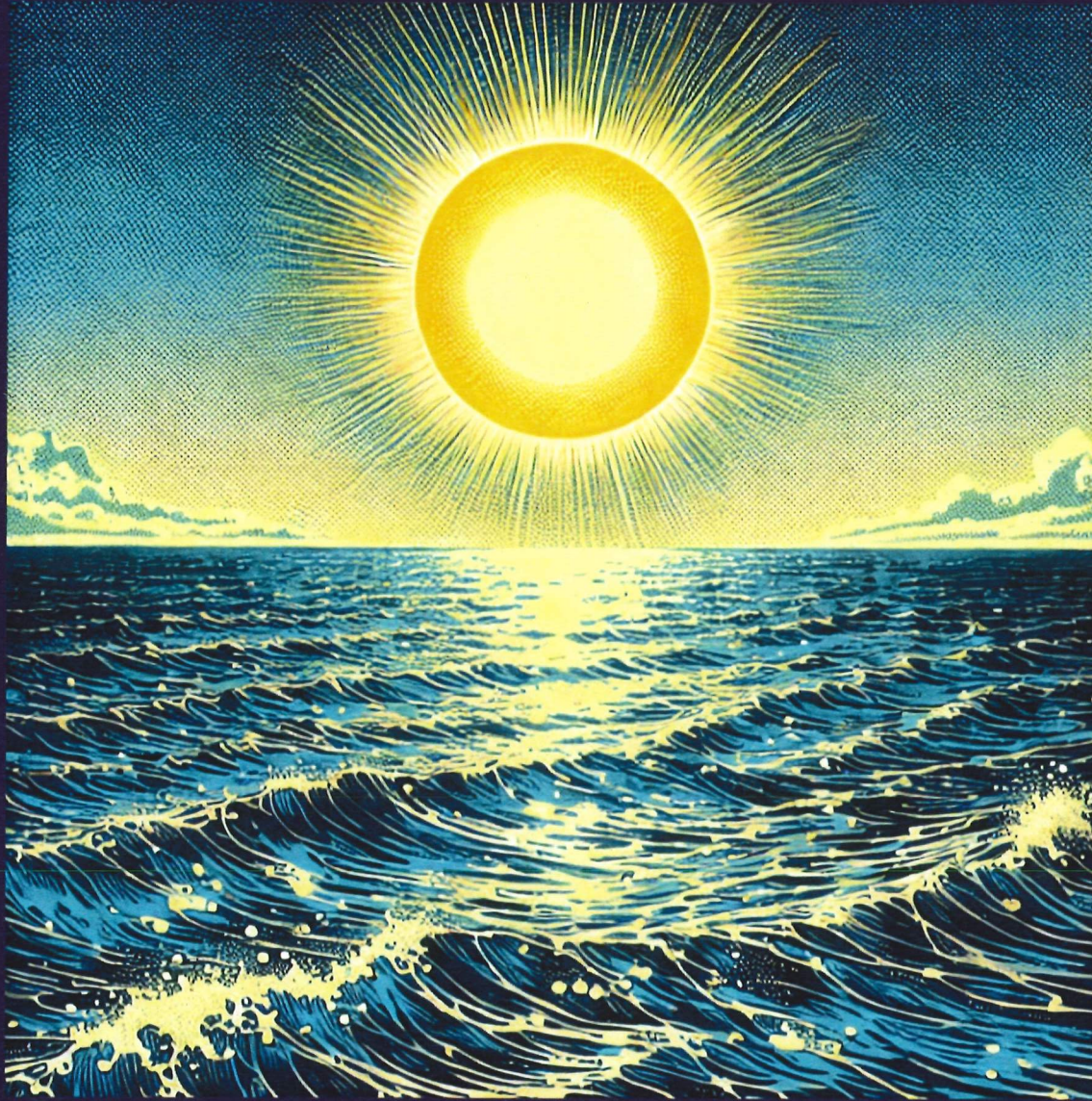
Priya stepped onto the
boat without being able to
see it properly.

She felt butterflies in her
stomach excited for the
journey ahead.

She wondered if there
would be other kids she
could play with.



The family were taken on a small fishing vessel to a larger boat. They boarded the new boat. In total there were 117 people aboard.



The first two days on the boat were difficult. People had been seasick. There was no shelter from the searing sun. The small bunker of the boat was available only for children to sleep in at night. During the day there was nothing to do. A small amount of food was given only once a day and there was very little water to drink.

During the third day the engine stopped working.



After a day an old battered wooden replacement boat arrived. This boat was much smaller only set up to legally carry 40 people. All 117 people squashed on board to continue their journey.



The days were long and hot with nothing to do. Everyone was hungry and thirsty. There was very little of what they had been promised.

Day after day the small vessel slowly bobbed up and down towards its destination.



Priya's mother would tell her stories about the land they were going to. It was filled with slides, swings, swimming pools and fun. Once there, they could have ice cream and chocolates.



Priya's mother was dressed
in a red sari.

The garment that had
once been used to dance
in joy with her husband
was now dirty and limp.

The stole was used to
protect the children from
the sun in the day and to
hold them while they
balanced over the edge of
the boat to go to the toilet
over the sea.



On day 25 the engine stopped working. The boat was now just drifting in the ocean with no navigation system.

At night the moon and stars shone despite the despair on board.

The woman who gave birth a week ago cried herself to sleep after her newborn had died.



On day 33 Priya watched her brother drinking the sea water mixed with some chilli powder. This was all that was left. There was no fresh water unless it rained, no food despite only eating a small portion once every few days.

The adults knew that they were not going to reach their destination.
No food, no water. No hope.



On day 35 everyone was weak, many close to death, they discussed everyone jumping overboard. It was agreed that if they did, all their lives may make a difference if it was discovered and reported worldwide.

Maybe western nations would step in to help the people being persecuted in Sri Lanka. They agreed to jump that night, using their sari's to join families together.



At sunset an old man
spoke up. He quoted
Psalm 23,
“The Lord is my Shepherd.”
He told some Christian
parables and asked
the group to sing and
pray with him. To not jump
overboard but to
have faith that they
would be found and
rescued.



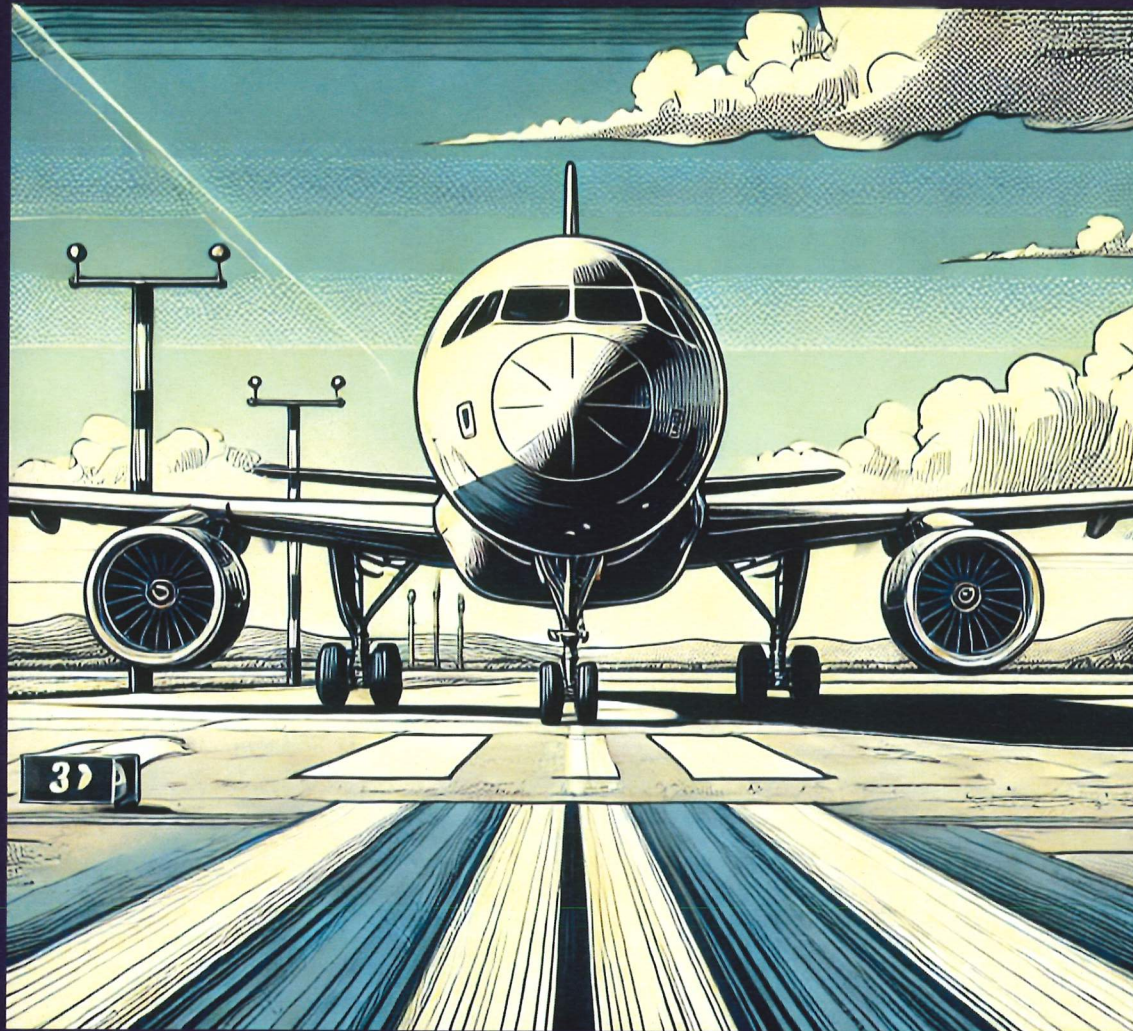
Whether divine intervention or a coincidence they were all rescued by the Australian Navy the next day. Priya's family were Hindu but so convinced was her mother that a miracle from God had occurred she converted the family to Christianity when they arrived in Australia.



The navy took them to Christmas Island.

Priya could not understand what was happening. She could only speak Tamil and did not understand any English.

This place was not like what her mother had promised but she was grateful for the food and water.

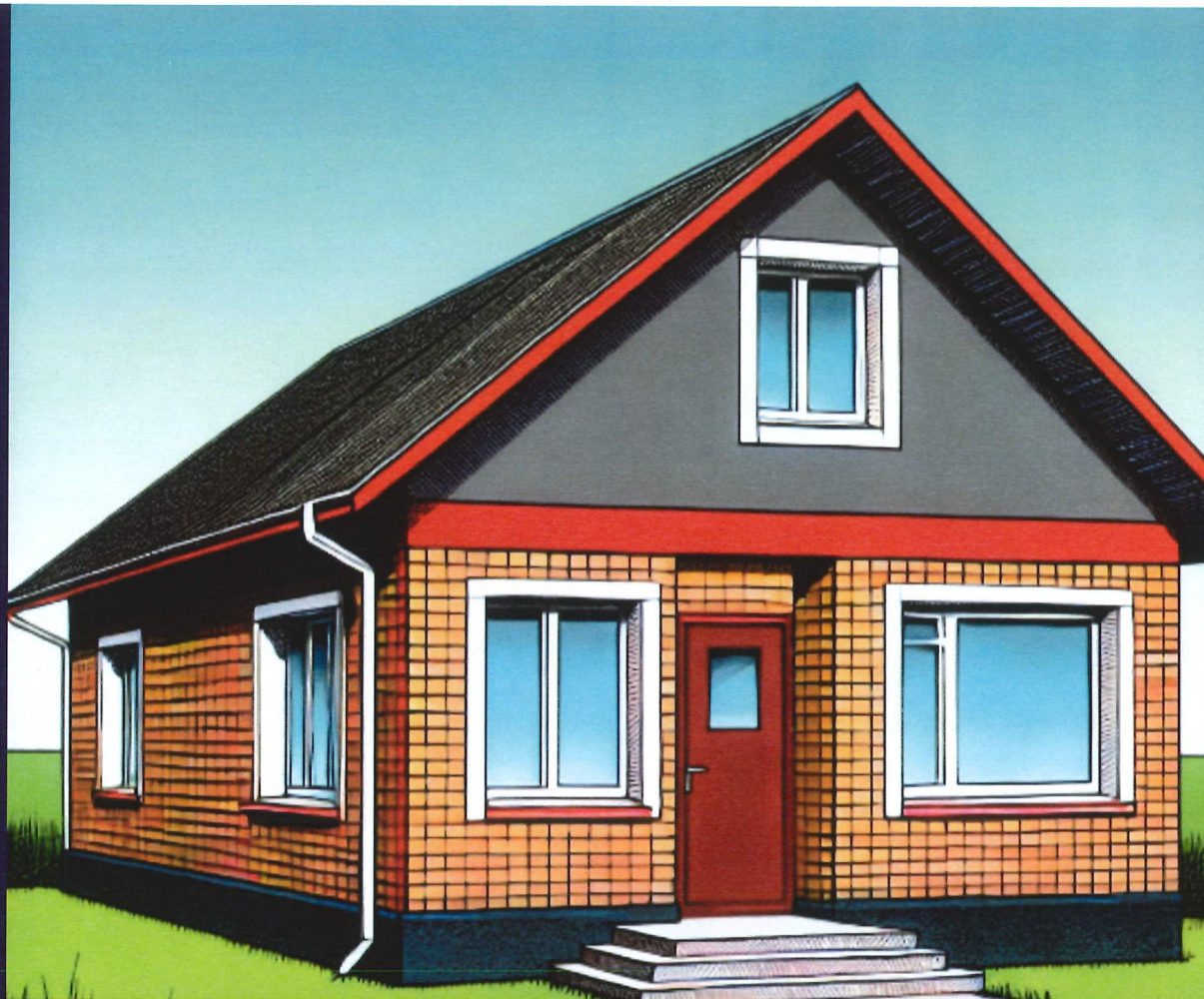


After three weeks on Christmas Island Priya's mother, her three siblings and Priya were all flown to Adelaide. They were given a shared house to live in under security guard.

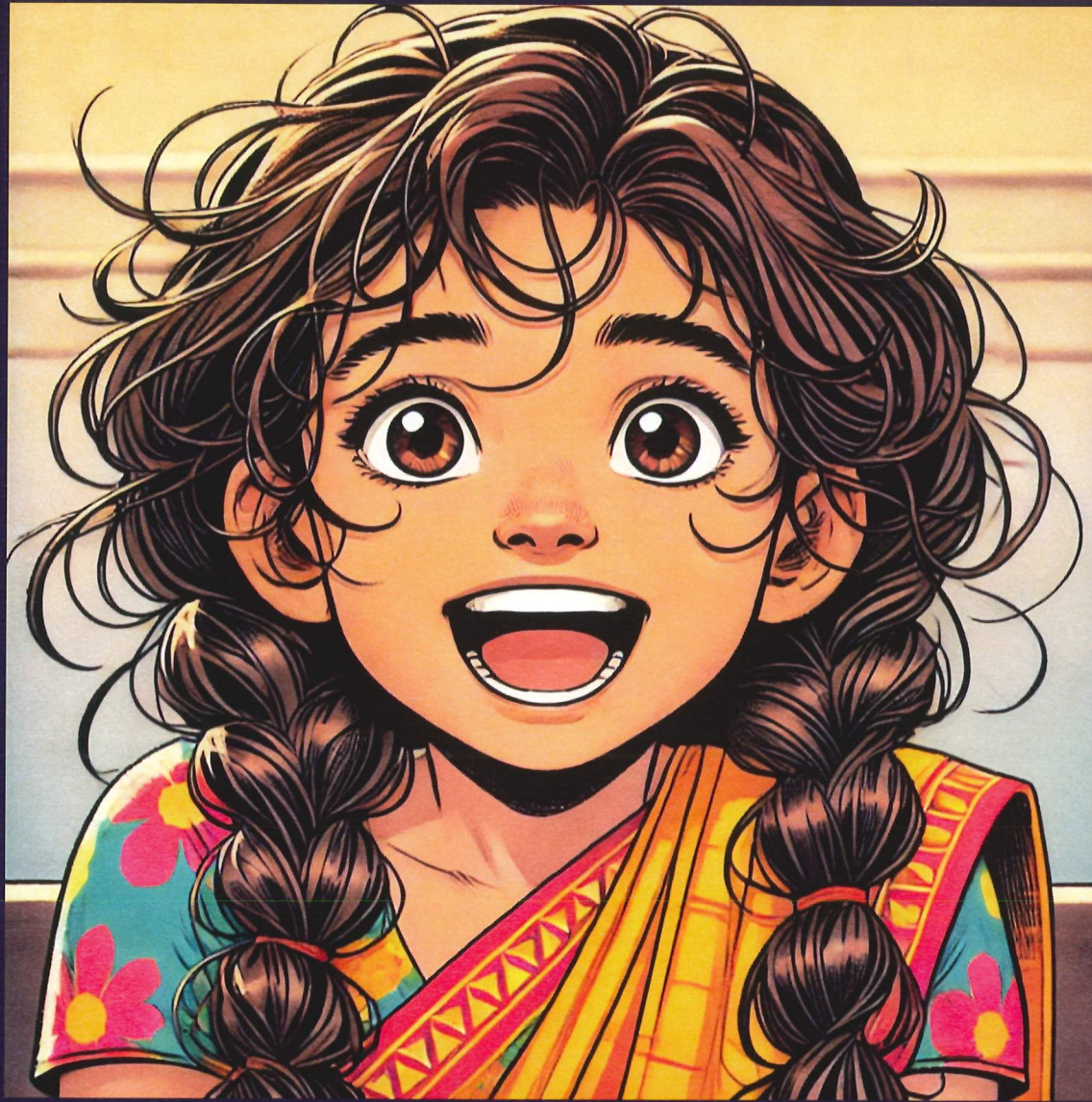
They all chose to sleep in one room, safe together.



They lived in Adelaide for two and a half years having no contact with the outside world. They learned no English, did not go to school, had no computer, books or toys. But the house had a piano and violin. Priya's mother taught her how to play. She loved it.

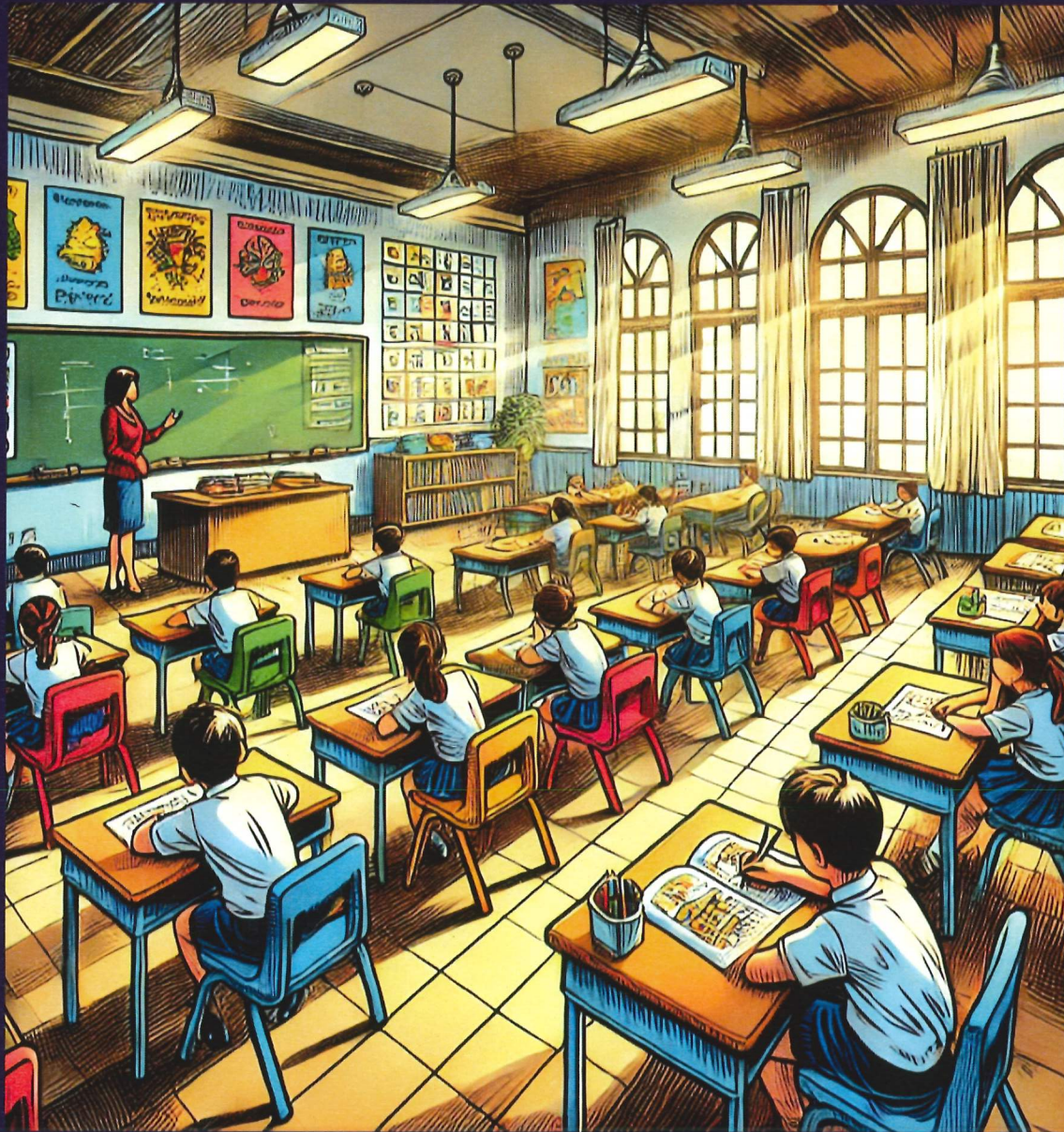


Shortly before Priya's eighth birthday the family was moved by immigration to Perth. They were given their own small house to live in. They were under house detention so Priya could not go to school or access the outside world.



Eventually a year and a half later the day arrived that Priya was allowed to go to St Jude's Catholic Primary School. She was nine years old and was going to attend school for the first time in her life.

They told her she was going to be put in Grade 4.
Priya was so excited she could hardly sleep.
But she was also very, very scared.



As excited as Priya was
the reality of how difficult
this was going to be
soon set in.

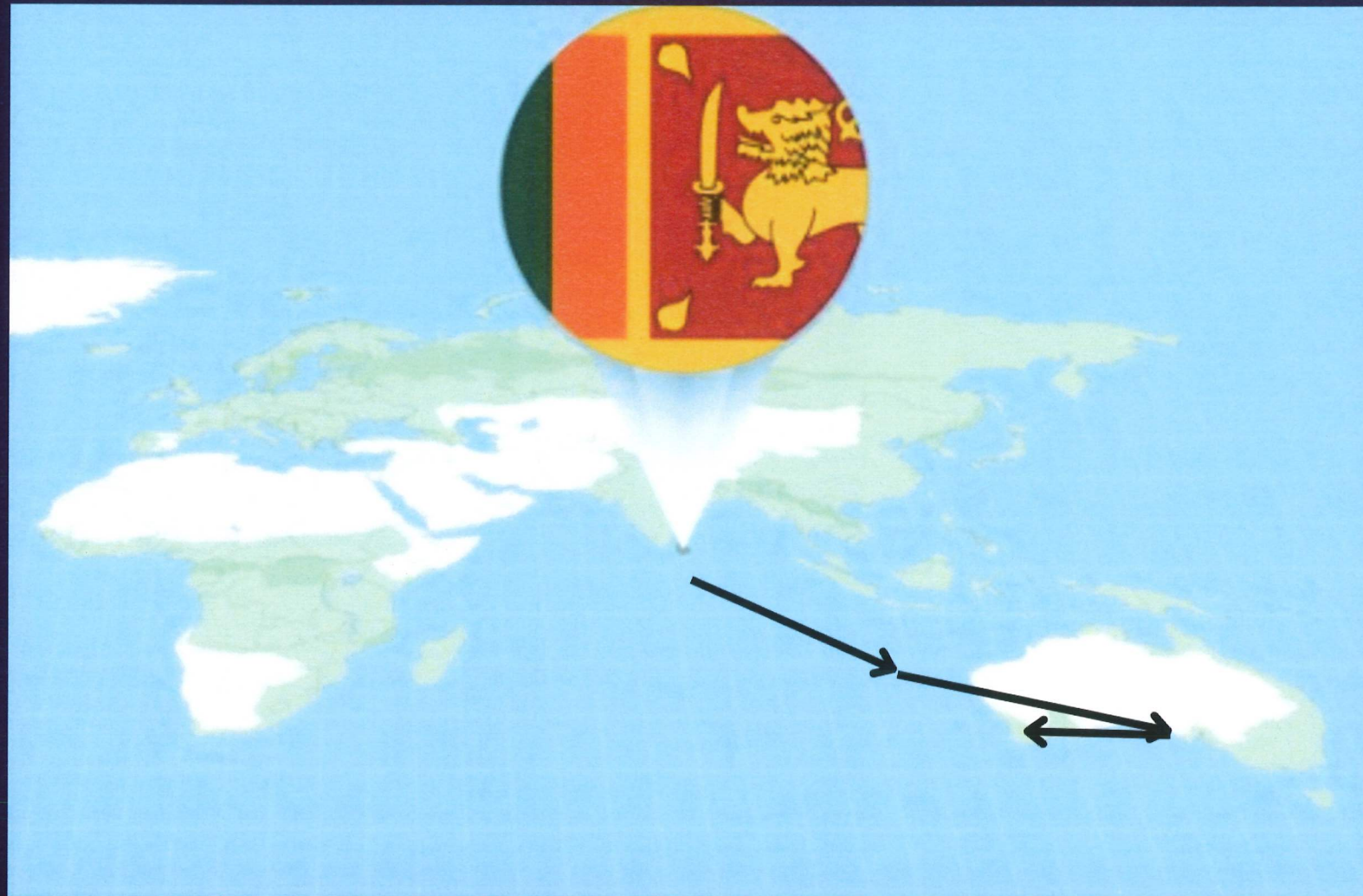
She knew no English.
And while other children
were reading novels she
could not even recognise
the letters in the alphabet.

She could feel the hot
tears forming in her eyes.

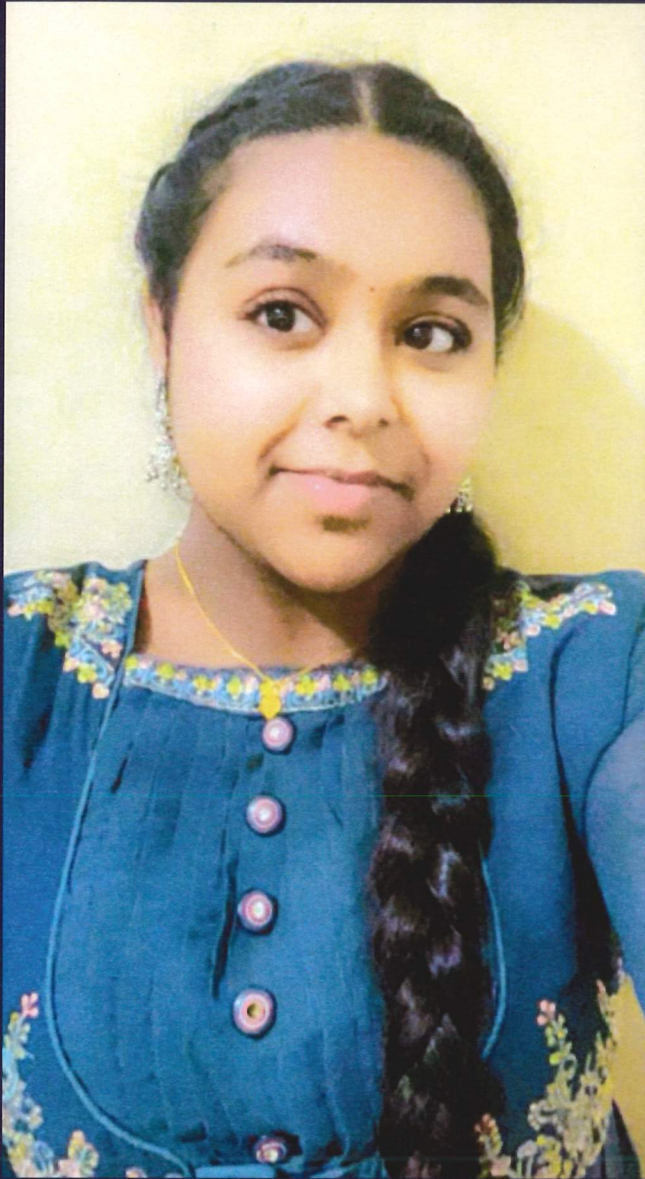


As Priya arrived at school the next day, anxious with knots in her stomach, a girl in her class ran up to Priya and took her hand. As they walked into the classroom the girl handed over a small yellow daisy she had picked and smiled at her.

Priya did not know that daisies represented joy and friendship but it was at that moment that she knew with certainty that everything was going to be okay.



Priya's journey saw her travel by boat from Sri Lanka to Christmas Island then by plane to Adelaide and next Perth. The journey to safety that started in July 2012 ended in April 2024 when Priya, her mother and three siblings were granted Permanent Residence in Australia.



Priya turned 17 this year (2024).

She is currently in Year 12.

She is very active in her Church community and still loves to play the piano and violin.

Priya is planning on studying for a degree in Business at the University of Notre Dame located in Fremantle, Western Australia next year.

She is very grateful for all Australia has done for her and her family.