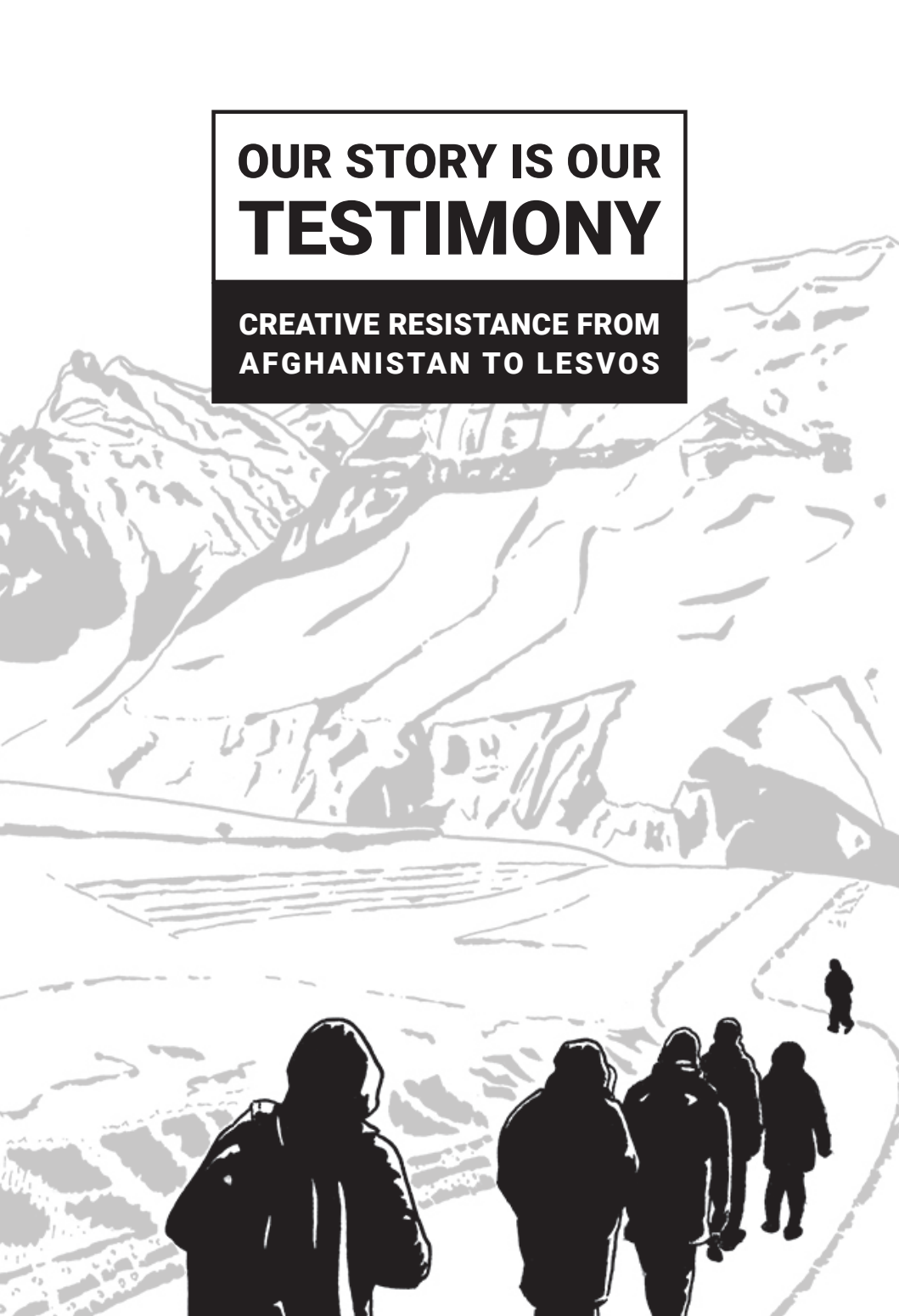
OUR STORY IS OUR TESTIMONY

CREATIVE RESISTANCE FROM AFGHANISTAN TO LESVOS



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Legal Centre Lesvos
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Introduction

The storytelling workshops at Legal Centre Lesvos began in 2019, when Afghan activist Nadia Ghulam created a space for women on the move to create stories together in a safe space outside of Moria camp, built on shared experiences, desires, and struggles. After Nadia left, the pandemic halted the workshops until 2025, when revived by Leila Bar Bari.

For years, Legal Centre Lesvos has been taking testimonies from survivors of border violence and what are known as pushbacks; violent and illegal returns – kidnappings, really – of people on the move from Greek land or waters towards Turkish territory. But testifying about state violence carries risks; some real and some perceived, leaving many too afraid to make official complaints.

Through storytelling, however, women can express their truths indirectly. Our fictional characters carry our realities: the violence we have faced as women, as Afghans, as migrants, as people forced into exile.

Here, we channel our own stories through imaginary characters, who bring to life the experiences we've endured and our continued struggle for survival.



"The first time I participated in a storytelling workshop was in 2019, when I was living in Moria refugee camp. I found the space comfortable because we were people from the same background who had been through similar difficulties who stood up for each other. Now, these workshops are even more urgent, because they provide a way of talking about state violence happening illegally at sea, which people are too scared to talk about openly when they finally reach land. Not everyone has the strength to seek help, or the chance to talk to a psychologist. Sometimes, this kind of project helps people to find the solidarity and support that they need to continue their fight."

- Leila

Part 1:

Exiled from Afghanistan and Iran

I am sitting here with five other women. Some of us are meeting for the first time. We are drinking tea and eating cookies.

We introduce ourselves and make the rules of our session together. We list:

Trust,

Confidentiality,

Mutual understanding,

Respect,

No personal questions!

Someone says: "All those questions give you the feeling that no one believes you."

We all arrived here on Lesvos island in inflatable boats, all of us from Afghanistan, and we have paid a heavy price to be here.



Fatima was born in Afghanistan. She was the oldest of three daughters. After Fatima's youngest sister was born, her father's family put pressure on him to take a second wife who could give birth to a son, before he gets too old.

The family struggled with the pressures of their extended families and their daily lives. Fatima's mother Zahra, who had always dreamed of becoming a teacher, had given this up when she got married, and for years had supported her husband Hossein in his sewing shop. However, with three small children to care for, Zahra no longer had time even for that.

I am happy to have boys. My sister got divorced because she had four daughters. Her husband got another wife, so my sister asked for a divorce. He didn't even help with the children after that.

By the time Fatima turned 18, the family's economic and family pressures were made worse by the situation in Afghanistan. They were living under the constant threat of bombardment. It was impossible. Every day, when Fatima's father left the house, he wasn't sure if he would return.

The family decided they needed to leave the country, to find somewhere safe to live.

I think we can say they left the country illegally. At least that's how I left Afghanistan. It's almost impossible to get a visa.

They could not get visas, so they went to Iran illegally. Since they had no close friends or relatives in Iran, they hoped to continue their journey to Europe.

They would probably stay in poultry or cattle farms, or work in agriculture. Afghans can't get a better job in Iran.

Exactly, or in a textile factory. I was living and working in a textile factory while I was in Turkey. But it is the same in

Iran. There are lots of textile warehouses in Tehran. My relatives worked there.

Fatima and her family found work in a textile factory in Tehran, with a room where they could live and work. They decided to stay there; if everything went well, they might be able to get documents to stay in the country. But nothing went according to plan: not only was it impossible to get documents, but Hossein was staying at home, too afraid to go out because he could be arrested and deported back to Afghanistan.

Police were all over the city. They detained Afghans, treating them in the worst way possible, taking them to detention centers and deporting them to Afghanistan. Although women are also targeted, the family decided it safer for Zahra to go out to do the shopping.

Fatima and her sisters weren't accepted at school, and it was not very safe for them to go out either. They couldn't make friends, and were stuck spending all their time working in the factory.

Three years later, Hossein heard that the Iranian government was sending Afghans to the war in Syria. They were paid monthly salaries, and after a few years they were promised legal residency in Iran. If they managed to return alive...

I think everyone who was forced to go to Syria got killed there. I lost so many relatives there.

Hossein was sick of staying in a dark warehouse, day and night. He made the decision to join the war in Syria, against Zahra's wishes.

Two weeks before Hossein's departure, Fatima, her mother and her sisters found work at a villa with a huge garden. They would tend to the garden and live in a room on the property.

The villa hosted parties on weekends and one night soon after they moved there, a guest, a 35-year-old Iranian man, came to the room where Fatima and her family lived. He tried to touch Fatima, to rape her. Fatima was terrified. For a few seconds she didn't know what to do, but then she started to defend herself, pushing him away, screaming. The next day, the owner came to persuade Fatima and her mother, Zahra, not to make a complaint to the police.

He reminded them that they were in the country illegally, that they had no evidence... Who would believe them?

Zahra had to decide what she wanted to do: either leave with her daughters, or stay and forget it all. Anyway, where would they go? She decided to stay until her husband, Hossein, returned, but Fatima disagreed. Fatima couldn't stay there anymore, pretending that nothing had happened. Besides, what if that man tried again? Fatima wanted to be somewhere she could finally feel safe, and even if the decision weighed heavily, it was time to live a normal life, somewhere she would no longer need to hide.

She decided to run away. She had met a man, Omid, at work, but they weren't married yet, and Fatima needed to get her father's blessing for that. She didn't want to go back to Afghanistan. If they returned to Afghanistan as an unmarried couple, they would be in danger. They would go to Europe – there was nowhere else to go anyway.

Afghans never had a chance in Iran. They never feel safe, always threatened.

With the help of a smuggler, after two days of driving Fatima and Omid reached the Turkish border. They tried to cross, but they were caught by the Turkish border guards, arrested, beaten, robbed of all belongings, and forced back to Iran.

I managed to cross at the first time because there were only two of us. It was risky, very scary, but we managed.

When we crossed, there were 500 people! It was chaos...

When we crossed there were about 100 people and I was the only woman in the group, that was scary. It was covered in snow... I was trying to cover my whole face so nobody could tell I was a woman.



They went back to the smuggler's place. The next night, there were more than twenty men and a family with three children staying in the same room as Fatima and Omid. Fatima was scared, she couldn't sleep all night. They hid out there for the next day and, late at night, tried to cross again: an hour's drive by van and a five-hour walk. At the border, Fatima tripped onto the barbed wire fence and got cut.

Let's put that in, that happened to me too.

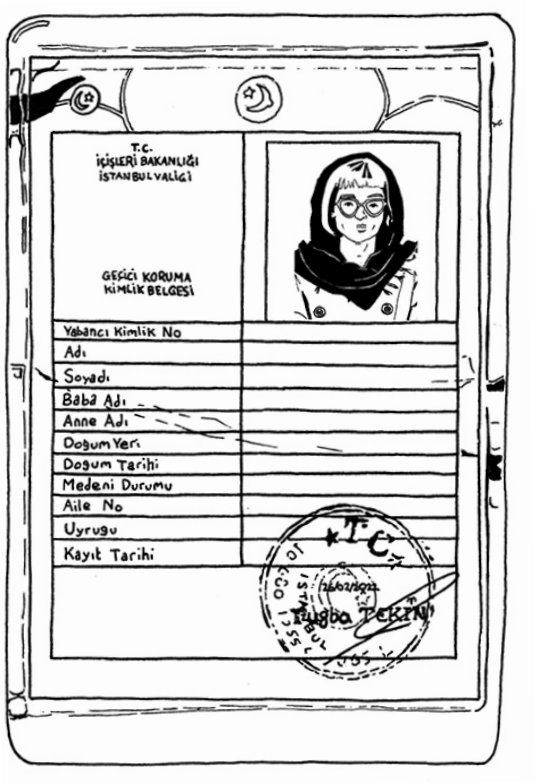
This time, with no documents, no money, no food, not even a bathroom, they made it across and entered Turkey. They went to Istanbul, where they heard that they could find other Afghan families who they might be able to ask for help. They arrived at midnight and slept on a cold park bench, tired, sick and hungry. Fatima began to wonder whether she should have stayed with her family. Maybe that was less difficult than this, and she definitely didn't feel safe now! "So what?" she thought. "Which Afghan woman have you ever seen who feels safe? Maybe this is the fate of all women."

What was Fatima thinking after she ran away? Probably that this was a big mistake. Women have no rights in this world. In the end, they have to accept what men decide for them.

In the morning Omid managed to find an Afghan family that agreed to take them into their home and to help them find a place for themselves. This family had been living in Turkey for about ten years, and they told Fatima and Omid that it had become impossible to get documents in Turkey. They should be careful – the police illegally deport people, sending them

back to their countries, without even a care if they're killed when they get back.

Omid found a job in an orchard, but he heard from his co-workers that if he didn't have a Kimlik (a document which allows you to stay in Turkey), there were no guarantees that he would be paid. With so much insecurity, Fatima and Omid decided to move to Greece.



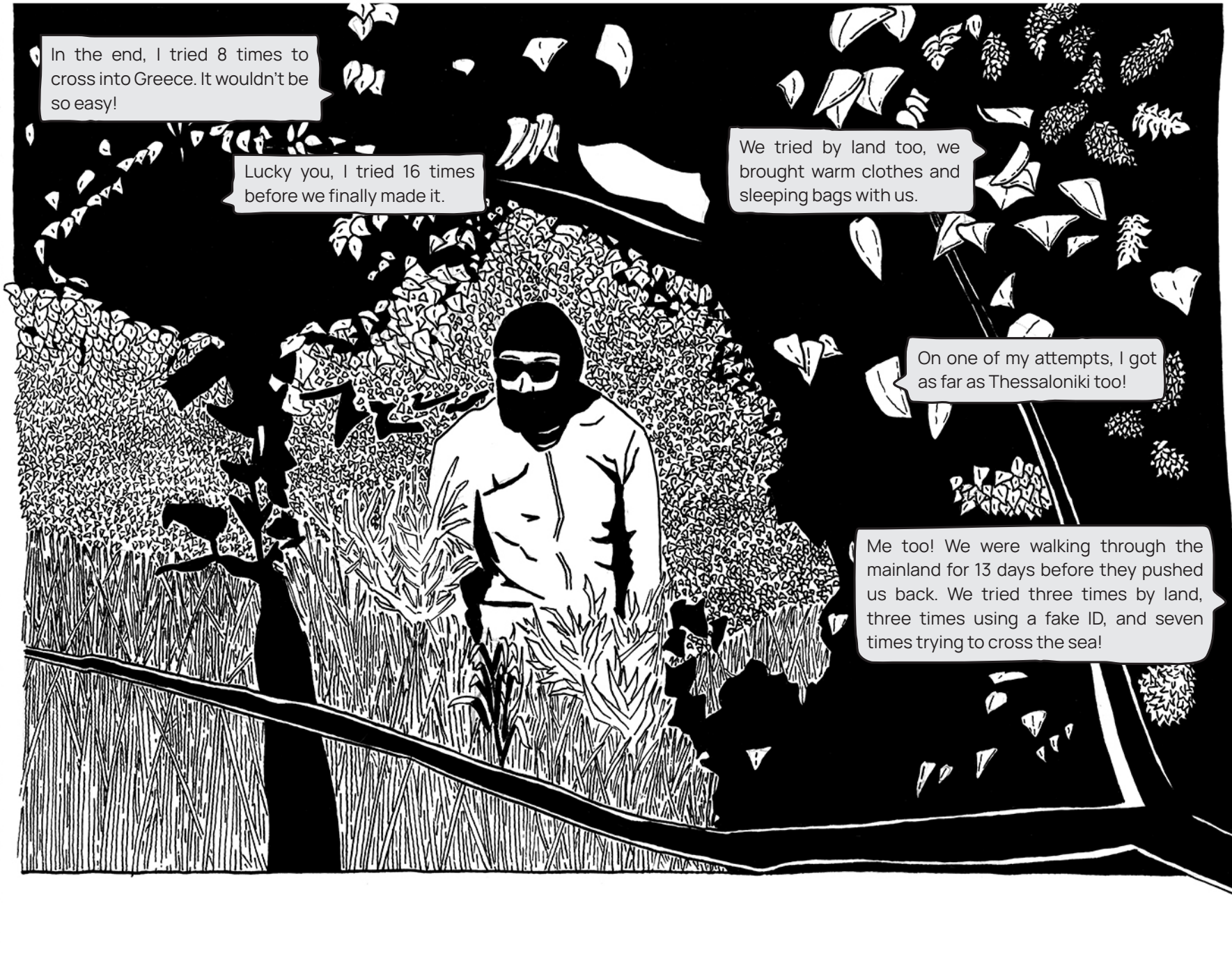
Part 2:

Attempted Crossing to Greece

We met again at the offices of the Legal Centre Lesvos a week later.

Let's return now to Fatima and Omid. When we left them, they had decided to try crossing the border from Turkey into Greece.

Fatima and Omid had two options: by land or by sea. Since they had never seen the sea before, they decided to try crossing the border into Greece by land. They took water and food, and travelled towards the border, reaching it two days later. They were met by a huge river, on one side Turkey, the other side Greece. They had to cross it. They barely managed it, then had to run away from the Greek border guards patrolling on the other side, taking refuge in the marshes. For thirteen days they passed through weeds and forests, through villages and mountains, uphill and downhill. Finally, they reached Thessaloniki, one of Greece's largest cities.


In the end, I tried 8 times to cross into Greece. It wouldn't be so easy!
Lucky you, I tried 16 times before we finally made it.
We tried by land too, we brought warm clothes and sleeping bags with us.
On one of my attempts, I got as far as Thessaloniki too!
Me too! We were walking through the mainland for 13 days before they pushed us back. We tried three times by land, three times using a fake ID, and seven times trying to cross the sea!



They were walking on the side of the road, heading towards the camp. Suddenly, a black van pulled up next to them and two men got out – police!

Can I tell the next part? The way it happened to me? There were three of us that time around...

The police took their phones away and forced them into the van. Then, they started driving, back the way they came. They arrived at a military compound next to the border. But before getting out of the van, they searched Omid and Fatima, a full body search, grinning as they touch Fatima.

Fatima didn't say anything. She just froze. And she worried about Omid: the police forced him to take off his clothes and left him in only a t-shirt and his underwear. When they entered the compound, they found roughly 60 others, people of all nationalities. "So", thought Fatima, "all the terrible stories were true. Secret, illegal deportations by the Greek police and army. These pushbacks really happen."

Tall, strong men in green military uniforms wore black masks to cover their entire faces. They treated everyone very violently. But among them were other migrants too, some covering their faces with a mask and some not. Whether or not they wore a mask, they were helping the men in uniform.

Fatima saw three men, bleeding from their heads. Another person seemed to have a broken arm and a young girl, almost naked, was trying to cover herself in a corner. There were also some small children with their parents who looked very hungry.

It was terrible when they arrested us. There were six other immigrants who behaved very badly towards us. I heard a rumour that if they helped the masked men for six months, they would be allowed to stay in Greece.

I think that those people were just as unfortunate as we were. They just got caught, too. They'll probably be deported back to Turkey as well, in the end.

I disagree. I think those Afghans working for them are worse than others. They had the choice to be less violent, to at least not touch my body, but they do it to save themselves and they don't care about anyone else.

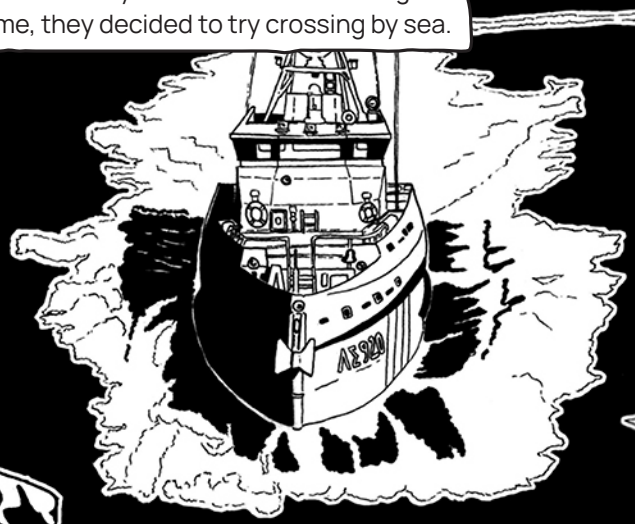
That evening, after dark, two big black vans came and took everyone. Someone told Fatima and Omid that they were lucky to be sent back the same night with the others, that at least they wouldn't be humiliated and beaten like the rest of them.

When the vans approached the border, Fatima and Omid saw the same river that they had crossed before. The masked men beat them, pushed them out of the van, took all their clothes away, and forced them all to board two small boats. They were all abandoned on the other side of the river, where Turkish police arrested them and took them to prison.

The conditions in the prison were terrible. There were no doctors and not enough food. They ate just once a day and were forced to drink water from the toilets. After being kept in prison for three days, they were free to leave. On their way out, a guard shouted at them: "go to your own country and die there!"

Fatima and Omid stayed with one of the families that they met in prison. Lonely and tired, they decided to try again to live legally in Turkey. But it was still impossible. They went back to working illegally in an orchard, but without a Kimlik they had no access to medical services, no right to work, couldn't risk leaving the house, and besides they had no time to learn the language.

All of those pressures pushed them to risk their lives and try to cross the border again. This time, they decided to try crossing by sea.



They were beaten up, their phone and belongings taken away, and left alone at sea.



After three hours of drifting, the Turkish Coast Guard picked them up, took them to prison again, the same old story...



In five months they made seven attempts to cross until finally they managed to arrive.

After entering Greek waters, Fatima and Omid were caught by the masked men on a Greek Coast Guard vessel .



Part 3:

Life in a Greek refugee camp

Immediately on landing, one Monday morning around 10am, Fatima and Omid ran to hide in the nearby forest, afraid of being caught by the masked men. They were together with 52 people, one of them a heavily pregnant woman, and many children. They called some phone numbers looking for help, people who they had heard would take care of them, make sure they wouldn't be taken away by the police, and get them registered in the camp. With the help of some doctors, they finally made it to the camp that afternoon.

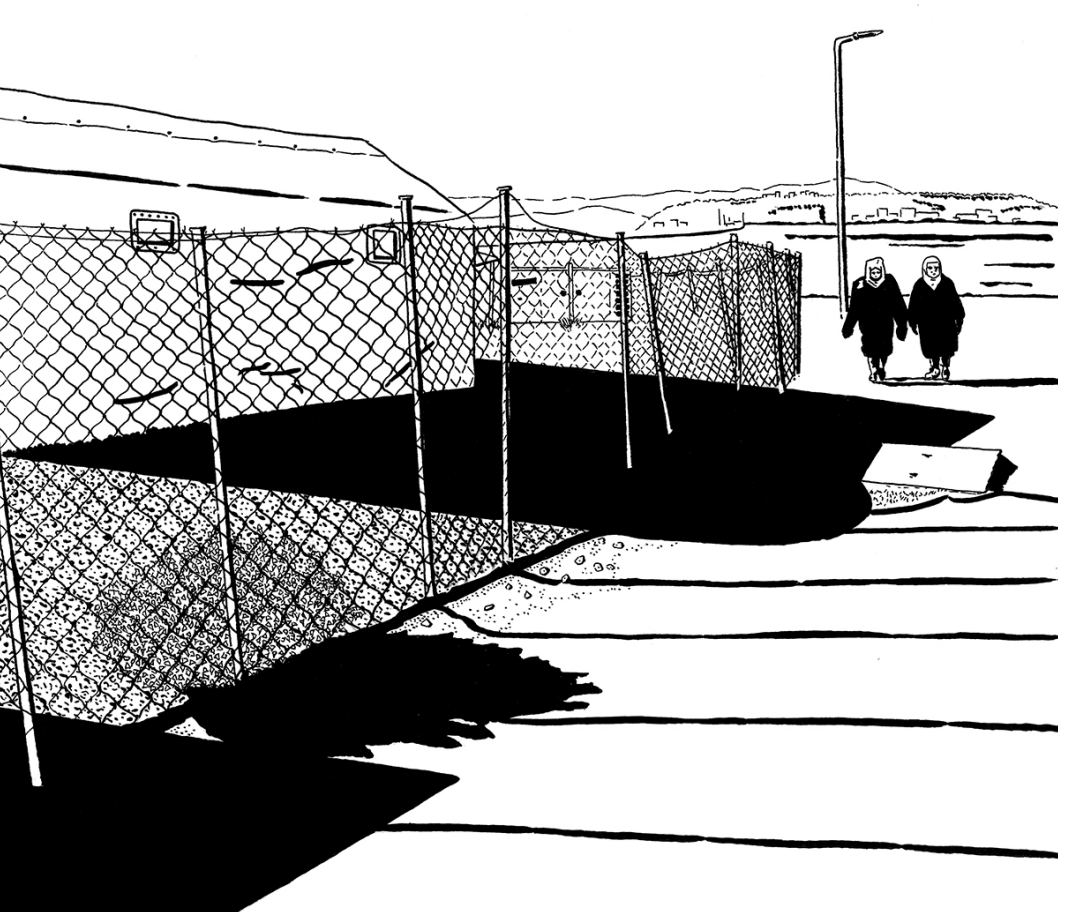
At the camp, they were searched, their phones confiscated, and they received just a blanket each. Their clothes were still soaked from the journey, but when they asked for something dry to wear, they were given nothing.

Some of the people who had travelled with them had gotten sick: an old man was throwing up, almost everyone had headaches, coughing and spluttering, and a baby was uncontrollably crying. Fatima felt dizzy. They were sharing a small tent with another group who'd arrived before them. With so many people there weren't enough beds to go around and, anyway,

some of the beds had no mattresses. It was freezing, they'd been given a badly-cooked cold meal, and had to sleep in their wet clothes.

Some people brought them some tea and bread, home-made, so at least it was edible! You could tell that they'd already been there for a few weeks at least; they behaved like they'd gotten used to it.

Eventually they were given their own place to stay in the camp – Tent 44, "Blue Zone" – which they shared with two other families from Afghanistan. They were tired, stressed and, after paying so much money to smugglers, broke too; the last crossing alone cost them 1,200 dollars each!



Fatima had not been feeling good lately. She was afraid that she was pregnant. She was happy to be here but very worried about her sisters – are they grown now – are they safe? She doesn't know what happened to her father. Did he come back? Is he alive? Where is her mom?

Early in the morning Fatima went to wait in line to see a doctor. It took a few hours to see anyone, but at least she could. Fatima had met a lot of families in the camp who couldn't access medical care because their asylum requests had been rejected. What if hers was rejected too? Would she be left without any rights? She prayed that she wasn't pregnant but, in the end, the test came back positive. There was no interpreter to tell her – instead the midwife pointed at her belly and made a big circle. As she looked at the test she felt many different emotions. She remembered that, just a few minutes ago, she met a family in line who'd had their asylum case rejected and were not allowed to get even vaccines for their children. She started to feel dizzy, ran outside, and threw up.

The next few days Fatima missed her mother more than ever. She had no idea how she would be able to go through all of these things alone, and felt terribly guilty for leaving her sisters in Iran. Maybe she should have stayed with her family, no matter what...



Part 4:

Fatima's Future

We meet again to finish the story. We are not all the same women who started telling the story of Fatima, because part of the reality of living in Lesvos means people are constantly coming and going. Although we are a different group of women, all understand the story of Fatima that we have written until now. The truth is that we have all lived the same story ourselves, or we have heard it countless times. In Lesvos we witness this story over and over again. We have seen our family and friends leaving, continuing the journey elsewhere. We have suffered the pain of not having a home and not knowing where we belong. We have lost our family members. We have forgotten what a normal life looks like. Despite the differences in all our circumstances, there were no disagreements at all while we were telling the story – not even once!

After sharing Fatima's story with the new women in the group, we decided that everyone should come up with their own ending for the story and share it with the group.

Ending 1:

During their first six months in the camp, Fatima and Omid's asylum claims were rejected twice. After enduring a year of harsh conditions and frequent illnesses, they finally passed an admissibility interview. This process is required for asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Syria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Somalia who have passed through Turkey, even though Turkey is not their country of origin. They were granted refugee status. While in the camp, Fatima gave birth to a son, whom they named Amirali. After a year and a half, they were finally able to leave the island and relocate to Frankfurt, Germany. Fatima feels a bittersweet relief that her child is a boy. He will suffer less than a girl like her.

Ending 2:

During their first six months in the camp, their asylum claim was rejected twice. They couldn't pass the admissibility interview. Determined, they filed a subsequent application to reopen their case, but it was rejected once again. Without the money to pay for another application, they had no choice but to wait in the camp for another year, enduring dire conditions without access to food or water inside the camp. Life with a small baby girl during that year was incredibly difficult, but eventually, they received their documents and left for Germany. During this time, Fatima reconnected with her mother through Omid's friends. She learned that her father had been killed in Syria, and her mother, after leaving the villa, had returned to work in the textile factory.

Ending 3:

They lived in the camp for one year and five months, facing many difficulties. After their asylum request was rejected, they

lost access to medical care, and their daughter couldn't get vaccinated. Finally they got their documentation and with the help of an organization, they moved to the city. Although they tried to settle in Greece, life remained challenging. No jobs and no support to learn the language made it nearly impossible to stay. After two years, they decided to leave and sought asylum again, this time in Germany.

Ending 4:

Fatima sat under a tree, watching her daughter play with her younger brother. The fresh breeze carried her thoughts back to the days she spent in the camp in Greece. She recalled the strong winds that whipped through the camp, pulling up the tents. Memories of the six difficult months she endured there came flooding back. Her thoughts were interrupted when Zahra, her mother, called out to her. Fatima looked at her and felt a deep sense of gratitude, realizing she was now the happiest girl in the world. After her father was killed in Syria, Fatima often thought of her mother and sisters, carrying a heavy burden of guilt, so she had decided to leave the camp and moved to Switzerland, where she worked tirelessly to bring her family to safety. After years of effort, she succeeded in reuniting with her mother and sisters, and now they live together in Switzerland. Though Fatima is happy, she often thinks of the countless girls who face similar hardships—forced marriages, violence... Now she thinks of how she can help other girls around the world.



Part 5:

The world we want to live in

We are just four today. One of the women was waiting for the bus from the camp for 45 minutes and could not make it in the end.

We decided to meet in nature today.

The weather is a bit cold but sunny. We sat on two blankets which we put on the grass on the hill facing the sea.

We began the session by checking-in with one another, to see how telling Fatima's story made us feel.

I talked to my husband and I told him the whole story! I told him how happy I am to be part of this. What we are doing is really important. I'm a psychologist and I find this way of storymaking so powerful and strong. When I was alone again I thought a lot about the details, I was thinking about all of us and how we have all lived this story, line by line.



I talked to my husband too. He saw that I was happy, happy but sad at the same time. I thought about what happened when we began making the story. All of us said that Fatima and her family must leave their country. Why did they go to Iran? Why were they alone? Why did someone want to rape Fatima? Why didn't anyone say they stayed in their country, or that they have a beautiful house there? Why couldn't we imagine a happy family, living together with all their family? Why, wherever we go, are we always alone? Why do we always have to fight, even in our dreams?

We decide to focus today not on Fatima's story but on creating **the world we want to live in**:

(1): In my world, I am 20 years old and I am an engineer, I always wanted to be a civil engineer. In reality I was born and grew up in Iran. One day when I was just in 10th grade, the principal entered the class and called the names of me and four more students and right there in front of everyone said: Afghans are no longer allowed to study here. I still can hear it.

So in my world I am able to study and I am not a refugee with no rights, I am an engineer, I am working and I am an independent woman who can buy and do whatever I want, living in Europe with my family. I had enough from Asia. In my world my family has a big house with a very beautiful garden, there is a small blue pool in the yard and there are flowers around. Actually that is the exact house we had in Kabul before my parents were forced to leave our country. I have never seen it but my siblings describe the house to me with all the details. I always had the feeling that I have lived there. In my world it is also 2025, because last year I met a lot of good people. I also have a horse, as my family used to have in Afghanistan. You know, the reason I became a tailor is that I love to draw the building plans.

Now I look at the human body like a building and the dress I am making is like bricks which are covering the body. Whenever I finish with a dress I make, I always say this building is completed. Maybe I still can become an engineer in this world.

(2): In my world I live in a country like the UK or Switzerland or the Netherlands but it is in Asia. I am 24, 25 years old. I have a beautiful house with a very nice bedroom, big windows and a sunny balcony, a lot of apple trees are around, flowers, it is summer but we had a beautiful spring and we had a lot of snow in the winter too, like in Afghanistan. In my world I finished university, and I am an interpreter translating documents. In this world I always wanted to go to university but when I finished 8th grade I was forced to get married to someone who I had never seen before, that is why in our story I said Zahra had to marry very young. Before my marriage I was one of the top students in the school but after my husband did not let me continue. In my world no one needs documents or a visa to move around. I am going once a month to my parents. The streets are clean and I have a car. I feel safe to be myself and I am living alone. People are kind, there are no police, no prisons, everyone respects each other and men and women have equal power.

(3) In my world, no one is forced to leave their country, or better, there are no countries to leave, there are no borders, there are no passports and I am living free with my family. Yes, I was able to study and become a psychologist in this world but it was very difficult. Being a refugee in a country where no one wants you there, other students and teachers ask you all the time when you are going back to your country. In the world I imagine, you belong to nowhere and you are allowed to live where you want. There are no wars in some places in order to have peace elsewhere. My imagined world is on another

planet, I do not think the world we want to be in is possible to make it on this planet that we already have.

(4): I am an Artist in my world. I am free, I have rights, I don't need to ask permission to leave the house, not from my husband, not from anyone. I am thinking about all the women in Afghanistan now who can not leave the house even or to study. In my world I am free, there are no borders, no passport, no interview. You know, on the day of my asylum interview I was thinking why do these people have the right to ask me all about my life and why do they have the power to make me go through all my difficulties again? I was very angry and sad that I have to talk about it and they decide if they want me here or not. Why? Who are they? In my world you can live whenever you want and no one is superior to others just because they were born in a different place and speak a different language. While living in a world that we had to suffer too much, thinking about another world seems impossible to have but I can hear it from all of us, the world we want to live in is the one where we were born, where our families are and where we know the language. These powerful countries need to leave us alone and stop making war to sell their weapons. I know we would be happy where we were before if there was no war and violence.

The End



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