



# Someone to see you

Caged like criminals behind razor wire, Villawood's asylum seekers lead lives of quiet desperation. Can well-meaning visitors from outside do anything to improve their lot? **Caroline Baum** feels impelled to find out...

On the other side of the fence: women and children are among the hundreds of asylum seekers living out a debilitating existence behind barbed wire at Villawood.

**I**HESITATE FOR WEEKS BEFORE SETTING out for the Villawood Detention Centre. I'm not sure how I'll cope emotionally once out there, and I don't want to make the detainees feel like animals in a zoo – a new novelty experience for bleeding-heart liberals, a feelgood Sunday outing with a difference.

A friend with church connections gives me the names of several detainees who speak English and warns me that the wait to get in will be long, I will need sunblock and water, and that it's a good idea to take food with me. Dinner hours at Villawood are early, between 4.30 and 5.30. If detainees – adults or children – miss that sitting, they don't get to eat till breakfast. Many are too polite to mention this to visitors and go hungry.

On Christmas Eve, my husband David and I drive out with gifts: a soccer ball, magazines, a book of photographs of the Australian wilderness, nectarines, soap and perfume samples. We stand in line behind men in long

flowing robes laden with food and presents and a woman with a single roasted chicken in a foil bag. We fill out forms listing the names of people we want to visit and in the box marked "Relationship to detainee" we write "friend", although we've never met any of them. At the processing desk, an unsmiling officer asking for identification points out that David's driving licence expired the day before. "You can see he hasn't changed since yesterday," I say in my most cajoling tones, but the man ignites, shouting: "This is a correctional facility. These are the rules. If you don't have 100 points of ID you don't get in." David spends the next two hours in the car, in punishing heat. I am furious with him for leaving me to face the unknown alone, and furious at the man for being so unyielding. I am scared of what's on the other side of the heavy door.

I walk through the metal detector, my hand stamped with an invisible frog motif and my wrist banded with a numbered orange strip. My bag of gifts is searched, an officer bouncing



the soccer ball repeatedly. I progress into an ultraviolet anteroom where my frog stamp shows up in the purple light and my white T-shirt takes on a disco glow. Then the final door is opened and I can see into a big dusty yard full of people. I wait for the last gate to be unlocked and I am among them, strangers and their friends, eating, talking, standing around in quiet groups, or sitting in the shade. I am surprised at how many people have brought children. There are carols being sung by a group led by nuns; I feel embarrassed that I do not know who I am looking for, and ask one of the officers where Dr Sultan is. He points to a man sitting under a tree.

**“YOU ARE MY THIRD VISITOR TODAY,”** Aamer Sultan says with a shrug when I introduce myself, as if suffering from a sort of reverse compassion fatigue. Undeterred, I show him what I have brought. He is clearly unimpressed.

“Another soccer ball,” he sighs. “We do not need more soccer balls.”

“But there are so many men and boys here, and you have nothing to do...”

“We are too depressed to play soccer,” he explains gently.

I get him to smell the white nectarines, and he agrees they have a beautiful scent, but he will not drink my water, does not want my books or magazines. “We have many books in our library, but we are too depressed to read.”

I ask him what they do want, what they need, and get out a notebook to make a list.

“A Tamil dictionary, and a Farsi dictionary – those would be very useful,” he says.

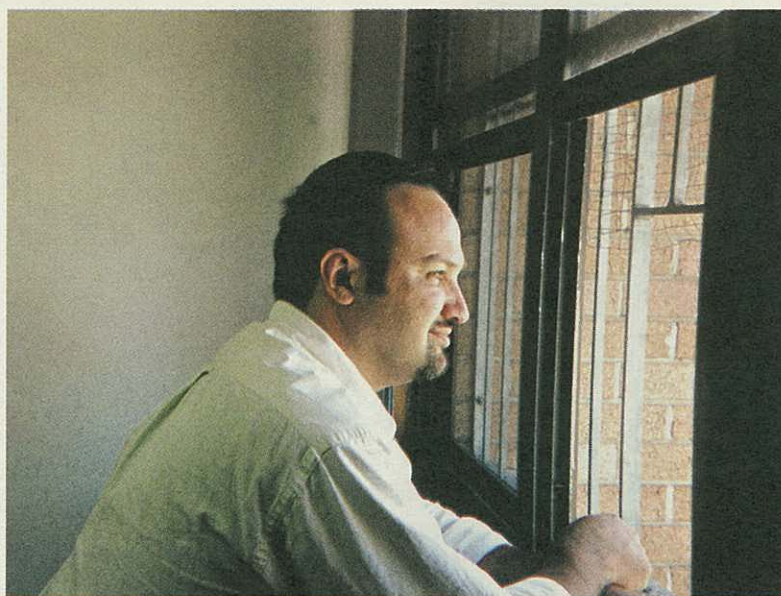
Dr Aamer Sultan is a 32-year-old doctor from Baghdad. He has been in detention for nearly three years, having sought political asylum. His story, that he helped insurrectionist Shi-ite rebels, was not believed and he arrived without papers. He is now a chain-smoker and has lost more than 12 kilograms. But he has a tremendous psychological resilience: I get a sense of someone who is strong, confident and unbowed by what he has been through, though he tells me he cannot sleep without drugs. “I’m afraid of cracking up,” he admits.

He has achieved special status both with other detainees and with officers. His charm and good English have made him a focus for attention and he’s now extraordinarily well-connected. A natural leader, he’s helped many other detainees with their cases, as well as documenting the psychological effects of detention in articles published in medical journals. He’s even received a human rights award for this work (but was prevented from attending the awards ceremony). He has managed also to keep his sense of humour and clearly likes women. I notice him looking at my cleavage and wish I had worn a higher neckline.

“Why do you have such dark skin?” he asks me eventually, and I explain my background. I am interested to see his reaction to the fact that I am partly Jewish. (Iraq does not recognise the state of Israel.)

“I have read quite a bit about the Holocaust and I have seen the film *Schindler’s List* twice,” he says, explaining that he rented the video in Iraq.

I ask him if he knows that the original story was written by an Australian; he does not believe me. I make a mental note to invite Tom Keneally to come out with me next time.



**“These are my friends. It is like in the concentration camps where the Jews, the Gypsies, the homosexuals were all thrown together and made bonds.”**



**“I’m afraid of cracking up,” admits Dr Aamer Sultan (top), who has been in detention for nearly three years; (above) police officers guard Villawood detention centre during a protest earlier this year.**

I ask about friendships here. He turns to two young men sitting on a picnic blanket with some visitors. “These are my friends,” he says, “they are Iranian. It is like in the concentration camps where the Jews, the Gypsies, the homosexuals were all thrown together and made bonds.”

“Why didn’t you escape when the big groups of detainees got out?” I ask, when we’ve settled into a more relaxed conversation, referring to the break-outs from Villawood in July last year.

“I have never broken the law and I am not going to start here,” Sultan replies quietly.

For the next hour and a half, we talk, and flirt a little. After all, why shouldn’t this man have some fun in here? He knows I am married, but being cheeky seems to be part of his personality, and his way of asserting his masculinity without being crude or disrespectful. Sultan seems, in fact, very Western in his attitudes, and bombards me with questions about feminism. When I ask if it would be better to come more modestly dressed, he jokes, “We are not the Taliban, you know.” Other men are more traditional and circumspect. When, on a later visit, I forget myself and kiss a middle-aged Afghan doctor whom I have spoken to several times, he stiffens and recoils. I also have to keep reminding myself not to eat with my left hand.

When it is time to leave, Aamer Sultan walks me to the gate, making it seem as normally polite and casual as if we had just met for coffee. He apologises for appearing so unwelcoming on my arrival. I am not sure how to say goodbye, so I shake his hand and hug him at

the same time. I’ve been okay till now, holding in my feelings about the place, but the gate makes everything stark. I start to cry, apologising that I promised myself I wouldn’t do this. “No, no, it is all right, it is better that you cry here with me, than out there, as most people do, and never come back.” When I go through, he is smiling and waving encouragement.

**I** HAVE BEEN A VISITOR AT VILLAWOOD FOR five months now. Every visit is completely different. The mood is determined by the officers on duty, by the detainees, and by the weather. There is only a small shelter if it rains, which can become cramped and noisy, and I wonder what it will be like to visit in winter, since there is no indoor area.

There is a vibe here that is as catching and capricious as a flu virus, raising temperatures, playing with emotions, sapping energy. By March, tensions are high, with the camp full almost to overflowing – another 100 people have been detained, bringing the total number of inmates to around 500. The queues for the phones are much longer, causing frustration.

Outside the main gates, the queues of visitors are longer, too, and it can take more than two hours to be admitted, especially at weekends. The experience is made unnecessarily unpleasant by the fact that the officers could allow more visitors through the gates to a shaded area where there are a dozen chairs, but they don’t seem willing to do so, forcing people who are often elderly or accompanied by children to wait, standing with no access to toilets or water.

Once inside, visits are subject to a certain amount of supervision. Overt displays of affection between detainees and visiting partners are frowned upon, and officers stop couples if kissing and cuddling gets too passionate.

Sometimes visits are very intense, with detainees solemn and morose over advice they’ve had about their cases, or because nothing seems to be progressing, or because they have not been able to reach loved ones on the phone or fear being deported in the middle of the night, which is when “removals” occur; some detainees are apathetic from taking too many antidepressants – most are medicated, sleep-deprived, and eating poorly. (Many of the detainees work in the kitchens as catering assistants and are paid in Phonecards, at a pathetic and insulting rate which does not compare with what prisoners are paid for tasks in our jails. Detainees also perform cleaning duties.)

Of course children are hit hardest, especially the teenagers, confined just as their minds and bodies are craving freedom. They are bored, restless and desperate to go to school, play music, see the latest Jackie Chan film. They are handsome, proud, fiercely articulate, and look after each other even if they have no blood ties. The kinship of confinement is powerful and dangerous, breeding another virus, this time of resistance, which prompts them to talk of hanging themselves. I have seen adolescent boys bearing wrist-slash scars from self-inflicted razor wounds, and met one who has swallowed a bottle of shampoo. So far, none has drunk the bleach they all seem to use to dye their hair. There is no bravado to their threats: when they talk about killing themselves, they do it quietly. On these occasions, it is impossible to get them to meet my eyes.

Sometimes visits are sunny and almost playful; it’s possible, for an hour or two, to



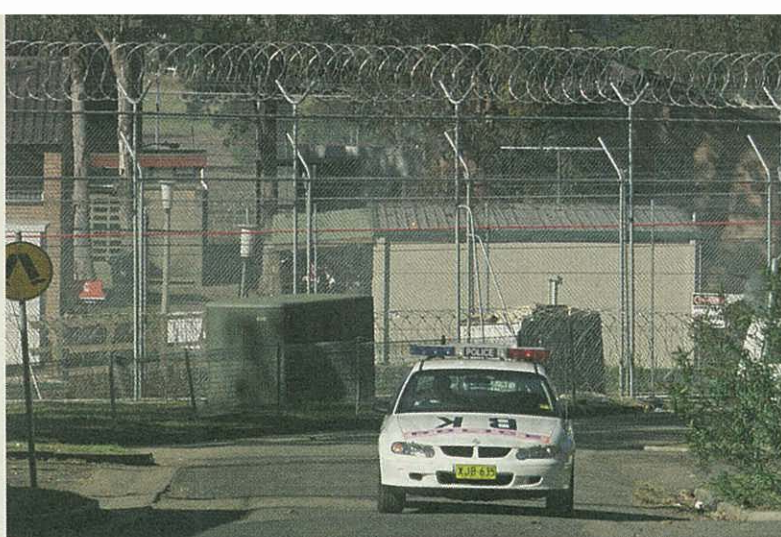
escape the high razor-wire walls. One day I ask Aamer Sultan to pretend we are in Baghdad, and he is going to cook me Sunday lunch. I get him to describe the shopping, preparation and dishes in detail. An hour and a half later, I have to beg him, "Stop, I'm full", and feel as if I have just been the guest at a banquet. I also learn that he has a weakness for the best fetta cheese, which I bring regularly. We often talk about films, since many visitors bring in videos. Action movies are popular with the younger men. Sultan tells me he's not sure he can finish watching *Shine*, because he's finding the father's abuse of his son "too distressing".

Women inmates are hard to communicate with. Many speak little or no English, and seem uncomfortable in the presence of non-Muslim women. Few of them come out unless they are being visited by friends and relatives.

Other detainees tell me that they enjoy the kindness of strangers, but don't like to be asked to repeat the sorry details of their case or their experience on a leaky boat from Indonesia. "It only makes me feel worse," says one. "I want to try and think about the future, not the past." But what future is there to think about? Occasionally, as I am leaving and the gates are being padlocked behind me, an officer will ask me, without a hint of irony, whether I had "a nice visit".

Sometimes I have to wait for the detainees I am visiting because they are delayed, forced to stay in their rooms during one of the many daily "musters" during which officers perform a headcount. I hate the way they use this word, as if these people were cattle. On another occasion, Sultan apologises for keeping me – he'd been rushed off to the dentist for emergency root canal work and refused to wear handcuffs to the clinic (standard procedure for all men leaving the centre for any reason). "I told them I would rather die in here than wear those outside."

Beyond the visitors' area stretches an enormous compound. There are the accommodation blocks, but also a small court where detainees play soccer, a children's playground and a so-called fitness area which consists of two metal frames. There is also a pair of small classrooms for primary school-age children, but no facilities or tuition for children



**There are computers, but connection to the Internet is not allowed. "If they got on the Net, they'd learn how to make bombs and build a tunnel out."**

**Stepping up security: police patrol Villawood in July last year after a series of break-outs by detainees.**

of secondary school age. The television room has been supplemented by a library of donated books which appeared a few months ago, after the public outcry about conditions prompted by programs like the ABC's *Four Corners*. Computers were delivered just before a visit by a human rights group. But connection to the Internet is not allowed, being considered a security risk. As one officer explained to me, "If they got on the Net, they'd learn how to make bombs and they'd build a tunnel out."

Still, detainees who have been moved to Villawood from Curtin, Port Hedland or Woomera are the first to recognise that in comparison it is, as one put it, "the Ritz", even if there is a nightly 10.30 curfew and, each day, five rooms are randomly selected for searching.

Visitors come in all shapes and sizes, but the largest group are nuns. Sensible shoes, Liberty print floral blouses with Peter Pan collars, scrubbed faces and short grey hair give them away. Many have been coming here for years, long before the detainee issue made headlines.

Aamer Sultan gets more visitors than anyone, and there are days when he is surrounded by so many people that it feels as if I'm at a kind of bizarre cocktail party, except that, as one fellow

visitor says, "there's no alcohol and some of the guests can't leave". When Tom Keneally does visit, bringing a signed copy of *Schindler's Ark*, Sultan is hugely flattered, calling over to mates who have never heard of the book or the film to come and meet him. They sit in an attentive, respectful circle, listening to stories about Eritrea and Ireland.

**G**RADUALLY, I BECOME AWARE OF COMPLEX issues of etiquette. I feel awkward and guilty if I ask to visit one detainee and then, once admitted, am seen by other detainees I have not asked to visit. I don't want to hurt their feelings. Inevitably, bonds are made with some, not others. I find myself narrowing my focus from an initial dozen or so people to a more realistic handful whom I can get to know and who can begin to trust me, confident that I will come back and see them regularly.

No-one asks me to do anything unreasonable. In fact, few of them make any requests, except to post letters, or try to find them a better interpreter so that the statement they are making for their case can be more accurately translated. It becomes apparent over months of faltering conversations, supplemented by mime, that the potential for misunderstanding is tremendous and can have serious consequences. A Cambodian couple I meet early on are virtually isolated from the outside world, speaking little English and too frightened to accept any offers of translation from strangers whose political allegiances they cannot be sure of. Eventually, through SBS, I find someone they feel they can trust, and they are able to tell their story clearly for the first time.

"I hope you are keeping some of your Gallic scepticism," one friend, a distinguished writer, admonishes me. Am I being gullible in believing what the asylum seekers tell me when they claim they are political dissidents fleeing because they have protested against totalitarian regimes? This forces me to ask myself whether I believe everything even my close friends tell me. Probably not – exaggeration is a universal human fault. What I am certain of is that when you meet someone, the decisive factor in a true connection is instinctive. I believe these people enough, which



**THE ONLY THING  
HEAVY ABOUT OUR  
NEW VINTAGE.**

THE  
BIG AUSTRALIAN TASTE



Lighter in style than past vintages, but still with rich fruit flavour,  
our Bin 222 Chardonnay offers Gold Medal quality at less than \$15 a bottle.





satisfies me without making me feel credulous.

When I get too comfortable with my pals in Stages Two and Three, where single men, women and families are housed, I brace myself to visit Stage One, which is where the more "difficult" detainees are kept, sometimes in solitary confinement. This includes escapees, people who have started riots or hunger strikes or who have harmed themselves. The visits here are conducted in a small room around Laminex-topped tables, much as in a prison, and are more closely supervised. The atmosphere is wilder and more edgy. There are men here who have been locked up for more than four years and are living all together, in one big room, together with several criminals awaiting deportation to their countries of origin.

Naturally, the detainees are being criminalised through contact with them. There have been attacks and fights, and even football games degenerate quickly into violence. I am often the only Caucasian woman visiting. I meet young men from Algeria without proper legal representation, mouldering away far from the public gaze, who tell me they came to Australia "for a better life". Economic refugees, illegal immigrants who entered the country as stowaways, their situation is hopeless and I can't find a single Pollyanna-ish sentence to utter to give them hope. All I can offer is a tandoori chicken sandwich and a promise that I will send them the dictionaries they request.

AFTER TALKS WITH RUFI SELVI, THE TURKISH programs manager at Villawood, I am given permission to stage a small concert inside the detention centre. The appropriately named

Café of the Gate of Salvation choir agrees to give up a Sunday to sing for nothing, before official visiting hours begin. I meet them at the gate, and we quickly set up the sound system, mixing desk and rows of chairs. I have no idea how many detainees will turn up, since none has been given any notice of the event. An announcement goes out over the public address system while they are at lunch, and a few straggle in, but the choir still outnumbers the audience, making me feel embarrassed for them. They seem perfectly at ease and have told me not to worry. "Even if they don't come, if they hear us from their rooms, it will have been worthwhile," they reassure me.

The music starts with the stirring *Children Are You Ready?* and suddenly, out of nowhere, people come running, their faces full of surprise. They settle tentatively in the back rows, but move forward between the songs.

"What is this music? I think I've heard it in black American films," says Amer Sultan between drags on his inevitable cigarette. When I tell him it is gospel music, and was sung originally by African-American slaves, he takes out a notebook and writes down "gospel music". "Very beautiful," he murmurs.

My jaw is aching from fighting back tears. By now there are 50 or 60 in the audience, and they are cheering, whistling, clapping and snapping their fingers. Small children, who cannot be more than three or four years old, are dancing in front of the seats. Macy Gray's *I Can't Wait to Meet You* is a big hit, and I can only marvel at how the soloists retain their composure in the now charged atmosphere. Officers hover around the edges of the concert,

some swaying to the rhythms with smiles on their lips. The choir sings *The Storm Is Passing Over* and detainees nod wistfully and look up to the skies. The encore of *O Happy Day* proves too much: most of the choir lose their professional serenity and cry openly, tears rolling down their cheeks as they hit their last notes to rousing applause. Detainees come forward to shake their hands, thank them, and tell them, tentatively, that in their own country, they sing or play the drum.

"We will come back!" promises the choir with one voice, quickly winding up cables so that we can leave punctually and not jeopardise future concerts. Outside, the elation is mixed with shock. "Every Australian should see this," they say. In the days that follow, several will contact me, saying they would like to become regular visitors.

I HAVE NO ILLUSION THAT MY VISITS TO Villawood are making a difference or doing any good. As the daughter of a refugee, I simply had no choice; the visits ease my conscience and allow me to sleep at night.

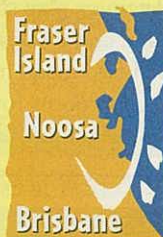
I feel privileged to have met Sultan and the other asylum seekers I now consider friends. I can only hope that if I were incarcerated under similar circumstances, I could show a quarter of their dignity, and maintain a shred of their optimism and faith that, underneath it all, Australians are a generous and welcoming people prepared to show compassion to people fleeing from oppression, risking their lives to reach shores they perceived as welcoming. In the meantime, I'm going to keep on flirting and feasting with Dr Sultan.



An escape to Queensland's Sunshine Coast really is something special. Enjoy breakfast by the beach or in a cafe along our magnificent coastline, embark on a 4WD adventure, be pampered with a poolside massage, or feast on local produce while overlooking one of our vineyards. Discover the creative heart of the Sunshine Coast - the hinterland boasts lush farmland and rainforest, charming mountain villages and spectacular views of the entire Sunshine Coast. Take it all in at your own pace. It's what the locals call Sunshine Coasting.

For your free  
Sunshine Coast  
information pack  
call 1800 732 732.

SUNSHINE COAST  
Just north of Brisbane. Just perfect.



### Noosa Blue Resort

Resort to Indulgence

One of Noosa's newest and stylish resorts, located on the crest of Noosa Hill, 450m from Hastings Street & Main Beach. Valid to 22 December 2002

Phone 1800 INDULGE  
(1800 4638 543)

email: info@noosablue.com.au www.noosablue.com.au

### French Quarter Resort

Located at the Paris end of Hastings Street, home to alfresco eateries & boutiques, opposite Main Beach. Valid to 22 December 2002

Phone 1800 674 599

www.frenchquarter.com.au

FROM \$97.50\*  
per person, per night, twin/double

FROM \$94\*  
per person, per night, twin share

### Kingfisher Bay Resort - Fraser Island

Just North of Noosa, Just Perfect! Fraser Island is perfect for its rainforests, pristine freshwater lakes and miles of white sandy beaches. Kingfisher Bay Resort is the perfect place to relax and enjoy the natural beauty of this World Heritage wonder.

#### INCLUDES:

- Resort Hotel accommodation
- Return fast catamaran transfers
- Hot buffet breakfast daily
- Welcome drink on arrival
- Ranger guided walks

Phone 1800 072 555

reservations@kingfisherbay.com  
www.kingfisherbay.com

\* Based on a minimum 3 night stay. Conditions apply

FROM \$119\*  
per person, per night, twin share

### Alexandra Beach Resort

Directly opposite the patrolled Alexandra Headland Beach, this 4 1/2 star resort offers fully self-contained apartments luxurious yet casual ambience and a prime central Sunshine Coast location.

#### FEATURES:

- Studio, 1, 2 & 3 bedroom, air-conditioned apartments
- 150 metre lagoon swimming pool
- 2 heated pools, 2 heated spas
- swim-up pool bar, gymnasium
- restaurants & bar
- bbq gazebo & children's playground

\*Valid to 30/3/03 excluding Sept/Oct & Dec/Jan school holidays, subject to availability.

Phone 1300 651 046

email: info@alexbeach.com  
www.alexbeach.com

7 nights FROM \$550\*  
for two in a studio suite

### Netanya Noosa

Enjoy the absolute beachfront views from this luxury boutique hotel on sparkling Laguna Bay.

Phone 1800 072 072

netanya@ozemail.com.au www.netanyanoosa.com.au  
Valid to 20/12/02. \* Conditions apply

### Ocean Breeze Resort

In the heart of Hastings St opposite the beach.

PAY FOR 3 NIGHTS STAY FOR 4.

Phone 1800 679 407

oceanbreezenoosa@bigpond.com  
www.oceanbreeze.citysearch.com.au  
Valid to 26/12/02. \* Conditions apply

FROM \$108\*  
per person, per night, twin share

FROM \$83\*  
per person, per night, twin share

WHERE ELSE BUT QUEENSLAND.

\* Subject to availability. Conditions apply.

SCGW/04/02