

A SYRIAN PRINCESS

by

Petros X, rescue and relief volunteer worker
Lesvos island, Greece



Cover: Painting by artist Sofia Filea, inspired by the chapter "*Angels of the Aegean*". More information about the artist, her work and contact details can be found in Sofia's personal Facebook account below.

Sofia Filea: www.facebook.com/sofiafileasart

*In memory of all those little angels of the Aegean,
(we are sorry for arriving too late...)*

Contents

Preface	1
A prologue	2
Chapter 1: Lesvos, October 2015.....	3
Chapter 2: Arrival at Mytilene	5
Chapter 3: Embraced at Kaloni	7
Chapter 4: Alexandros	9
Chapter 5: Operation field Sykaminia (Despair's flotsam).....	11
Chapter 6: Night watch.....	13
Chapter 7: First wave	16
Chapter 8: Khalid the radar	19
Chapter 9: Second wave	21
Chapter 10: Tears for the East.....	23
Chapter 11: Third wave	25
Chapter 12: The quiet Afghani.....	27
Chapter 13: A march of shadows.....	29
Chapter 14: The doctors from Achaia.....	32
Chapter 15: Aeolus descending.....	35
Chapter 16: You are safe now!.....	37
Chapter 17: Bryan the cook.....	41
Chapter 18: Grandmothers, anarchists, and NGOs	43
Chapter 19: The meeting	45
Chapter 20: A Viking priest, and the Mayor	47
Chapter 21: A fisherman's silence.....	50
Chapter 22: Vineyard philosophy with a Pakistani from Birmingham.....	52
Chapter 23: Alert on the coast!.....	56
Chapter 24: Inter-camp shuttle service	59
Chapter 25: All camps are full!	61
Chapter 26: Grief.....	65
Chapter 27: A Syrian Princess	68
Chapter 28: PIKPA's Heaven	72
Chapter 29: Moria's Hell	75
Chapter 30: A swastika at midnight.....	78
Chapter 31: ...and a good time was had by all!	80
Chapter 32: Prayers for an unbeliever	82
Chapter 33: The Angels of the Aegean.....	84

Chapter 34: Leaving.....	86
Epilogue and a tribute	87
A note to the people of Europe (written in the summer of 2016).....	89
A short note to the Visegrad countries	91
Για τους Έλληνες	92

Preface

This is a personal account of the refugee rescue and relief effort mounted in the island of Lesbos, as I experienced it during my days of volunteer work on the island's North coast in October of 2015. All the characters and events are real, improbable as some may appear to be. The same goes for the main dialogues, even if naturally I could not remember exact words or the time sequence of their occurrence. Names have been mostly changed to protect the privacy of individuals. The reason for my anonymity is to avoid usurping, upending or in any way attaching my name to what has been, and still is, an immense collective effort by many rescue and relief workers on that coast of despair. Most of them have done (and still do) so much more than I did. Moreover, before any of us arrived there from other parts of Greece and the World, the people of Lesbos have always stood there, doing it all alone. In a story repeated in other Aegean islands, local fishermen plucked refugees from often unforgiving seas, at all seasons, villagers treated them in their houses, village squares, small taverns and cafes as best as they could, many years before this vast river of human desperation registered on the radar of much richer European countries to the north. Finally, while there are individual refugee stories, theirs is a picture unavoidably blurred and incomplete. This is simply because of the dynamics imposed on us from facing wave after wave of refugees arriving on the coast. All that remained at the end of a day was a smile there, a fragment of a story here, a sad faraway look, longing eyes looking East, fragments, just fragments of a canvas painting a much larger drama. I hope someone writes about it one day in all its multi-layer scale, maybe a refugee that once passed through Lesbos or some other island of North-East Aegean, and stayed among us to restart her life in peace in Greece or elsewhere in Europe.

With the exception of this paragraph, and 'A note to the people of Europe' at the end, this account was written well before the sexual attacks in Cologne, the multiple terrorist attacks in France, Germany, and Turkey. After these events, with the political climate shifting decisively towards fear, scattered racists events, I abandoned any hope that publishing this account could do anything of significance against such a dark and still rising tide. The exit of the UK from the EU, and the ascent of D. Trump in the USA, spurred to a great degree by stoking immigration fears by people that should be in a circus rather than any serious political arena, are the most recent demonstration of it. At the end, I decided to go ahead, if only to bear witness to some extraordinary events and people, as my Norwegian friend, a nurse would put it. My now modest hope for this little book¹ is to reinsert into the ongoing debate taking place across Europe regarding these historic refugee movements and settlements an element that has been slipping away: our shared humanity. It is what brought us to the North shores of Lesbos during that tragic Autumn of 2015, and what kept us there when even the blue sea became grey and dark with fear and despair.

¹ It is also meant to energize people around the World to help, with their volunteer time, or other resources the organizations here in Greece that are actively involved in helping refugees arriving and/or settling in Greece.

A prologue

In the early Autumn of 2015 a group of people that have successfully set up and maintained a refugee support operation in Pedio of Areos and Victoria square of central Athens, decided to move it where it has become the front line of the largest refugee movements in history since WWII, one of the Greek islands of the Eastern Aegean. By that time islands such as Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Leros, Samos and Kalymnos, places with already very limited resources of their own, have become the pinch points of a vast river of human desperation and fear, while several European countries 'downstream' of that river started raising border fences in response. A rescue and relief initiative was then set up in the North shore of Lesbos by people from an anarchist-autonomous cell based in Athens, and provisioned by a local charity called 'Angalia' (which means 'Embrace' in Greek) founded by Papa-Stratis, a Greek Orthodox priest (now deceased), in the village of Kaloni.

It was around those original and determined efforts that a most improbable set of volunteers from Greece and around the World coalesced to help. The chosen base of operations was to be near Skala Sykaminias, a beautiful small village in the North shores of Lesbos. Rescue and relief efforts were to extend as much as possible along the coast on either side of that village, but mostly towards the road-accessible parts of the coastline towards Molyvos. This was the stage where people from an almost unbelievably wide range of nationalities, political and religious beliefs (or not), workers in various NGOs, came together and cooperated (even if sometimes uneasily) towards saving lives and giving shelter and safety to the refugees arriving in large waves from war-torn Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. There were rescue and relief workers from Athens, Patra, and the city of Mytilene, as well as Norway, Spain, Italy, Denmark, the UK, Israel, The Netherlands, and even from further out places like the USA, and from a certain Far East Asian nation from where our field cook was hailing from. All of them, along with local fishermen, the heroic Greek Coast Guard, the island police force, FRONTEX sailors, and even a Norway-contributed patrol boat, went out on a limb to help at all levels, day and night. I hope this account does justice to all their efforts during those early and difficult times when we stood on those shores, at the cusp of rapidly rising refugee flows, with very few resources.

Chapter 1: Lesvos, October 2015

«...και το ρακί του, πάντα διπλά και τριπλά αποσταγμένο τσίπουρο. Εξάλλου όλοι αγαπούσαν να ακούνε τις γουστόζικες ιστορίες του, που όσο και να πάλιωναν, πάντα είχαν την νοστιμάδα τους και ποτέ δεν έλεγαν να τελειώσουν...»

«...and his raki, always double and tripled distilled tsipouro. Besides they all liked to listen to his funny stories, which no matter how old, they kept their tastefulness and they were never ending...»

**«Παναγιά η γοργόνα», Στρατής Μυριβήλης, Λέσβος, 1948
“The Mermaid Madonna”, Stratis Myrivilis, Lesvos, 1948**

She stood there in soft Autumnal light gently highlighting her palette of colours as no harsh Summer sun could ever do. A colour dynamics ranging from the deep green of her large mainland-like dense pine forests ('pefka' everywhere!) to the yellow-white reflections of sunlight from her large salt-gathering and sardine-breeding, shallow seas in the bay of Kaloni. It was ending, if that word could be used, to that boundless Mediterranean Blue of Sky and Sea. During my sailing and wandering years in the Eastern Mediterranean it was here in Lesvos that I had to come to find the master stroke of Nature putting together landscapes, smells, and island attitudes usually spread over many Aegean and Ionian islands. This was a micro-mega of an island world, with large, tall-ceiling cafes imbued with old-time cosmopolitanism such as Panellinion in Mytilene's port, and yet also with those small cafes/taverns one comes to expect in a typical Aegean island. Little warm worlds of strong coffee smells, sometimes flavoured with mastic from nearby Chios, and the occasional fish dish accompanied by rounds of tsipouro or that famous Mytilene ouzo. Often intimately close to the sea, both in terms of location as well as clientele, these cafes/taverns, small and unassuming as they are, they serve also as the 'agora' of all those villages where lively debates take place and arguments are set out loud.

In Autumn I found them as lively as I would expect from my summer journeys across the Aegean Archipelago: today's sardine catch, the foul weather mid-October, multiple crescendos on this or the other political issue played out in Athens or some distant European capital, and football (of course). Yet, this being October of 2015² the refugee issue would invariably come up. Then, unlike all other issues where almost everybody would have an opinion to be boisterously expressed, much fewer did so. Several would lapse to a complete silence and sometimes a distant look out of the nearest weather-beaten window. Now these were mostly fishermen, usually the loudest of the souls on most issues. Later I found what these long silences and glances out of the window may have meant, for the moment they simply stood indecipherable.

In sharp contrast to these small-village worlds stood the city of Mytilene itself with her large port. Old- and present- times cosmopolitan, with rows of stately mansions, the so called Καπετανόσπιτα (=Kapetanospita, meaning Captains' houses), lining up some of its boulevards, belonging to a vibrant merchant-marine class. Large churches like 'Ageios Therapon' whose architecture blend Western and Eastern ecclesiastical styles were there, a beautiful City Hall standing next to a

² It was during that month of that year that the refugee flows through the Eastern Aegean islands started steeply rising with as many arriving during that month as during the entire year of 2014, many died in the crossing. It marked a turning point for this humanitarian disaster, one that the rest of Europe could no longer ignore.

cluster of sea-food taverns renowned over the entire Aegean. This seemed a city that went out to the World once, and then returned bearing much of it on her shoulders like a Golden Fleece. Past and current trade brought also a Sea-opened view of the world that helped propel Lesvos to an outsized role in the Greek Letters. Celebrated writers like Stratis Myrivilis, Argyris Eftaliotis, the Nobel-laureate poet Odysseus Elytis, as well as the painter Theofilos, all hail from this island. Cosmopolitanism built by centuries of trade, veins of legend and history still throbbing in shallow ground, gave to these writers inspiration, and to this island its particular character. But that was not all. Another historic event, one that took place almost a century ago, its memories indelibly etched on the people of Lesvos and of other Eastern Aegean islands, added another page on their palimpsest of history. It was one that uniquely prepared these islands and Lesvos in particular for their front-line role in the refugee flows and the sociological shock it meant for small island worlds.

In the year of 1922 extensive pogroms and massacres of the Greek and Armenian populations residing in Asia Minor conducted by the victorious nationalist elements in Turkey set off waves of desperate refugees coming to these islands. Many went on to settle in Athens and the Greek mainland, some continued on to other European countries such as France, or even crossed the Atlantic to the USA. Quite a few stayed in Lesvos. Children of that Exodus, that the Greeks today invariably call 'The Asia Minor Catastrophe', are some of today's grandmothers and grandfathers seen wandering in the parks of Mytilene with their grandchildren or quietly sitting in benches facing the sea in the various villages along Lesvos' shores. It was memories of that other Exodus from the East to the West, literally still living in Lesvos, that in my view created a different set of social reflexes and average responses of its population towards this new tidal wave of human despair that came rushing on to their shores once again.

In the Autumn of 2015 another World order started cracking up, Western countries were arraying themselves to bomb Syria and Iraq while the war 'party' continued on in poor Afghanistan and had just re-engulfed large cities like Kunduz. Death-cult armies, the Frankenstein-like results of previous supposedly well-planned military interventions and occupations by high-tech western armies, razed the ground, vying for control with old-fashioned dictators and their geopolitical allies. That was the stage as the tectonic plates of East and West started moving again. To be at their boundary is to be at a place where horrors as well as flowers emerge. Greece stood on top of that very ground since times immemorial, and in a reprise of tragedies past she awaited once again for those children that came running from the East.

Chapter 2: Arrival at Mytilene

I left Athens one night in early October on a ship bound for Mytilene. I could have taken the plane but I opted for a ship because this was how I traversed the Aegean in the past, even if under sail rather than throbbing engine. Maybe it was also a better way to prepare myself for the task ahead. I was to join one of the refugee rescue and relief teams operating in Lesvos since the late summer of 2015. After a nearly 10-hour journey mostly at night we reached Mytilene in the early morning. I went on the upper deck to set eyes upon a city unlike any of those I have seen during my journeys across the central Aegean islands like the Cyclades. No longer defined solely by white-washed houses with blue outlined window frames and doors here was a city also of browns, reds and light greys and the bustle of a busy port even during this non-tourist season. A wide boulevard went around the harbour, and several ships could be seen docked, sailboats, fishing boats, and a Turkish-flagged ferry boat reminded me of the proximity of the Turkish coast. A grey torpedo-boat of the Greek Navy, two large Coast Guard ships and a Norwegian-flagged Coast guard ship were also there, adding an ominous tone to the port.

I disembark to find Sakis, my old high-school Physics teacher, embracing me all smiles. 'I have not seen you in ages Petro', 'how are you and the family in Athens? Welcome to Mytilene!'. 'Everybody is fine Sakis, sends you their regards' I reply, my joy seeing him after so many years singular, and one of the few I had in Lesvos during the days that followed. Sakis was born and raised in Lesvos, with only a short teaching stint in Athens in my high-school. He was my first "fixer" on the island, hooking me up with a local philanthropic team called 'Angalia' (which means 'Embrace' in Greek) that was assisting refugees. It took a while to make our way through the port grounds, and it was then and there when the magnitude of the refugee crisis, and what it meant for small island societies like that of Lesvos, first struck me.

The whole port section where the passenger ships from Athens arrive was an impromptu refugee camp, with many tents of various colours and shapes everywhere, smouldering remnants of fires that must have burned at night to keep people warm, laughing children of all ages running about, crying babies and tending mothers, laundry hung out to dry on the fence encircling that part of the port. People with those inscrutable eyes of the deep Orient looking back at you. Faces worn by the elements, whether those in some distant mountains of Afghanistan, the plains of Mesopotamia, or the elements during their Aegean Sea passage I did not know. On those faces there was anticipation and the quiet anxiety it brings, but often there was that weary look of people that been through too many blows and stoically, even knowingly await for the next one. These images, the haggling in Arabic, Farsi, and Pashto, transported me momentarily in another land well beyond Greece, in a bazaar of some sort somewhere along Silk Road territory, except that nobody was selling anything.

Then in the first hopeful sign, I found this 'bazaar' to be smoothly spilling outside the port and into the city of Mytilene. Refugees walked around the harbour's main promenade, mostly families with children in tow. They would visit one of the many food stands and shops ringing the port and there, in fragmented or fluent English and even Greek³, this idiosyncratic East-West bazaar acquired its last missing element. The haggling now was indeed about prices, prices for food, cigarettes, and various everyday amenities. Seeing all this while walking around the port I had a happy thought that would pop up a few times in the days that followed. The famous Lesvos

³ To my amazement some Syrians spoke Greek, a result of some Greek communities in Syria formed during WWII when many Greeks left the German-occupied Greece for the safety of the Middle East, how times change...

cuisine, with its strong influences from the East along with those from the West, must have given to many of these people a small sense of homey continuity in otherwise profoundly disrupted lives. Laughter of some young Syrians standing over a falafel and souvlaki stand near the port's exit puts an exclamation mark on this thought. Still, most of the refugees could certainly not afford any culinary 'run' even in the cheapest restaurants of the port as they were desperately poor, especially the Afghans.

'Let's go to a car rental company I know' says Sakis, 'the lady there will certainly give you a good price for the days you will be here'. After walking along a small street that goes around the port we find the small office of the rental company near one of the port's exits. Just opposite of the office, on the port's wire fence, there was an impossibly large number of clothes set out to dry. A real riot of colour and style and with an age range starting from that of infants, it provided another cross section of the refugee population swelling in the port of Mytilene. Many children, their faces joyfully peeking through 'cracks' of that wall of fluttering clothes, laugh and giggle at us while some small Afghans try to raise some kites up to the deep blue Autumn sky. In the office I rent a small compact car thinking it as the best choice for manoeuvring in the small village streets of the island. Then Sakis gives me final directions on how to reach Kaloni where the people of 'Angalia' are based, I promise to stay in touch, hug him firmly and then drive off. Some of the kites are now up in the sky flying among the seagulls.

Chapter 3: Embraced at Kaloni

Δια τούτο δεν ημπορεί ποτέ κανείς να ειπή ότι «η τάδε χώρα πολεμείται, δεν με μέλει, διότι εγώ ησυχάζω εις την ιδικήν μου» αλλ' εγώ πολεμούμαι, όταν η τάδε χώρα πάσχη, ως μέρος του όλου όπου είμαι...

For this, one can never say that "a given country is embattled, I do not care, since peacefully I reside in mine" but that I am also embattled when that country suffers, part of the whole as I am...

**«Η Ελληνική Δημοκρατία», (Τα Δικαιώματα του Ανθρώπου), Ρήγας Φεραίος, Βιέννη 1797
"The Greek Democracy" (The rights of man), Rigas Fereos, Vienna, 1797**

In the large village of Kaloni is where the main depot of the local charity 'Angalia' and some of its volunteers were based. It is there where Sakis has set me up with my next contact, Eleni, a former student of his who was a volunteer there. While driving along the coastal road I had to smile at the thought of Sakis and all those former students of his spread all over the island. Sakis the young and dashing physics teacher of my old Lyceum days, and all those students in our class sparkling up every time he came in to teach.

Happy memories of youth up welled from deep inside, linked hands with the boundless Mediterranean blue, now made deeper and deeper by the long shadows cast by the setting sun. Then they danced and danced while I was driving up North along a magnificent coast. 'Hell! It feels almost like a holiday', I found myself thinking, and better still, this being October, without any summer hordes either! I reached Kaloni just as those long shadows were joining up to form the coming night, the village lights coming sparkling up in clusters, the last vestiges of sunlight quietly retreating in deep yellows and reds. It was the hour of the amber when Time embarks for His more distant outposts, the stars.

I had the keys to a small apartment that Sakis owned in the village where I was to stay. In the morning, after a quick breakfast I drove to the warehouse where the volunteers of 'Angalia' were waiting. Eleni, all smiles, introduces herself, and takes me around to meet the rest. Most of them are young, between 17 and 25 years old, making me at 46 years old, the oldest volunteer there by far. Some are from the island but quite a few came all the way from Athens like me. 'Hey!' I chuckled inwards, 'who said that youth is all wasted and materialistic these days?' Here they were all smiles sitting in a row along a low wall, 'I am Christina from Molyvos', 'I am Nikos from Mytilene, welcome!', 'I am Iro from Athens welcome', and so it went. A wonderful moment. No matter what the problem was, for that short moment I felt like we were enough to face it down, joyfully strong to run towards it and defeat it, our shields joining on the plains of a different Marathon. A small 'army' of good, innocent enough to think we could even win.

Alas my first moment of deflation and near-defeat came immediately afterwards when Eleni took me to the warehouse where all the supplies for the refugee relief effort arrived from Greece and the rest of the world. Imagine the warehouse of a medium-size supermarket with piles and piles of unsorted things reaching up to 2 even 3 times the height of an average human. The number of people trying to sort all this out and homogenize it somewhat (i.e. socks with jackets rather than with... umbrellas) so that it could be useful to the people operating on the coast? Well, they were exactly two...

In a theme that repeated many times during my stay in Lesvos I found that while we were often awash with stuff, sent from all corners of the World to help in the refugee problem, we were always too few for any given task. In that warehouse alone I felt like we could dress much of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan combined, and yet there were not enough people on the receiving/sorting end to put all this material quickly to such a use. People send us lots of things they thought useful, and indeed most were so (even if to our utter amusement while I was there we received several piles of umbrellas colour pink, and several small hand-operated pumps, for foundering boats I suppose...). Yet very few send us what was the most valuable resource, some of their time, time with us out here. A few large and utterly heterogeneous collections of items looked like if some people tried hard to clear attics and consciousness in one master stroke. I experienced some of this myself when I tried to collect items from various friends and relatives in Athens before I left for Lesvos.

‘So where will it be?’ Eleni asks, ‘Do you want to help here? or go to Sykaminia where we operate?’. ‘I would like to go to the coast’ I reply instantly, ‘I am a good swimmer, and I have a car so I can transport people and goods’ I quickly add to justify my choice, even as it would further exaggerate the staffing/sorting problem I had just witnessed. Selfishly I told myself that I did not come here all the way from Athens to sort things in a warehouse, I came to be at the ‘front line’ wherever that was. This selfish thought was later mollified somewhat when I discovered that even at the coast, we were still too few for the tasks there. ‘That’s fine’ Eleni replies, ‘but then please take also Alexandros with you and some supplies’. We load the small car to an absolute brim, Alexandros hops on to the front seat, and after embracing all the people working there we left Kaloni for Skala Sykaminias a village on the North coast of the island where our forward operations base was located.

Chapter 4: Alexandros

There are two routes for reaching Skala Sykaminias from Kaloni, one that mostly lies along the coast, and a completely inland road passing through several picturesque villages, the largest one called Agia Paraskevi. While the inland route is the most winding one, it is still the shortest if one knows where to turn and what blind alley and dead-end road to avoid in all those villages. Alexandros knew the inland route well so I followed his instructions, making as many mental notes as I could for the time when I would have to drive it alone.

A long stretch of the inland road passes through a beautiful lush forest of pine trees, with a canopy dense enough to cast a near complete shadow within certain forest areas. Given the needle-like shape of the Aegean pine tree leaf, this was quite a dense canopy indeed, extending in the valleys and small mountains surrounding us so much that I thought we were driving somewhere deep in the mainland of Greece rather than in an Aegean island.

While driving I start to get to know Alexandros a bit, and what brought him to the island and this effort. 'I worked as a fixer' he says tells me as a matter-of-factly, 'when teams of reporters or cinema people want to film something, scenes, people, etc., I go out there first, make the right contacts so that they can film whatever they want without a problem'. He has worked in several countries, and also for a now discontinued but once popular series in Greece, called 'Reporting without borders'. At 40 years old he was the oldest of the people I met up to now, with a small, wiry but strong frame, world-weary I-have-seen-things intense dark eyes, accentuated by thick eyebrows and a moustache. He had an ingrained and strong distrust of what he considered as 'The System', the political order of the day, those compromised with it, and anybody remotely serving it in his eyes. During our drive to Skala Sykaminias he tells me that as far as he was concerned most NGOs operating on the island were in it for the money, the sweet overhead that goes into their operations. On top of that he tells me that despite the significant resources these NGOs commanded, they seemed woefully inefficient and arrived unprepared for operations where it mattered most, the coast towards which we were now driving. It was there where most of the refugees entering Greece during the Summer and Autumn of 2015 were arriving. 'No refugees have yet died in our areas' he tells me, 'while there have been a few deaths in the areas where all these NGOs operate.'

At the point I had no experience whatsoever about the issues Alexandros was talking about. My views were those held by many in the West, thinking that humanitarian relief NGOs are run mostly by volunteers like us, with most of the effort and money spent on the front lines of humanitarian disasters. I never gave much thought about how much money went to their administrative structures and overhead, to their managers, versus their actual field operations and the people there, or whether serious profit motives were involved and to what extent. Later I realized that there was a large grain of truth in Alexandros' views about the NGOs, even if not fully justifying the stark and absolutist terms he used and his quiet vehemence on this issue. At that moment I simply considered his views on this as theorems deduced from his core set of political axioms; for Alexandros, along with a few others, was a member of an Anarchist-Autonomous group in Athens. It was them that came to set up the refugee rescue and relief operations in Sykaminia I came to join, provisioned by 'Angalia', a charity founded by a Greek Orthodox priest. Knowing how anarchists view priests and priest-related organizations in general I had to smile at this coexistence (Apollo, a young anarchist in our crew routinely called priests 'τράγους' (=tragous), which means male goats in Greek, hardly a flattering term). Maybe those axioms were not that rigid after all, and that is a good thing out here.

After passing the village of Mantamados the first signs of a now slowly mounting international relief effort came into view. A large camp with one large white tent, set up by Medecins sans Frontiers just outside the village. It was still being set up, only a few workers around. The big cavernous tent was empty, its sides flapping in the wind, a strange scene of ordered desolation under a clear blue sky.

We kept on driving and suddenly, projected against that sky, I saw the first scattered columns of refugees walking towards us along both sides of the road. It was an almost impossible people-against-sky projection, facilitated by our now steep uphill drive towards them, and them being at the cresting point of a road that went steep downhill beyond that point. They were not many, 50-60 people in total, but all generations were there. Mothers and fathers with children walking in tow, women cradling infants, grandparents tiredly trailing further behind. This encounter with refugees in Lesvos I remember vividly for its otherworldly people-on-sky projection but also for its serenity, and utter lack of any sense of urgency or tragedy.

Many of them wave and give a shy exploratory smile, one that would flash to a full one in an instant once you smiled back. A small wave of smiles followed our car uphill. Then there were all these primary colours of the clothes of the Africans, the elaborate scarves of young women that appeared to be Afghanis, and the clothes of the children where a full colour riot was taking place. 'Few people', '...a rare day' says Alexandros. He then goes on to tell me that when numbers are this low, our operation theatre can easily cope and give to the refugees some dry clothes when necessary, a cup of warm soup and child food, and also let them have some rest before they start walking up to the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp outside Sykaminia (ours on the coast being designated Stage 1). 'I wish every day was like this' he says quietly, his eyes scanning the landscape.

As this first column of refugees now recedes in the rear view mirror, we reach the cresting point of the road before starting downhill towards Skala Sykaminia's. A panoramic view of the entire North shore then suddenly comes into view revealing a beautiful green-blue coast, with forests reaching all the way down to the sea, with the coast of Turkey on the other side the closest I have ever seen it. The first sight of the north coast of Lesvos from such a vantage point on a sunny day can make one want to spread wings and fly over the Sea of Aegeas, hover over it, cross it and finally rest in the East, that now intimately close East. As we descend on the narrow winding road, the Greek radio stations are inexorably fading away, blanketed by static and then gradually replaced by Turkish ones. We reached the small village in the late afternoon, the news of the burning East all around us, in a language we did not understand.

Chapter 5: Operation field Sykaminia (Despair's flotsam)

A beautiful little church standing propped up on an outlying rocky outcrop and almost surrounded by the sea, was the first distinct and endearing aspect of the small village harbour of Skala Sykaminia's. The harbour was full of fishing boats, nearly a little village by itself gently rocking about the waves. A huge tree, a 'Mouria' as it is called in Greece (mulberry tree, a berry fruit tree) was right in the middle of a tavern that was built more or less around it. This apparently famous 'Mouria' was called 'Myrivilis Mouria', named after the celebrated literary son of Lesvos, Stratis Myrivilis, who frequented this place and even wrote a novel using this village and its small church 'Panagia i Gorgona' (The Mermaid Madonna) as its setting.

It was in this tavern named, what else? 'Myrivilis' Mouria', and the cafe adjacent to it where our team members, workers from the various NGOs, Greek police personnel, and sometimes FRONTEX sailors came to eat at any time of the day or night events would allow, if they allowed. The two brothers operating it, Lefteris, and Grigoris, would often keep it open up well past midnight, even for the very few rescue/relief volunteers that would tiredly drift in for some food before going to sleep in the various villages around. My first day at Skala Sykaminia's was to be the last when I could sufficiently detach myself to take in the beauty of this place, some of the peacefulness of its land and seascapes.

We then left the village to drive the short distance towards our field of operations. It is very near the shore, next to a dry riverbed which has a small bridge over it. The coastal road that one takes to come out of the small village square is the only divide between our main operations area and the shore, a mere few meters away. It was then when I saw the first boats.

Black or grey inflatables, of the type used to transport divers, were dotting the entire coast from the village up to our operations camp and well beyond it, as far as could I see. They are all empty now, gently rocking along the shoreline or completely washed out on the coast. Some are fully inflated, looking brand new, having carried the most recent wave of refugees. Others are partially or fully deflated, some are shredded, by some locals I was told, that used the plastic pieces to shelter crops or partition fields. All boats, even these that looked as the most recently arrived one, were mysteriously lacking any outboard engines. There are also two large white wooden ones, of the type used as lifeboats in line ferries of large cruise ships, rocking about slowly. Next to them there is another small wooden boat nearly completely broken up except for its tiny nearly intact helm cabin. It is was fishing boat, not unlike those in the village port. To me it appeared so small that transporting anything more than its captain, a mate, and a modest fish load would make a trip with it very precarious.

There were piles and piles of lifejackets and discarded clothes everywhere on the beach or gently bobbing in the waves near it, and the occasional toy. It all looked like a major shipwreck had recently happened out there, its flotsam now dotting the entire coast. Then, just in front of our operations area I see a large grey inflatable boat, intact, and completely washed ashore. Right beside it there is a colourful life jacket for a child. It is pink, with mermaids and various cartoon characters imprinted on it. 'It must have been a girl's, no more than 6-7 years old...', I am thinking, its joyful colours in stark contrast to the grey inflatable. This whole scene on the coast was strange for its absence of any human sounds, all the while loudly proclaiming of the many waves of people that have been there. Having seen many scenes of waves of refugees arriving on Lesvos in the Greek TV and the foreign media I find all this quietness perplexing.

Then me and Alexandros went on for a short exploratory drive along the coast towards Molyvos before returning to our operations area just as the sun was setting. Everywhere we went, the same gently lapping waves, the empty boats, the lifejackets, the seagulls hovering above or scampering along the rocky beach, the blue sea stretching in the horizon, silence, and a feeling of foreboding... 'Why so quiet?' I ask him, 'I don't know' Alexandros answers, his eyes wearily scanning the sea towards the Turkish coast, 'I don't know...'

Chapter 6: Night watch

We were unloading the supplies we brought from Kaloni when a pale-skin and tired-looking doctor came up and brusquely asked whether we brought a cylinder of medical oxygen she has asked for. We had not, as we came directly from the depot of 'Angalia' in Kaloni, and medical equipment of this kind could only be had in Mytilene. She then went on to tell us that she needed one today, because the previous cylinder was used two days ago, and that someone should go back to Mytilene and bring one by tonight. This is how I met Asimo (her name deriving from 'Ασημί' (=asimi, meaning silver in Greek), the only doctor we had in our operations field when I arrived. 'She is a volunteer here, also from Athens like you', Alexandros tells me, 'She came many days ago, but now she has only two days left before she goes back to her regular job in Athens' he adds. 'What will happen after she leaves?', 'Will we have a doctor available here?' I ask him, 'It does not look like it' he tells me, his voice sounding oddly determined given what he had just told me.

Alexandros later recounted the incidents where the previous oxygen cylinder was spent. They happened two days ago and one nearly ended in tragedy. A boat full of refugees had just come, and a small baby fell into the sea during the final approach to the shore. Asimo rushed in to treat it after they got it out, and that cylinder in her hands made all the difference in the world. The same cylinder was then used to treat a hypothermic refugee picked up from the sea the same day, and it was now spent. Alexandros looks around and asks another volunteer, Yiannis, to drive to Mytilene and pick up a new oxygen cylinder and bring it to our operations field. Up to that moment, Alexandros and Asimo were the only people from our camp that I interacted with. I turn around to introduce myself to Yannis. Then in a scene out of a cartoon, he shakes my hand, 'Yannis!' he says and then, in a blink of an eye, he dash-runs to a compact red car parked in front of our camp. 'Petros' I offer back meekly, him now almost at the car door. Alexandros looks bemused, I guess he has seen this act before. The car starts and then abruptly brakes, a window rolls down, 'Petro do you want to come along?' he asks, I turn to Alexandros to ask whether I might be needed here for the next few hours but he has gone into the medical tent. 'Don't worry they will not be any boats coming before we are back, but hurry, we still must be back here before six' Yannis says. Wondering how the hell he knows all this, I jump into his car. As we drive away from Scala, a mere two hours after I first arrived here, Yannis tells me that it has been a quiet two days with nearly no boats arriving. This is because Alexis Tsipras, the Greek Prime Minister, along with a few European dignitaries visited the island⁴ and for some reason this seemed to have such an effect. It was so noticeable by the various volunteer crews, that small printed humorous notes were posted all around the camp and Sykaminia, ironically thanking Tsipras and the European dignitaries for their visit and the resulting 'break' that the humanitarian relief workers enjoyed because of it...

'It will be back to normal chaos from now on' Yannis says, and then goes on to add that even when that ...normal chaos ensues, there are still some regularities. One is a break in boat arrivals somewhere between around 2 and 5 pm. Maybe the human traffickers on the other side were giving us a long lunch break (mostly used for clearing up the camp for the next human waves rather than lunch), or maybe it was a result of theirs, who knows... 'Sometimes boats still arrive during that time, but far fewer, still a respite, courtesy of the bastards' Yannis tells me, 'bastards' being the human traffickers. In case I missed the point, a mountza⁵ he gave with both hands

⁴ It was to be the first of several such visits, since it was during that Autumn of 2015 that the long-festering refugee crisis reached alarming proportions and decisively entered the political 'radar' of Europe at large. Up to that time she, Europe that is, was preoccupied with saving her.... banks.

⁵ Mountza is an obscene gesture in Greece, given with palms facing out and all fingers widely spread.

(momentarily leaving the steering wheel while driving on the winding road up!) towards the opposite coast made his point perfectly clear.

'One hour to go, one hour stuck in Mytilene's end-of-work-day traffic, and one hour to come back..., we can be back before six, and with that damn cylinder!', says Yannis while he drives madly fast from village to village and slowing down only once we are in them, 'Thank God that there are no tourists around' I am thinking. We are now tracing back my previous route from Kaloni to Sykaminia, only this time bypass Kaloni and continue directly to Mytilene while driving much much faster.

We got the oxygen bottle and drove back to Sykaminia, arriving at dusk. Then, with the volunteers still left in our operations area, we set up a night watch. This simply meant that few of us would stay up to 10-11 at night (we did not have enough people to operate around the clock). Boats rarely came later than that, any arrivals tailing off by 7-8 pm. Maybe the traffickers tailored their activities to our capacities, who knows. We started patrolling the coastal road to the left of our camp, but also kept lookouts along the small stretch of the road between our camp and the village. The northern coastline to the east of the village was not accessible by the coastal road, while 2-3 km to the west of our operations that road rose well above the shoreline which was also much rockier. Whoever ran aground there had either a steep climb to reach a road passing much higher up or the choice of negotiating the rocks and large boulders while walking along the shore towards our camp until that shore become gentler, and a few steps inland could get one on the coastal road again.

For refugees approaching a dark shoreline on rubber boats at night such choices were the toss of a coin. So some of us went out there along that road with the high beam car lights on, trying to act as lighthouses, coastal road markers of sorts, to boats we could not see (grey or black inflatables with no lights were great choices for evading the Greek Coast Guard or FRONTEX ships, but decisively poor ones when it came to helping us help them make safe landings). Yannis, a diver in his everyday life, pulled out two powerful dive lights from his car and, while standing on the cement plateau right next to the camp, he 'played' their beams out to sea, sweeping them slowly 180 degrees from East to West, a one-man lighthouse.

We had no night vision equipment whatsoever, handy as it would have been, only a pair of high-power daytime binoculars. Still we were not totally blind to the happenings in the dark sea in front of us. The powerful beams of the Greek Coast Guard and FRONTEX ships sweeping the sea in search of refugee boats were giving us valuable clues. If the ship's beam sweep was to stop and the beam stay stationary at some fixed point at sea for a long time, we knew that they must have found a boat, and then that other boats must be out there as well (they never came one by one but in clusters). Where all these other boats would come ashore was still anybody's guess, but at least we knew they were out there. We then had a strong incentive to stay on and patrol the coastal road with cars, trying to cover as many probable landing areas as possible along it. At the camp Yannis would turn on his bright dive lights to mark its position, while we hoped that our car lights going up and down on the accessible segments of the coast would help refugee boats towards safer landfalls, away from the inaccessible parts. Of course for all this to work, it assumed that the refugees did not consider all these lights as markers of a less benign force and try to avoid them instead. At the end of the day we simply hoped that news of the humane way they were treated by

the Greek Coast Guard⁶, and the police force of the island⁷ must have trickled back to the refugees still on the other side so that they would not be afraid of our lights, even if they judged them to be indicators some sort of official authority.

Tonight, my first on the coast, just one Coast Guard ship was out there doing smooth East-West runs. For a little while it stopped, its powerful beam came on and did a broad sweep around, momentarily flickering towards us. Then the beam switched off, and the ship resumed its patrol pattern, its green and red side lights the only ones left marking its position in the darkness. Around midnight it stopped patrolling altogether, and Yannis packed his equipment and left. We also decide to stop the watch so we could start again early next morning. One of us went to sleep in one of the camp tents, the rest left for various villages. I drove back to Kaloni, got lost a few times in villages now soundly asleep (which meant nobody to ask for directions) but managed to have the shorter inland route back to Kaloni imprinted in my mind. I reached Kaloni well past midnight and fell fast asleep, the alarm set for six o'clock in the morning.

⁶ This meant no boat tow-backs to Turkish territorial waters, escorting the boats closer to shore for a safe landfall or often bringing the refugees aboard and into the port of Mytilene, and of course full rescue operations if the refugee boat was found in trouble. Such rescues numbered in the several hundreds during the time I was there. Despite these heroic efforts several people, many children among them, lost their lives at sea during my stay at Sykaminia.

⁷ They never interfered with our operations while I was there, operations that often involved us transporting refugees in private cars to other camps or to hospitals, an illegal activity if the letter of the law was to be applied. What they did do was chase hard after a few people that took up such transport for a hefty fee.

Chapter 7: First wave

*Πικρός κι ανάποδος είσαι ω κόσμε, μα έχεις και τις παράξενες σου τις γλύκες.
Έσκιζε η βάρκα τα κύματα και πήγαινε κατά την Σκάλα.*

*Bitter and warped you are oh World, but you also have your strange sweetness.
It was slicing through the waves the boat, and was going towards Skala.*

**«Νησιώτικες ιστορίες», Αργύρης Εφταλιώτης, Λέσβος, 1894
“Island Stories”, Argyris Eftaliotis, Lesvos, 1894**

The next morning, I left very early. Breakfast was to be had in the car while I was driving. Knowing now the inland road to Skala Sykaminia’s I soon reach Mantamados and the Medecins Sans Frontiers camp outside it. ‘Three tents already, it is going up fast’ I am thinking. Then I see that a small group of refugees is already there, maybe some of those we saw walking on the road yesterday. I reach the road’s cresting point, there I stop the car to take a careful look at the sea passage between Lesvos and Turkey.

There are two large ships sailing in it, one being the Greek Coast Guard, the other I could not tell, but I figured that by being closer to Lesvos than the opposite coast, it must be FRONTEX. Unlike yesterday when I first saw them, today they were not doing the smooth East-West sweeps of a typical patrol, but sharp turns around various points at sea, and sudden speed-ups marked by wider than usual white-foam trails behind them. The small refugee-carrying inflatables cannot be seen from up here, even as specks, so it was again the behaviour of the much larger Coast Guard and FRONTEX ships that gave clues about the presence of refugee-laden boats, and thus about how busy with boat arrivals our coast would be. It since became a daily ritual for me to do this first ‘reading’ of the sea traffic from that vantage point of the road before heading down to Sykaminia.

‘There must be several boats coming’ I am thinking, and I continue on driving downhill. I quickly pass the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp just above the village, managed and staffed by a NGO called ‘Faros’. It is nearly empty. So far so good. Then to my utter surprise, as I reach the village itself I find its small square chock full of refugees! An absolute explosion of people. The contrast with yesterday absolute. Some have their lifejackets still on, many children, some crying or shyly smiling, old people with stoic looks.

‘Damn! Several landfalls already! I should have come earlier’ I tell myself angrily, ‘...and some must have been right on the village harbour itself!’ I slow the car to a crawl to pass through unbelievably dense crowds, trying to clear the way and head towards our operations area. Children swarm around the car making this very difficult. Hopeful adults knock on the car windows, ‘Camp? Camp?’ they ask, some others ask ‘Port?’ and a few, astonishingly ask where Athens is (!) betraying a complete lack of knowledge about where they just landed and that Lesvos is an island rather than part of mainland Greece. My cell phone starts ringing, it is Apollo, one of the young volunteers in our camp, ‘Where are you?!’ he demands, ‘Come quickly several boats have already arrived!’. ‘I am just next door, in the village square’ I reply, ‘one boat or more must have landed right on the village harbour, it is full of refugees’ I tell him, ‘Come to the camp immediately!’ he replies and hangs up.

I finally clear the square, turn left towards the camp, driving on a small segment of the coastal road paved with cement up to our operations theatre (which turns into a dirt road beyond it). That small stretch of the road between the village and our camp is full with refugees, coming from our camp's direction. Unlike the others, these ones look dry, no life-jackets on, some holding the Styrofoam cups with warm soup or tea that our field kitchen gives out, more smiles and waves than the previous group. I quickly give them directions for walking up to UNHCR/stage-2 camp, and then continue my slow drive. I find our operations area full. Numerous refugees stand at the food tent where Lefteris from Kaloni, and a young couple from California hand out bread, dates, milk for the children, juice, and maps of the island and Greece. Others stand in front of two huge pots of the field kitchen where Bryan, our field cook, prepares those cups of tea or soup. In front of the medical tent, there is a small group of people, a worried look in their eyes, from inside the tent I hear baby cries. This explosion of people happened so abruptly that all I could register was a 'sea' of people, unable to focus on any individual faces, cries, and pleadings unless repeated many times and from several directions.

On the 'mouth' of the dry riverbed is our clothes changing area, flooded with people now, manned by a smattering of volunteers. A large white bed sheet hangs from the bridge that spans that riverbed as to create some private space for women to change. The bridge itself is used by us to carry supplies (clothes mostly) from the main camp area to the clothes distribution desks, without passing through the riverbed itself where the refugees change clothes. I go and start assisting there, under on-the-fly instructions by Iro, a 20-something year old volunteer. 'Baby clothes there', 'shoes, socks there' underwear, sweaters and jackets there' she tells me as she points towards various desks, all the while helping various people to change into dry clothes. Apparently we even have a baby-changing station, which is just a large clean table set out in the open, under a tree, with a baby there now being changed.

The sea was not rough today, no large rolling waves on the beach, allowing smoother than usual landfalls on the shoreline near our camp. This meant mostly wet pants, wet shoes, wet socks and lower underwear, and a rather lopsided depletion of the stocks in our clothes 'department'. I started handing out clothes to people of all ages, hearing 'Thank you' in all the languages of the Middle East, plus Greek and English. This being daytime, with calm seas, and boats that landed nearby where we could quickly assist, meant no gravely scared people among this first wave. The children were, as always, the first ones to adjust, maybe thinking of all this as a family excursion of some sort, a particularly exotic one for their eyes I suppose. I had to hold and take care of many of them while their parents were changing clothes, funny faces, laughter, and baby smiles all around. Some drifted around the camp, away from their parents, curiously looking around. Seeing them wandering alone like this would often scare the hell out of us since we tried hard to keep families together at all times. A tough proposition given the size of some families in the Middle East, or the complete chaos that would often engulf our coast. In any case I was grateful that the words 'Mama' and 'Papa' are near universal around the World. This along with the near universality of the flick-of-the-wrist 'where are they' hand move solved most of such problems.

In the main area of our camp there are three benches facing the sea and refugees would often sit there to rest (grandparents especially), talk, or tend to their children. As my work in the clothes 'department' eased up and the volunteers there could manage it, I went up to those benches. In one of them I saw a little girl standing, no more than 6 years old, with dark curly hair reaching a little longer than her ears, with a mop covering one of her eyes sideways. She was crying and sobbing silently, no parents around. I knew where the toys were, in a sack next to the medical tent. I go and grab a funny extra-terrestrial-looking doll cat, with huge eyes (I will always remember

that first toy I gave out), hide it behind my back, and tiptoe up to her. Funny faces, my large nose, and assistance by the extra-terrestrial cat did the trick..., and that little girl handed me the first identifiable victory of that day, an absolutely sweet smile, and a giggling laugh at the end of it. Her parents came over from the nearby food stand where they have gone. They were young, around 25-30 years old, from Aleppo, Syria. I plant a kiss to the cheek of little one, now great friends with the extra-terrestrial cat, and hand her over to the parents. Like many young Syrians, they both spoke fluent English, so I could give instructions on how to reach the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp, without an interpreter. As they are about to leave for Stage-2 Yannis the diver, stops his red car and beacons them in, with four more people already inside ('how the hell does he fit them in?' I ask myself yet again). That will save them the steep 2km uphill walk. Before they step into his car, the young mother turns around with her daughter and wave goodbye..., they momentarily stand still and smile amidst all that ebbing and flowing of turbulent humanity around them. For just a brief moment my eyes and mind rested on that mother-daughter "island" ..., I waved back.

Of that river of people, I saw that day in Lesvos, that young mother and her little daughter lingered on its banks long enough for me to remember. I held on to their faces long after I left the island, along with those of a few others, keepsakes, and sure-fire memories for bringing up a smile when thinking about all this in some other time. Now the 'river' was here, and a particular swirling eddy of it, Yannis, his red car, and his impatience, swept them away.

Now all around the camp the refugees are slowly drifting out, most walking, a few others (families mostly) driven up to stage-2 by volunteers. We stay back to clean up, re-order, re-stock the various stations, take a breath, and wait for the next wave.

Chapter 8: Khalid the radar

'What the hell do you mean there are boats out there?' I ask him incredulously 'I see nothing at all!', 'Well, there are two boats there, one there, and two more in that direction' Khalid says with an easy certainty and a still easier smile. 'Hey Apollo, Lefteris, come out here' I shout, 'Do you see anything?', 'No' they both answer, 'but we trust Khalid on this one' they say, and laugh. 'Hell!' I cry out, then march into one of the tents and grab the only set of high-power binoculars we had. I come out and train them to the places Khalid indicated. Sure enough I see small black rubber boats in all of them, and with the numbers Khalid indicated. 'Man', I manage to say, 'this is incredible' 'Does it work also at night?' I joke unsurely (hell maybe it does...), 'Then we do not to depend on the Coast Guard and FRONTEX ship beams', 'No' he says with a smile, 'I can do this only during the day'. This is how I first met Khalid the 'Radar' as Yannis the diver from Athens nicknamed him for reasons now plainly obvious.

Khalid was our Farsi and Dari interpreter, which along with Arabic, was the most valuable language skills to have in our camp. He was from Afghanistan, and came to Greece nearly 13 ago also through Lesvos, and he was now practically a Greek citizen. He spoke flawless Greek, and was with us as a simple volunteer, helping everywhere. He often worked with the doctors in the camp where he was truly indispensable as one can imagine. Numerous intense dialogs between the doctors and refugees about what was wrong with this baby or that silent grandfather were facilitated by him. Then there were these 'radar' eyes of his..., which today gave us an accurate distribution of the next wave of boats setting out from the coast of Turkey.

In a front line operation like ours though, translations often demanded more than just language skills, for fear and suspicion followed people even after they fled war zones and completed the perilous journey to safety. In some cases, Khalid had to try really hard to gain their trust before they started talking at all. Still, in one very intense incident, a refugee from Syria, upon hearing Khalid speaking Farsi got very angry and moved towards him in a threatening manner. It took some effort to convince him that he just worked in our camp as an interpreter, and that no..., he was not an Iranian spy or connected to any Shiite militia like those fighting to keep the dictator Assad in power. At the end it worked out fine, but it was a serious reminder that the waves of the geopolitical storms raging in the Middle East would come lapping right up on our shores. I guess the world is round after all, even geopolitically.

I now train again the binoculars towards the directions Khalid indicated, 'here there they are' I think upon seeing all those black colour inflatables, still in quite some distance out. With the boats still nearer to the Turkish coast, I cannot make out the number of people on them, their presence betrayed only by orange-colour smudges. 'This is the colour of the lifejackets Syrians mostly use' Khalid tells me. 'These are the safe ones, but also more expensive. Afghans and Iraqis usually buy the cheap ones, blue, or grey colour, with a tint of red here and there' he says. 'That is why you cannot see them easily from such a distance' he concludes, '...and certainly bad colour choices if you want to be seen and rescued when adrift at sea' I add inwardly. This was another little secret of this coast, how to tell nationalities on approaching boats by the colour of their lifejackets. Disturbingly Apollo goes on to tell me that the cheap ones that the Afghans and Iraqis typically wear are nearly useless, providing at best only auxiliary buoyancy to people that are supposed to be swimming. 'They are inadequate to keep one's head above water if they cannot swim or are otherwise incapacitated in the water' Apollo tells me. Given that most Afghans do not know swimming, and that for many of them the sea passage from Turkey to the Greek islands is their first encounter with the sea adds a terrifying aspect to Apollo's last comments.

I raise the binoculars again, now I can finally make out individual lifejackets of the people on board. There are already six boats out there on their way to our shore when suddenly Khalid says 'More boats have been launched from the Turkish coast!' pointing in several directions, I see nothing with naked eye, I then raise the binoculars and sure enough I see several more in the distance. 'How did you get these radar eyes Khalid?' I ask him. 'In Afghanistan I lived on the mountains' he says, 'there one gazes far into the distance or distant objects during everyday life, far more often than city people, maybe this is why...' He then tells me that this particular skill of his makes him very popular at the bus stations all around Athens. I smile at the thought of him reading bus numbers and directions well in advance of old and young people alike squinting to discern them in bus stations around Athens. We then disperse back in the camp to help the others prepare for the second wave. It looks much larger than the one of the early morning.

Chapter 9: Second wave

The boats of the second wave are now seven, approaching spread over almost the entire North coast! Two are heading directly towards our camp, one far to the East of it, beyond the village and towards the cape of 'Korakas' which is inaccessible by the coastal road and our operational capabilities. One boat remains mysteriously idle mid-sea while the other three are heading well to the West of our operations area. If they continue on this course their landfall will be all over the rocky part of the coast where the coastal road passes high up. There, we will not be able to reach them, unless they land even further West near Molyvos where that road comes down and near to the shore again, while the shore itself becomes gentler.

Once we are done with the two boats that are coming directly towards us, we plan to send cars to the west coast to search and guide any group of refugees that somehow managed to negotiate the steep climb up to the coastal road. We also hope that a group of (mostly) Dutch volunteers operating out of camp OXY near Molyvos would find them and take care of them. A group of volunteers from Spain formed another very valuable tight-knit team operating along our coast. They were professional lifeguards, in a team of three or four, and were very well equipped for near-shore rescue. They used a 4x4 to patrol the coast at all hours except night time. Their presence and efficiency made our work, and that of our doctors, much much easier. Today they were stationed near our operations area, waiting...

During waves of boats, like the one approaching us now, we used hand signals, orange-color lifejackets from the beach waved in wide circles over our heads, and shouts, to get the attention of the people on the boats, and guide them as close to our camp as possible. The Spanish rescue team tried similar techniques for getting the boats to head towards parts of the shore where landfall was deemed easier and the coastal road easily accessible. Then the people could walk towards the camp or, in case of emergencies, we and our doctors could reach their landing spot fast with cars. All this signalling only worked intermittently, with some boats indeed changing course towards the points we indicated, but often they simply continued on their original course, landing in rough and inaccessible places. During bad weather this often had tragic consequences.

Right now all the boats stayed their course while the one adrift mid-sea remained idle. This is my first witnessing of refugee-carrying boats approaching our coast, the first wave having arrived very early in the morning before I arrived. I could now see the people riding on the boat coming directly at us without the need of binoculars. I could not believe my eyes. There were 30-40 people(!) on a black rubber inflatable designed for no more than 10 people maximum as Yannis tells me. Forget images of fast-moving zodiacs riding over the waves. This was a heavily-laden inflatable, moving very slowly about, its inertia made huge by the sheer number of people on it. I have never in my life seen such a boat so much laden with people. It was so full that it had to come very close so I could discern its bow and side tubes barely clearing the water line by no more by a mere 30-40 cm, a terrifying sight even in the calmest of the seas.

During this second wave the winds have picked up a little since morning, small waves are now lapping around the approaching boat, often cresting over its low-lying side tubes and bow, washing over inside it. 'Switch off the engines!' Alexandros shouts to no avail, as the boat comes right up and hits with some force the low cement wall that marks the boundary of the cement-paved part road in front of our camp. We jump into the water and grab the two sides of the boat, trying to stabilize it enough so that we can start an orderly unloading, the sheer number of people on it making this difficult. The problem is then compounded by several refugees jumping in the

water around us from all corners of the boat, making it wobble about. 'The children first!!' shouts Lefteris that left the food tent and came down to help with the evacuation. To make the point clear to all, he takes a little boy out of the boat and hands him off to another volunteer to take him out to dry land, and so it starts...

It all goes smoothly until one little boy, around 6 years old, cries and does not want to come out of the boat, afraid of the sea around him. His mother, now on land, pleads with him, his father still on the boat does the same, kids him, to no effect. Then an angry voice from the father does the trick, and the boy jumps right into my arms with enough momentum that he almost tips me over, with him in my arms, into the sea (in that shallow spot, we are immersed in the water up about the waist). The little boy, an Afghani it seems from his looks, looks at me and laughs at our combined wobbling, young eyes laughing as I hold him and wade ashore to take him onto the soil of Europe..., a little boy that came running from an East that was burning.

Many months later, while I was in a restaurant in Monastiraki, Athens, a beautiful Greek song about a most famous city straddling the boundary of East and West, powerfully triggered the memories of those moments, and did so ever since, it was a particular verse in it ending as: "...αλλάζουνε εντός μου τα σύνορα του κόσμου. . ." (allazoune entos mou ta synora tou Kosmou), translating as: "...changing they are, inside me, the borders of the World", and so it was, the East coming to be embraced and sheltered in the West, changing those borders inside me as I cradled that little boy and waded ashore that afternoon in Sykaminia.

Chapter 10: Tears for the East

*Άξαφνα σώπασε η γριά, γύρισε την κλαμένη της όψη της κατά το πέλαγο,
κοντοστάθηκε συλλογισμένη σα να άκουγε κάτι...*

*Suddenly the old woman became silent, she turned her tearful face towards the
sea, and stopped in deep thought, like she was listening onto something...*

«Νησιώτικες ιστορίες: Το προσκυνητάρι του Αϊ-Νικόλα» Αργύρης Εφταλιώτης, Λέσβος, 1894
“Island stories: The pilgrimage of Saint Nikolas” Argyris Eftaliotis, Lesvos, 1894

We are nearly done with evacuating the boat that landed directly on our operations area, two babies were also on it, only a few months old! To the west of us, the Spanish team was doing a great job evacuating the second boat that made landfall nearly at the same time. Volunteers from our camp give out thermal blankets to the refugees even as it was not particularly cold that day. Quite a few were almost completely wet even though these two landfalls happened in shallow enough waters that wading ashore should mean mostly wet lower bodies. I guess that in such heavily laden boats, even in the mild winds of today a whiff of sea-spray can easily splash inside and soak the people, especially those sitting at the front. Finally, for small children and babies, a small body mass makes them much more susceptible to cold and hypothermia when wet. These we wrap in thermal blankets nearly always until we could give them dry clothes.

The people from the two boats are now slowly streaming into the camp, first in the ‘mouth’ of the dry riverbed and our clothes ‘department’ where volunteers help them change to dry clothes, then on to the food tent where snacks, tea, and warm soup is handed out. Just these two boats alone yielded 60-70 people in the vicinity of our operations field. With around 6-7 volunteers on the camp grounds that moment this meant a near 10:1 refugee:volunteer ratio. It was the best we would have it during the days I was there. From that day on this ratio steadily deteriorated, and the hard realities of rapidly rising refugee flows during that October of 2015 would soon overwhelm our capacities in nearly every respect.

It was during that afternoon that I first came across the Norwegian nurses. They were in our camp during most of the time I was there, but I do not remember whether they belonged to a NGO, or funded by the Norwegian government, or came ‘self-propelled’ like many of us in our camp did. They helped us immensely during the crunch times when several boats would arrive in rapid succession. I asked one of them, Anna-Sofia, what brought them there and she told me that they knew that many of these refugees would end up to Norway. So they thought it would be necessary for them to come to a refugee entry ‘point’ to see for themselves what these people are going through, as far down the ‘chain’ of events as possible. ‘This way’, Anna-Sofia tells me, ‘we can be better prepared to take care of these people when they arrive to Norway’. ‘A thorough approach’ I thought admiringly, and was glad to have them around us. Sometimes the nurses would team up with the girl volunteers in the camp to tend and change diapers to numerous babies on the special table we set for that purpose under a tree near the clothes ‘department’. There were some days and nights with so many babies that their cries made that area sound like a fair-sized nursery.

Today, with only two babies in the camp, was not one of those days, and the good refugees-to-volunteers ratio allowed the nurses to go around the camp to look for people in need of special care, even if one not immediately obvious. This was a luxury we did not often have because of the sheer number of refugees arriving on our coast. It was during such a quiet moment, on one of the benches we had in the camp, when I saw one of the Norwegian nurses sit next to a grandmother,

about 75-80 years old, stoically looking East across the sea passage that she and her extended family had just traversed. The nurse puts an arm around the shoulders of that grandmother and then her stoic look abruptly vanishes and tears, many tears started streaming silently from the grandmother's face, with only the faintest of the sobs, while she kept looking East. And on and on it went, no matter how hard the nurse tried to console her, asking whether she felt ill, where was the rest of her family, and other such things. With no translator around this was rather pointless, but I doubt whether it would have made any difference at all.

In the days that followed I saw a few more old people trance-out like that while looking East, and if they were to start crying, those grandmothers and grandfathers of the World they were simply inconsolable, for they knew, I think, that may never have the time to go back. You see with children it was easy to stop tears, some sweets, toys, tricks, funny faces, and a bit of time around the camp would nearly always do the trick, and their world was new. Not so with those grandmothers and grandfathers of the World... After some time I have come to see their tears, more than those of the children, as the shame of the World, of all those geopolitical gangsters that passed for statesmen in their nations⁸, and of a West too content for far too long with a rotten but convenient (for her) political order in the Middle East (much of it of her own geopolitical making), content until it came knocking hard on her own door. Shouts from the lookouts in our operations field disrupt these thoughts, and I run to see what is going on, leaving the Norwegian nurse and the grandmother behind.

⁸ All these geopolitical gangsters keep forgetting the simplest of the facts, that the World is round, even geopolitically, and these days well-populated too. So any push for lebensraum, vital space, spheres of influence, strategic depth or whatever you want to call it wraps around it, and sooner or later its usually nasty results tap you in the back. In this simplest of frames for geopolitical machinations, the sophisticated ones differ from the crude ones in only one aspect, namely how long it takes for this wrap-around. For the sophisticated ones it can take long, and different generations will pick up the pieces, and that particular gangster may even be invited in respectable galas, parties and think tanks to dispense geopolitical 'wisdom' (e.g. Henry Kissinger). For the cruder ones, associated mostly with run-of-the-mill dictators, the same generation, and occasionally even the geopolitical gangster himself may suffer the consequences.

Chapter 11: Third wave

'I think that they are slowly coming in' says Apollo, it is the boat we thought it was idling mid-sea! It now seems closer, I grab the binoculars, indeed it is closer as I can now clearly see the people on board, all wearing orange colour lifejackets, 'Syrians' I tell myself. While looking at that boat, a large navy-grey inflatable, I notice something strange, there is no noticeable wake behind it or any constant bow-rising wave-front to indicate that it is moving under power, even low power. There is only some strange wobbling of the boat, 'well this mystery will soon solve itself....' I say to myself, as I lower the binoculars and cross the road to go up on the little plateau with the benches where the main area of our operations was.

Suddenly one of the two cars that have gone to patrol the Western coast to seek the other three boats comes back to the camp fast, a large cloud of dust kicking behind it. It brakes, and Nikos another volunteer, comes out with a little baby wrapped up in a golden-foil thermal blanket. He races into the medical tent, and slowly out of the same car comes the mother and the father, along with what looked as the grandfather, and all slowly head up to the tent. I have no time to go and see what is going on, but with Asimo and the Norwegian nurses around the tent, I would not be of any extra help anyway. 'Two boats made landfall on the rocky western shore', 'we do not know where the third one went' says Nikos in a resigned voice as he comes back to the idling car, 'refugees from both boats climbed up the road, and are marching towards us, about 60-70 people, many children' he tells me. He then gets back into the car and leaves for the western shore to pick up any other people in urgent need and bring them to our camp.

In a pattern of assistance, we used along the coast, the top emergencies were the medical ones, to be driven to the camp first. Then it was families with children deemed too young to walk the 3-4 kilometres of the coastal road, and/or those with infants, or with grandparents. However, with entire families riding on those boats, all three generations marching out on road after landfall, made the choice of lower level emergencies difficult to put it mildly. So what we typically did, was to drive to the back of often very spread-out columns of people marching towards the camp, pick up those we deemed the weakest and drive them up to the camp. We would then go back and do it again and again, until this column of misery and tiredness was shortened significantly, and its front deemed to be close enough to the camp. This was a very improvised pattern and much sketchier than what this clinical description implies simply because we never had enough cars available for this. At best we had two, usually just one, the other used to transport medical cases that our field doctors deemed serious enough to be send to Mytilene's hospital. As for ambulances that could be at hand for such a purpose, the entire island of Lesbos had two, and with the financial crisis in Greece raging, no prospects for more. Still, while I was there, these ambulances came quite a few times to transport wounded or sick refugees to the main hospital. During my last days at Sykaminia a donated ambulance arrived from Wales, I hope there are more there now. I shuddered at the thought of what must be the situation in other smaller Eastern Aegean islands like Kos, Chios, Leros, and tiny Kastellorizo. They had much fewer such resources and must have been impacted by these large refugee streams even more disproportionately, especially given their smaller populations.

As I watch Nikos's car vanish in a trail of dust, the front of a column of people appears in the distance, coming from the Western shore walking along the coastal road. On this sunny day, with many of them already wrapped in the golden-foil of the thermal blankets, it was the strangest of sights. As they drew nearer I could see exhausted faces, limping people, children walking along parents that often also cradled infants. It was that image more than those of approaching boats

that made me suddenly realize, that in terms of immediacy, a war zone was not that far, and here is what comes of that 'machine'. As they now stream pass me, some manage a smile, a 'thank you' in Arabic, Farsi, English, Greek, or some combination thereof, but most too tired even for that. 'Our benches will come handy' is my first thought, 'how the hell did they manage to climb up to the road?!' my immediate second, 'the coast there is so far below the road' I am thinking in amazement. I guide them to the food station for warm soup or tea, cookies and milk for the children, so they could get some strength, changing into dry clothes can come later...

'They are paddling!' Alexandros says. I turn and see the boat we thought as idle close enough now so we could see its engine indeed not running. The men on board use their bare hands and two miserable oars to push an inflatable loaded with 40-50 people slowly, agonizingly, ashore. The mysteries of the lack of boat wake and the strange wobbling are solved, but still I cannot not believe my eyes given the distance involved! As they came close, their joy in making it ashore palpable, we cheered with them. We took them out, again many children. Apparently their outboard engine had seized up about mid-distance between Lesvos and the Turkish coast so they paddled the rest of the way with the two miserable oars and their bare hands. No wonder it was a slow coming boat, and the men that did this went to lie down on the shore, their weather-worn faces up to the sky, for a long time before receiving any food or dry clothes.

Later on one more column of people approached us from the West. There are around 100 people in the camp now, many children, and several infants at the baby station under the tree. Our provisions are taking a beating with this third wave. Tomorrow somebody would have to go to Angalia's depot in Kaloni with a truck and bring material to re-stock pretty much everything. The weather helps for now, just light to moderate winds, no rain. The latter would render our current clothes 'department' and baby care stations unusable as they are set out in the open and on that dry riverbed. In the case of a strong rain, we had no hope that that dry riverbed would stay dry.

Today was the last day we knew we could depend on a doctor present in our operations. Asimo goes back in Athens early tomorrow, to her regular job. For the days she was with us, overworked and exhausted, her presence was crucial, I wish we had more people like her with us. The UNHCR/Stage-2 camp above the village, managed by the NGO 'Faros', had yet to get a doctor during those early days of October, despite all that salaried staff and the significant financial resources such NGOs commanded (significant with respect to the all-volunteer, self-organized effort like the one I joined that is). Alexandros' words during our drive to Sykaminia came back to my mind. Still, despite its woeful under-preparation at that time, Stage-2 was critical as the place where refugees would gather and where the large buses (supplied by the city of Mytilene, later rented by UNHCR on a regular basis) would come to pick them up. They would then be taken to the refugee identification/classification centers of Moria or Karatepe⁹. Finally, Stage-2 had a large capacity to shelter people from the elements, which our much smaller operation base on the coast could not deploy.

Later that day we learned that the other remaining boat drifted all the way to Molyvos and its port, where the locals helped the people ashore. There was no news about what happened to the one that we saw heading East towards the cape of 'Korakas'. Five more refugee boats arrived that day, before the lull which we expected, the one to last until late afternoon finally came.

⁹ During the days of October 2015, Karatepe was closed, being refurbished for the coming winter season. This transformed Moria into a hell bottleneck for the unfortunate refugees going there to be given papers.

Chapter 12: The quiet Afghani

'I can speak five languages' he says so faintly I had to ask 'what?', 'I can speak five languages' he repeats only a little more prominently this time, and then he goes on to list them: 'English, Pashto, Dari, Farsi, and Arabic', 'do you think this will be useful somewhere in Europe?' he asks me. He is a young Afghani, around 25 years old, which for some reason stayed a little longer with us instead of walking up to UNHCR's stage-2 camp to be picked up by the buses. He was among the few still around, the rest having walked or been driven up by some of our volunteers. Like the refugees we found walking on the coastal road, so it was for refugee drive-ups to Stage-2, namely that families, old or otherwise infirm people were given priority (if we had cars for all this). So usually the people that lingered a little longer in the camp were typically young, in small groups bonded by friendship back in their countries or by the passage experience, but very few solitary ones like this young Afghani. I saw him leaning quietly on one of the wooden electric utility poles at the main entrance of our operations field.

'I think it will be' I tell him, to cheer up what looked like a face of absolute melancholy and, while I am not quite sure, a pair of wet eyes. 'Anywhere you go, tell them this, then they may use you as an interpreter' I add. 'You think so?' he asks, 'Yes' I tell him, 'especially if you go to large countries like Germany, Sweden or Norway, where many refugees from Afghanistan seem to go, they will need such an interpreter in their reception centres'. He came alone, nobody waiting for him anywhere in Europe. I did not ask how many people he had left behind. Truth is, his melancholy got a bit into me. This and my knowledge of the first signs of the nasty political climate forming up in Europe regarding the refugee issue, did not make for a good mood 'brew'. I could easily guess, that if Europe was to turn her back to the plight of these desperate people, the Afghanis would be the first to get the 'treatment', for the war in their country was the oldest and most forgotten one despite the recent flare-up that claimed Kunduz. Syrians will be the last as the war in Syria was the most recent, more prominent and bloodier, while a well-developed middle class formed a large sector of their refugee streams, one that the average European would feel more affinity.

I chat with him a little more, feeling guilty for wanting to move on. During the few quiet moments we had during our operations we focussed mostly on the children, as these were the most fun once you got them playful and going, and then to old people which sometimes would need a chat while resting on one of the benches. Even if no translator was at hand, the old people would gently nod and quietly smile at our attempts. Young guys like this Afghani would be a rarer choice, unless they came up to ask us something. A strange thing given that it was that age group (mostly of Syrians but often Iraqis and Afghanis) that we could often converse in English. It was from them that we learned about the particular war incidents, and the names..., the names of the destroyed cities and villages in Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan that send off the particular wave of fear and desperation riding on the boats. From them we also learned about the ways of the human traffickers on the opposite coast, the tariffs per person (from 1000 to 2000 EUR), or the fact that when the weather got worse the traffickers simply lowered the tariffs rather than stop sending boats full with people out to sea (unless the weather was so extreme that chances of successfully reaching our shores became virtually zero).

As he slowly starts the walk up to the UNHCR/Stage-2 I bid the young Afghani farewell and wish him good luck. He grabs my hand for a handshake, as he faintly smiles, some more of his melancholy injects into me. 'It is like he read my mind' I tell myself, 'all my do-good chit-chat about how useful his language skills will be upstream Europe just that, do-good chit-chat that he can see right through...'

It was then when I first asked myself: 'Why the hell are we doing all this?' 'Why? If the rest of Europe will give them the cold shoulder or worse?' (by late October reports of water-cannoning of refugees somewhere along the Balkan corridor started reaching us along with news of the first razor-wire fences being raised). An analogy I made then kept me happy during the times when our efforts of giving shelter, some help and kindness, and yes, understanding of their plight to these people seemed futile and so damn temporary. 'Imagine inoculations' I told myself, 'they only last a moment but can protect one for long periods of time from a range of diseases'. If intolerance, hate and indifference to their plight are the 'diseases' that they would have to face in the rest of Europe, we could at least 'inoculate' them right here as best as we could. This simple metaphor worked greatly to keep my spirits up during my time in Sykaminia, but not all the time... not all the time. As the news about the reactions to these historic refugee movements in 'upstream' Europe became progressively darker, so was my mood...

Chapter 13: A march of shadows

Sky blues are becoming deeper and deeper, nightfall approaches along with the time when the traffickers, if they followed their usual pattern, would send the last wave of boats, sometime between 5 and 8 pm. None of us had had any time for lunch, we made do with the soup that our cook was making for the refugees, the odd cookie here and there, and quite a lot of coffee, sleep always in short supply among us during those October days. Even without refugees present in our camp (aside from medical cases), we still had lots of work to do. Clean up as best as we could and re-order the dry clothes sets since each human wave rushing to our clothes 'department' would upset that ordering despite the best efforts of our volunteers to hand out clothes in an orderly fashion. A well-ordered camp was even more important for any night arrivals than daytime ones since darkness, punctuated only by the few light sources we had available, made everything more chaotic and our work more difficult.

During such lulls those of us with cars would transport families, old people, or people with obvious frailties and disabilities up to the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp sparing them the steep road up. This was often a fun task as you would get to cram the car with entire families, or otherwise large groups of people, and proceed uphill very slowly (you could hardly do otherwise). This gave us a long enough time to interact with them but not so long as to make it hard to dissociate once you had to drop them off at Stage-2, though it did not always work that way. Yannis would do several such transports day and night, feigning disgust that instead of rescue at the coast he was operating a minivan service using a ...small red car instead ('driver rather than diver' he would put it). Today, Alexandros, upon seeing the number of people Yannis could fit in that compact red car, in a moment of rejoice said: 'Hey Yanni, do you want me to find you a real minivan?', to which Yannis did not answer. In his typical fashion he was already on his way up with another 7-8 people carload. I often joined him in this task with my car. During such times, given the narrow road up to Stage 2 (one-lane inside the village and barely two-lane outside), and the need to avoid scattered columns of refugees walking up (often at night), or sleeping by the roadsides, I found that a small car was not a bad choice after all. This was provided one was ready to do the Sykaminia-(Stage-2) route ten times or more during the course of a day, if he wanted to make any serious dent on the large number of people walking up.

The people we transported this way already had had time in our camp, the dangerous land and sea crossing behind them, and some safety they could at last believe in. Smiles thus instantly flourished, laughs, sparkly little boys and girls would poke their little heads over our shoulders to the front of the car to check out this funny Greek driver, and start bumbling out words we did not understand but laughed nevertheless and teased them all the while. We would continue doing this well into the night unless there was any alert for more boat arrivals on the coast. Tonight we finished such transports early evening. During the last one I saw worryingly that Stage-2 started showing signs of crowding and backlog of people left lingering in its front alley as well as inside its main perimeter (bus transports would typically stop during the night).

We decide to stay on until midnight, after which boat arrivals on our coast usually stopped. Our hero of a cook had to be persuaded to go to sleep as we needed him early the next morning. Apollo starts placing some low energy consumption camping lamps all around, one hanging from our food tent, one near the baby station under the tree, a couple in the clothes 'department'. 'Islands' of soft white light created in each location, 'submerging' rapidly into the darkness around us within a short distance. The only well-illuminated part of our operations was the interior of the medical tent. I can now see Yannis preparing again his diving lights to start his beam sweeps of the

sea in front of us. As the nightfall is now complete, I take my car to patrol the west part of the coastline, and the Greek Coast Guard ship makes its first pass in the sea in front of us, FRONTEX is not patrolling tonight. 'Just one ship search beam to go by tonight' I say to myself, remembering the valuable indicator role those beams play for us, from my first night watch. 'Khalid, are you sure a night version of your day radar is not possible man?' I ask, 'I wish it was, Petro, but no' he replies and laughs. It is now nearly 9 pm, 'It is unlikely there will be any more arrivals until early morning tomorrow' Alexandros says, but we stay on, while the Greek Coast Guard ship continues its East-West patrol sweeps in the passage between Lesvos and Turkey.

Nobody saw them coming ashore, no surprise there given a now completely night-dark sea and black or grey inflatable boats coming in slowly with their heavy human load, but to entirely miss their approach to our camp along the coastal road until they were so close to it was startling! The first people at the head of column were abruptly illuminated by a street light right next to our camp's edge and they kept coming, emerging one after the other from a darkness that seemed to be walking alongside them, until they reached the street light right next to our camp, where she suddenly missed a step. I had finished the last patrol of the western coastline only just an hour ago and I saw nothing! They must have landed close to our location shortly afterwards, and on a patch of the coast smooth enough for them to quickly come on the coastal road, then walk towards the village lights, stumbling on our camp along their way.

Nightfall in the countryside induces an almost silent, guarded, code of conduct among humans, as long as no widespread panic or fear is present. This group of refugees approaches us silently, a long column of quiet shadows marching along the coast, faces dimly, slowly, and only transiently lit by the street lights sparingly dotting the road near the camp. One could easily conjure the disturbing image of them walking drenched right out from the night-dark sea, continuing on along the road, phantoms of all those that did not make it alive in their final passage to the island.

We quickly offer out a welcome to put them at ease. Some must be terrified of night journey towards an unknown island coast, no matter our assurances. 'Hell I was terrified during my first night sea passage towards a known island and its port, and I was on board a sleek sailboat, not a goddamn dingy inflatable loaded with people' I say to myself, momentarily remembering my first such passage from Athens to the island of Kea during another October nearly three decades ago. 'We are from Syria, landed an hour ago, there!' says one young man in flawless English, pointing towards the general direction of the western coastline. 'Come in, welcome, whoever is wet please go there to get some dry clothes' I tell them and point towards the direction of the clothes station where Iro, Eirini, and Martha are. The first refugees of the column started making a turn towards the mouth of the dry riverbed, and they kept coming, shadow faces now illuminated by the soft glow of the lamps Apollo had placed around. Some smiles, 'thank you' in Greek, English, Arabic, and occasionally Farsi, as they walk past me. Then towards the end of the column I saw them, children, many of them...

My first inner reaction upon seeing little boys and girls in the dead of the night on that coast, sometimes clutching a beaten up toy in one hand, and a father's or mother's hand on the other was: 'My my you should be in bed by now little one!'. This silliest and simplest of reflexes, a faint smile from them, a hug from little arms to that stranger that their father or mother was now suddenly friendly with, did me in. I went and wept out of their sight for the first time since I arrived in Lesvos. Doing this towards the sea helped a little for she was dark and cloaked me, and that was good. If one is to be wounded, let it be with a chest towards the sea.

Around midnight we finished handing out dry clothes to people, some cookies and milk for the children. Then Yannis and me started transporting families up to Stage-2. It was well past midnight when we were done, with a lot of people having fallen asleep by the wayside below it. They slowly stir in the beams of my car lights as I slowly make my way back to Kaloni.

Chapter 14: The doctors from Achaia

'Petro, hurry up here, we need medical transport to Mytilene!' Alexandros tells me in a seven o' clock morning call. On my way down to Sykaminia I find the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp chock-full with many refugees already there, the first line-up forming outside its gate. 'Shit, today they arrived even earlier!' I say to myself, as I slow down the care to a crawl as to carefully go through the long columns of people walking up all over the road from our camp to Stage 2. Again anxious taps on the window, questions about where the next camp is, where Mytilene or Athens is, women cradling babies, old men and women wearily looking on while younger members of their families ask me for directions. 'Damn, I should start doing transports up to Stage-2' I say to myself, momentarily forgetting what Alexandros told me, the scenes of helplessness around me overwhelming. 'Petro are you close by?' Apollo asks again on the phone, 'There in a few minutes!' I reply. It takes me nearly ten minutes to drive the last kilometre to our camp through the village, the road choke-full of refugees walking up. With Asimo having left for Athens yesterday, I expect only the Norwegian nurses to be around to help us with medical issues. In Mytilene's main hospital the doctors have set up an impromptu refugee section, beds reserved only for them. However, patient assessment and transport is still up to us, and with Asimo now gone it would be much more difficult to judge what to do for particular cases.

It was thus the happiest of the occasions when a new team of doctors arrived. They swarmed our operation, the Greek Coast Guard ships, Mytilene's hospital, Moria's processing center, with their numbers, good will and humour. These were the doctors of EINA (Greek initials standing for: Association of Doctors of South Achaia, a province of the Peloponnese) who came to join our efforts today, all leaving their regular jobs in Achaia behind. They arrived to Lesbos last night, some staying in a local monastery, others in Molyvos. Today one of them, Katerina, was waiting for me outside the medical tent with a baby, wrapped up in a golden-foil thermal blanket, no more than a few months old. This was my medical emergency to transport to Mytilene's hospital, along with its mother and father and a Norwegian nurse. The baby should have blood tests for a suspected infection. I look at Katerina, green eyes, long wavy honey-brown hair, no more than 30 years old, 'Should we check the entire family in the hospital so that they stay together?' I ask her. 'That would be good, but I am not sure they can do this' she tells me. She then hands me a referral paper to use for the hospital, smiles, 'see you later' and steps back into the medical tent. This was my first encounter with an EINA doctor, one of many to come. Later that very day they were joined by two very young doctors from Germany, Alina, and Wolfgang, who stayed with us for quite some time. Wolfgang's is a tall trainee doctor with a serious studious face, balanced by Alina's brightest of smiles, and easy nature. So all of the sudden with the EINA people, and the two young German volunteers, there was a formidable medical team at hand!

I drive the baby and the family, Afghanis from Kunduz, to Mytilene, the most careful drive of my life, reassured by the presence of Ingrid, a Norwegian nurse sitting next to me. In Mytilene's hospital the nurses there took the baby and the parents in. They would keep them, they told us, until all exams were done and see what was wrong with the little one. It is hard to overstate what this meant to those parents and us, Ingrid was elated.

We were back to the camp by late afternoon. I went to the medical tent to report that all went well, Katerina was now gone, and a happy-go-lucky of a man, short, and with closely cropped grey hair came out, Manos, another EINA doctor. 'She went out with one of the volunteer cars to the west coast' he said, 'many more boats have landed there since you left' he added, 'the refugees that came out of them still walking towards us...'. He then told me of a patient inside the tent that he

just treated for what appeared to be a war-inflicted wound in the gluteal muscle. 'Somebody just stitched him up and send him on his way' Manos tells me, 'His wound got badly infected, so when I opened it up the entire tent smelled, pseudomonas infection you see', Manos says. I pretended to understand, then his next words echoed in me: 'The things I saw today in the tent and around here, man we are really not far from a war zone...a war zone...' his voice trailing off. Then I suddenly remembered a 7-8 year-old boy I saw today in Mytilene's port just before I left to come back here. He was going happily about playing when I noticed his right hand, amputated an inch above the wrist. I replayed his image in my head and remembered that there were several deep parallel scars, starting from the amputation line going up towards the elbow. 'It may have been such a wound' I thought. Suddenly all those barrel bombs that the military of that bastard Assad was dropping on Syrian civilians were not exploding that far off from Lesvos.

In the days that followed Manos' last words came back to me, not only because people kept coming to us with war wounds like the one he had just described, but also because so many arrived with medical conditions that should have kept them in a hospital rather than make a perilous journey over land, then travel on a damn dingy of a boat to cross the Aegean. There was a case of a woman with a kidney removal operation, stitched up, and send on her way a mere three days after her operation, people arriving on wheelchairs(!), others with fresh wounds inflicted by the traffickers, people taken out of intensive care units and send on a dangerous journey, their conditions made worse by the time they arrived. The list was long.

I leave Manos behind to go and get a few thermal blankets and bottles of water before driving out to the west coast, heeding his words that many more people must be there walking towards us. While I drive on the coastal road, I look to my right, I see no boats nearby, only a navy-grey ship of the Greek Navy is out on patrol. After 15-20 minutes of driving I stop the car stunned, the sight far in front of me overwhelming. There are hundreds, hundreds(!) of people marching towards me on a long patch of the coastal road, the equivalent of many boats. I just sit there not knowing what to do. Should I go up to them with my paltry stock of thermal blankets and water bottles or go back and restock with a much bigger supply than I have? I decide to press on. For this large number of people and the perils of their journey, statistics dictates that there will almost certainly be serious medical cases among them. I better go and find them.

Sure enough as I approach Yannis's red car whizzes by, its stop lights flashing, a family seems to be inside. I continue on and stop in front of the column. A man with doctor insignia on his volunteer jacket is there speaking Arabic to some people at the head of the column. He is cradling a small boy that seems asleep in a thermal blanket, my breath catches up...

'Nothing serious, he is just very tired and a bit hypothermic' he tells me quickly after seeing my worry, 'please put him in the car and take him back to the camp' he tells me, in flawless Greek. Seeing my surprise, he quickly introduces himself. He is Hamdi, a neurosurgeon from a large hospital in Athens that just arrived in our camp to help. This is how I came across one of our two Greek-Syrian doctors, the other one, Iman, riding on the car of Yannis that had just passed me. Their knowledge of Arabic and Greek, in the context of their profession was a great combination to have during our operations in Sykaminia. They would not help only as doctors, Hamdi in particular, could be seen transporting families from our camp up to Stage-2 at all hours of the day and the night.

I take the boy along with his mother and his siblings, Syrians from Aleppo, and drive them to the camp. There I find Manos joined by yet another EINA doctor, a rather colourful character called

Meliades, a paediatric surgeon, specialised in intensive care. One could not have chosen a better specialty to have on that coast those October days, and here he was, magisterial, calm, and insidiously humorous. In the days that followed he somehow maintained all these elements, even during the worse situations. His experience in the intensive care unit for children in a hospital in Patra, helping him I guess. I leave the boy in their care, and go back to the still far-off long column of refugees to bring back other emergencies in the usual fashion. By the time we were done with this wave night was upon us, and the winds have picked up noticeably.

Chapter 15: Aeolus descending

Μόνο γύρισε τα μάτια της κατά την θάλασσα, και τραγούδησε ένα παλιό τραγούδι του μακαρίτη του γέρου της: Η θάλασσα ξεβούρκουση, τα ράχτα πατηση δέρνει....

She only turned her eyes towards the sea, and sang an old song of her dead old man: The sea convulsed, she racks and beats the rocks....

«Νησιώτικες ιστορίες», Αργύρης Εφταλιώτης, Λέσβος, 1894
“Island Stories», Argyris Eftaliotis, Lesvos, 1894

‘The forecast is for rain, strong winds, and a temperature drop down to 10 C°’ Alexandros says. ‘I do not think there will be more boats tonight’ he adds, ‘so we better all go and get some rest’. ‘I will stay on a little longer, until past midnight’ I tell him, ‘just in case’... Elena and Martha, two EINA doctors, spending their first night at the coast, volunteer to stay late as well, along with Yannis. The rest pack up and leave for the various villages where they stay to get some sleep.

There is not much to do, so we all huddle up under the now deserted food tent and talk a bit about our lives and what brought us here. Yannis, after playing his dive light beams out to sea for a while, quits and joins us. The patrol with the Greek police jeep passes by, ‘How is it going people?’ they ask, ‘Quiet’ we say, ‘let’s hope it remains so’ they say, wave, and continue on. Elena and Martha work in the large hospital in Patra, and were moved by the images of refugees they saw on TV, and especially the still recent image that shook much of the World, the 3-year old Aylan Kurdi lying lifeless on the Turkish shore as if gently sleeping. ‘That was it for us’ they tell me, ‘...we had to do something’. Yannis does not say much, he just looks out to sea anxiously, ‘I hope nobody sets out in this kind of weather’ he says worryingly, ‘not in the kind of boats they ride...’ he adds. The trees around us now started shaking violently in the increasing wind, ‘whoever takes out to sea tonight is in for one frightful passage’ I say to myself, ‘I hope nobody does...’

Elena continues on to tell us about the nuns in the Greek monastery hosting her and some of the EINA doctors, apparently this camp is not in their ‘radar’ at all, she tells us. She finds this strange, until I tell her about who set up this camp and how. An anarchist-autonomous group out of Athens, with some local support from a similar cell in the city of Mytilene, taking over a piece of public land that belonged to the municipality of Skala Sykaminias. ‘No wonder the nuns did not acknowledge the existence of this camp, I would be surprised if they did!’ I tell her and she laughs. ‘Truth is, our anarchist friends started some serious problems with the mayor of Sykaminia and a few of the locals’ Yannis says, ‘their takeover of public land next to the village without any consultation has not been taken lightly’ he finishes. Upon hearing this, I sensed that a different kind of wind could soon buffet our operations.

The winds now rose to a seven in the Beaufort scale, shaking our tents strongly, ‘I hope Apollo and his friends pinned those down well’, I think, ‘we could not afford to have a messed up camp with missing tents in the morning’. Elena and Martha leave around 1am, but I stay a little longer with Yannis. He starts recounting a few stories from Mani, a place of Southern Greece where part of his lineage is from, and where he often went for diving. ‘Dramatic waters there, large depths near-shore, and a lot of piracy around the capes of Tainaro and Malia and Cavo Grosso for several centuries’, Yannis says. ‘Remote rocky shores, inhabitants known for defiant bravery, but also damn dirt poor because of a very poor land’ Yannis answers when I ask the reason. ‘In a tale called ‘Kakavoulia’, Kostantinos Radios tells that one year there were such bad crop yields and such

dryness that the inhabitants of Mesa Mani started dying from hunger and even lack of water. So when a foreign ship appeared near their shores they were very happy to assault it. Then they went aboard to find people even more wretched than themselves, refugees from some other fucking war in Western Europe. Maniates then took them in their villages and gave them food and asylum despite their own desperate conditions...' Yannis says. 'This my friend is bravery with your own stomach and that of your children on the line, sometimes that is way more difficult than having your ass on it' Yannis concludes in his typical language.

A hard rain starts abruptly coming down, and a strong wind gust blows off one pole of our food tent. 'Fuck! This will soak all our food supplies!' Yannis barks, and we scramble to bring the tent structure back up again, so that it can shelter those supplies that now stand exposed in the driving rain. We manage with difficulty, and only after using several of the food boxes as props and support structures around the tent poles. Those boxes we will lose to the rain as they will definitely be fully soaked by morning.

By the time we are done it is 2am, with Yannis and me being on the coast since seven o' clock in the morning. I do not know how I will be able to drive back to Kaloni, an hour's worth of drive, without falling asleep at the wheel. I manage alright at the end, fear of crashing does it better than coffee I guess. I stagger into the small apartment and fall asleep with my clothes on.

Chapter 16: You are safe now!

The next day I got up, looked out of the window, scattered clouds only, still very windy. I see two calls from Sakis on my mobile, so while I am buying coffee and breakfast from a cafe in Kaloni for my on-the-road breakfast, I return them. 'Good morning Saki, how are things?' 'All fine here Petro, I just called to see how are you, how are things at Sykaminia?' he asks, 'They are getting bad', I reply, 'we have steadily increasing numbers of people, only last night high winds stopped the flow early' I add. 'I heard reports of drown people there today Petro' he tells me, 'and I called you to see if all is OK'. 'I have not been down there yet, I don't know' I reply. 'Well, these are news we got from the Coast Guard today' Sakis tells me. 'If any boats did set out last night or early this morning, they would be in trouble', I tell him, 'Once you know please let me know, and be careful yourself' Sakis says. After ending the call, I start racing the car towards Mantamados. After I exit this village I glance towards the Medecins Sans Frontieres camp. Many tents are there now, some buses, and many more refugees, but its capacity still comfortably accommodating the number of people around it.

As I drive towards the North shore and the final stretch to Sykaminia I check for Greek Coast Guard and FRONTEX ships from the usual vantage point. There is only one ship, I am not sure which, doing a regular East-West sweep, no wild turns or irregular patterns. 'I guess the strong winds still hold refugee boats back' I thought. Then I see what appears to be a naval-grey Turkish frigate sailing similar patterns but nearer to the Turkish coast, 'well maybe this does it as well'. A bit later I see some refugees walking on the road towards me and presumably towards the Medicins Sans Frontieres camp I just passed. A car ahead of me going towards the same direction as me suddenly stops next to a group of refugees. The person inside it then starts handing some things out of the car window, it continues on, stops again and the same act repeats with another group of refugees. I slow down to figure what is going on, then after the fourth such stop, the car U-turns and heads back towards me. I slow down and hail it to stop. 'Good morning, what are you doing?' I ask him, 'Just handing out water, and some dried fruits for the road' a local middle-aged man replies nonchalantly, '...but I ran out of supplies just after a few stops', he complains, '...made the mistake to hand too much at the beginning, I should have even out the distribution better...' he continues, 'Still a great idea' I tell him, and drive on. 'A damn good idea, I should do this myself' I think as I drive away, the column of refugees now past me.

As I arrive to the camp, I see a few tens of refugees there already, the rough equivalent of two boats. Alexandros looks grim, his dark eyes, darker still 'All OK?' I ask, '...a large wooden boat capsized on the West coast, far outside Molyvos today, by the time the Coast Guard and fishermen reached it, 10 people drowned, several children among them...' he says. I look out to the sea, full of wave and spray, 'we cannot operate out there...' I repeatedly tell myself, trying to calm down, 'we can only do things near shore...', still it feels terrible, just damn terrible.

By late afternoon the Turkish frigate is gone and so is the Greek Coast Guard ship. 'Boats many boats are out!' Khalid tells us, pointing towards several directions. I guess strong winds are not that much of a deterrent during daytime, or maybe the traffickers just waited for the 'road' to clear of frigates and Coast Guard ships, who knows. One wonders why would the refugees step into overloaded rubber inflatables during such windy days to begin with, why not wait for calmer ones? After all many of them stayed for days on the Turkish coast waiting for a passage. I have been told that the traffickers simply lower the prices during such days, and keep sending out boatloads of people. Still I suspect that this is not the whole story.

Like today, strong winds in the North Aegean typically emanate from northerly directions. The Turkish shore where the boats are launched being exactly northward of ours meant that even during windy days like today the sea near the opposite shores would appear deceptively calm, the Turkish coast being in the wind 'shadow' projected by the mountains there. But this also meant that when the refugee boats would reach mid-sea, and out of that 'shadow', the waves would be whipped up by the full strength of the north wind. By the time this happened the boats would be near or have already crossed into Greek territorial waters, and very difficult to try and turn around against the wind, even if such a notion could be contemplated by people on an inflatable loaded to the brim in rough seas. Moreover, even as commanding the boat would become difficult because of the much larger waves whipped up mid-passage, the wind would still be pushing it towards the general direction of the North shore of Lesbos anyway. All this makes for a very cold-blooded calculation, easily applicable to people without sea experience as the vast majority of the refugees is, but it also made for some truly terrified arrivals on our coast during such days. One can only imagine the terror among those people as they suddenly became near helpless mid-sea, while even small deviations of the wind from a strictly northern direction would serve to scatter their boats across the entire coast between Molyvos and out to the cape of Korakas to the east of the village of Skala.

An hour later we can see, without binoculars now, all those approaching boats Khalid indicated. 'They are all over the place!' Nikos, a local man volunteering in our food tent, shouts. Two boats head well to the east of our position, to Korakas, where the coast is rocky and inaccessible by the road, and three head towards to our general direction. The Spanish lifeguard team already started signalling in order to draw the boats towards a smooth patch of the coast, some of our people do the same, though I doubt if these boats have much capacity for significantly changing directions now. 'Not in this wind, and not if they are as heavily-laden as they usually are' I am thinking. Later on we can guess where one of them will likely make landfall and start going there. By the time we reach the place the boat has drawn closer, and I can see the people on it, mixed nationalities it seems. The man manning the outboard is doing some erratic moves as they approach risking having the boat caught sideways by the waves. In previous landfalls some smiles would already be forming by now among the people aboard. Not today. Only terrified looks and silence as the boat draws nearer and nearer to the cresting rollers.

'Those fucking rollers!' Yannis exclaims, cursing the only downside of a smoothly shallowing beach when it comes to landfalls, namely its high rolling waves when strong winds buffet it from the sea. This is what we had today, not very high, but high enough to worry. When nobody was there to help them ashore, some refugees would find tragic deaths a mere 20-30 meters away from shore as these rollers seized and capsized their boats. On rocky shores the rubber boats would be thrown about the rocks by the waves, some of the chambers puncturing, with often fatal consequences. Such tragedies were made easier by the usually poor seamanship and sheer fear of the person manning the outboard engine, a refugee himself. He would be appointed 'captain' by the traffickers, after just a cursory lesson of less than an hour on how to handle the outboard taking place in the beach from where the boats were launched. Children were the most vulnerable during such accidents for obvious reasons and their parents, mostly unable to swim themselves, could hardly help.

Our near shore experience and the much more comprehensive one of the Greek Coast Guard designated such moments as some of the most dangerous for losing people. We tense up as the boat, loaded with more than 30 people, comes closer. We are waiting for it, Yannis, Alexandros,

me, and Nikos, all of us in the water. We grab it from both sides trying to stabilize it, then one side violently slips from our hold, the boat turns sideways, exposed to the next cresting roller...

We turn the boat quickly so that it faces the crashing wave on its stern rather than being caught sideways in it (a sure recipe for capsizing). At least this time the 'captain' has turned the motor off so we have only the momentum of the rollers themselves to face. Then the adults on board start doing two things simultaneously, giving us wailing babies and terrified crying children, while many of them started jumping out of the boat from every side of the boat possible. Shouts and screams fill the air around us along with the heavy boom of the rollers. At the end, after few moments of sharp terror, we get hold of both sides of the boat and everybody on shore, wet to the bone. Nikos goes to bring thermal blankets from his car. We give them all out, but they are not enough. Yannis puts a family in his car and takes them to the camp, I do the same, while Alexandros and Nikos stay behind to give directions to the rest. As I drive towards the camp I see the other boat having made a successful landfall with the help of the Spanish lifeguard team, the people from it are now walking towards the camp. At the end it all went well. Still even with few boat arrivals on windy days like these, we have come to dread them as the possibility of near-shore fatalities rose dramatically. I don't want to even imagine what the personnel of the Greek Coast Guard must be going through, having witnessed so many of deaths both near and far shore while operating around Lesvos and the other North-Eastern Greek islands.

'Some people have swum right into the village' Manos tells me when I arrive back to the camp, his happy-go-lucky face replaced by seriousness. 'Hell, there must have been another boat arrival we did not notice' I tell myself. 'Well, jump in, let's go' I tell Manos after the family I transport, Syrians-Kurds from Kobane, comes out to our clothes station to change. We arrive in the small village square, and in the small cafe/restaurant adjacent to the small harbour there is commotion with many locals coming in and out. We make our way inside to find three dripping wet people, two teenagers, and one middle-aged man with a moustache shaking badly, all three are naked but fully wrapped in thermal blankets. 'This is certainly not the whole boat' I tell Manos.

'What about the rest of the people? Where the hell did the boat land?' I ask the locals. 'There was no boat, they just swam into the village harbour' they tell me impossibly, 'What?!' I ask incredulously, 'How could that be?', 'We do not know' they reply. Manos examines the middle-aged man, 'hypothermia and fear' he tells me, 'We better get them some dry clothes'. I go back to the camp and bring some trousers. After putting them on, and with thermal blankets now wrapped only from the waist up all three of them step out in the village square. The young ones understand English, the mid-age man only a little, Syrians.

'We jumped off the boat' they tell me, 'What boat? Where?' I ask. Then they went on to tell me that they were on a boat whose outboard stopped mid-sea, so they started drifting with the strong wind taking them eastwards of the village. With the approaching shore appearing rocky, these three decided to jump and try to swim to the village itself, and here they are, a father and his two sons.

'It may have been one of the two boats we saw going towards Korakas', 'we should send a car there, go as far down towards the shore as the dirt roads allow' I say to Manos. I then turn to see the father still shaking, 'Don't worry, you are safe now! No bombs, no Assad, no militias' I tell him. Upon hearing this, he starts crying, and kept shaking. I turn around and give him a steady hug, and I continue: 'Why are you crying? You are safe now papa! You hear me? Safe! And your boys are here too! What is there to worry?!' He kept tearing up but now a faint intermittent smile started

cracking up on his face, and his boys? Well those bastards simply started laughing! At the end, a laughter of relief and camaraderie spread from them to me, the father, and to Manos as we all walked out of the little village square towards the camp.

Our search around the cape of Korakas came up empty. A shepherd there told us of a large column of refugees that walked through his village early in the morning. I cannot fathom how they made it up from that coast, and whether they all did.

The next day before I left Kaloni I bought water bottles and dry figs from a small hole-in-the-wall grocery shop next to my apartment. I wanted to do the same trick the local driver did yesterday. The grocer upon hearing my purpose he hands me another sachet of figs for free, and this was a man so poor that once quietly asked Sakis to buy him some lunch for he had no money that day. On my way out I see that he has some good vegetables at great prices, the thought of our celebrated field cook came to my mind, 'maybe I should tell him this' I think, smiling at the very thought of Bryan.

Chapter 17: Bryan the cook

'Spices at last!', he said, while jubilantly lifting up a particular package that just arrived in our operations field in the morning. 'Now this will really change things!' he said, and gave the victory sign after laying it inside his open-air field kitchen. Saying such words with a front-line refugee rescue and relief operation area as the background was betraying well...a very odd enthusiasm to have, or maybe simply an unstoppable one. But then again that was Bryan, the best field cook an anarchist-autonomous-run camp could ever hope to have. During the first days he was with us he coined the slogan: 'Soup, tea, solidarity!', and its longer version: 'Soup, tea, refugee, solidarity!' summarizing the essence of his work in a way none of us could. Hell maybe we could even summarize much of our effort with that very same slogan. We took it up, and every now and then we chant it bemused as a spirit lifter, and that was all great for Bryan, except for the lack of spices he suffered from during those first days.

Of a rather portly appearance, and with a καλοκάγαθο¹⁰ smile that could make the Devil himself reconsider his ways, Bryan was our field cook. Hailing from a distant truly Asian, Asian nation, he was easily the brightest ray in our camp, even during the darkest of times. Sometime after he arrived, he had an offer from the Faros-run UNHCR/Stage-2 camp, but turned it down because, as he put it: 'I do not want to be told what to cook', which made him the perfect fit for our operations. He had given up his regular job and went around the world 'cooking for the people' as he put it, which sounded like a great concept, even if the details were rather nebulous. He was the only one in our camp besides the doctors that added a designation to his reflecting jacket (we wore those mostly at night so cars and refugees could see us from afar), it read: 'Ask me for food'. Truth is there was never a need for that since, the moment refugees would start streaming past him and his small kitchen operation at the entrance of the camp, he would call out: 'Soup, Tsai (tea)' repeatedly, in a voice that stood on the fine balance of not shouting but still being noticed by a crowd that would often reach a hundred at a time. He was such an asset to the whole operation that the anarchists tried to extend his visa so he could stay in Greece longer, I do not know whether Alexandros managed it at the end, I hope he did.

His good warm soup in those Styrofoam cups we were handing out to refugees would often be our only heart and belly warming lunch as waves and waves of refugee-laden boats kept us pinned on the shore, unable to visit Lefteris' tavern at Skala. Bryan would go out and shop for vegetables himself (all soups were vegetarian). Today, after I saw him giving the victory sign for the package of spices that arrived, it became clear to me that here was a man not to compromise principle because of circumstance, at least as far as cooking was concerned. I mean, at the end of the day this was not a restaurant, and people would have been grateful even for mere warm salty warm water with a pink colour passing for soup. Not so Bryan. I guess up to the day when he had to cook without spices he must have felt like a maestro conducting an orchestra without violins. The truth is, after those spices arrived, we would all go for his soups multiple times a day, and even some committed carnivores among us were briefly converted. He was assisted by a young couple from USA/California that gave up their holidays in Europe to come to Lesvos and help us, and before them there was another elderly couple, also from the USA, that could be seen helping Bryan in his domain of magic. Marina and Nikos from Lesvos, stationed at the milk/cookies/canned-food section of the food tent, would sometimes help him prepare his huge soup and tea pots.

¹⁰ Pronounced kalokagatho, from 'kalos' kai 'agathos' in Greek, roughly translating as good and innocent

I do not know how he did it, but even during crunch times with a hundred of refugees filing past the entrance of the camp at a time, Bryan kept his pots full and his soups strong throughout. Only when a certain day arrived, sometime late October, Bryan's operation was overwhelmed by a tsunami of human despair, but on that day we were all beaten. He was there most of the day and while nearly a superman, he still needed some rest. So during our night watches we were left without Bryan and his soups...

Chapter 18: Grandmothers, anarchists, and NGOs

Every morning when I came to our operations field, and if I was not rushing about with some urgent task, I would be invariably and warmly greeted by three grandmothers from Skala, sitting on a bench close to our impromptu entrance (where Bryan's kitchen was). They would praise us like we were children (which we were for them I guess). Sometimes they would take and feed some babies of the refugees, which could then momentarily dash to Bryan's kitchen to get some soup, or simply wash in the public sink next to the grandmothers' bench. A particular photo of them, with one of them bottle-feeding such a baby made it around the world media, making them something of celebrities, but I did not know this at the time. One day one of them tells me these exact words: 'these poor souls, running away from their homes, so awful for them...(pause)...but it is good they come here, for we were so lonely before'. One of the simplest, most unpretentious, statement of humanism I ever heard. Khalid once told me that they used to tell him 'Welcome to Lesbos' for a few mornings, thinking him as one of the refugees, until they figured he worked with us, after that he entered their 'Good morning' list, to Khalid's infinite amusement.

Not all was peaceful between the people of the small village of Skala and the anarchists whose initiative set up the camp next to it, or between us and the NGOs operating on that coast. Today I saw Yannis, almost jumping on a poor public employee from the municipality that came with a garbage van to pick up the considerable waste gathering every day at the camp which we put in large plastic garbage bags outside the camp. 'What happened?' I ask him, 'Well he said that this is the last time he picks up the trash, and within three days the camp must pack up and go!' Yannis says. 'On whose orders?' I ask him. 'Apparently of the mayor of the village' he replies. 'Why?' I ask, 'Well because apparently the mayor wants the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp uphill to be the only one left around here' Yannis says. 'Maybe our friends operated way off the local society consensus scale by taking over a piece of public land belonging to the Sykaminia municipality' I retort, 'Maybe' Yannis says uneasily. When that same public worker passed by our spot again, I went up to him: 'I am sorry' I tell him. Him understanding that my sorry was about Yanni's previous reaction, he simply says: 'I want to help you people, I do not mind you here, but I am only doing my job, don't be so fast with your judgments'.

There is a coordination meeting scheduled tomorrow between us, people from the NGO 'Faros' running the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp, and representatives of the village people. Given today's incident with the public utility worker, I resolve to go, even as I never imagined myself going to any meetings on this coast, regardless how informal (the meeting is to be held in a cafe in the village). I may be able to smooth the ground between what appeared to be two different operating philosophies. Alas I did not know how different.

Later, during a small lull in our operations, I see Rob coming along the coastal road. Rob is a cool, tall, lanky English guy, with a stylish beret hat, and bookish wire-rimmed glasses who works for the NGO 'Faros'. I greet him, and then in my first attempt to smooth the territory between the two principal refugee rescue and relief initiatives operating on the coast, I ask him whether we can use the two large tents 'Faros' has set in a small olive grove near us. 'We can put refugees in there for short one-night stays in case they arrive very late' I tell him, 'I have to ask our director, but I personally think you should be able to if that need arises' he says. He then adds, 'but I guess one person from our team should be there monitoring the use of the tents and checking who goes in'. Later on I chat with Yannis, 'I think our anarchist friends will never accept any such checking whatsoever, or the presence of a Faros representative' Yannis tells me, 'they consider such NGOs just money-making establishment tools' Yannis says, sounding very pessimistic about such

pooling of resources. 'But Yanni, we will need those tents if the refugee arrivals keep rising, and especially if boats arrive late in the night' I tell him, 'Stage-2 has no buses running then, and we have no place to shelter people' I retort. 'Yes, yes I know, I know, this is the most logical thing to do', Yannis says, and then tells me that he will talk to them. To my eyes, this is an obvious thing to do. It may even help smooth the relations between our operation and some of the locals since Faros is an accredited NGO with a formal permission of the municipality of Skala Sykaminias to operate the Stage-2 camp.

The exchange of words between Yannis and the anarchists regarding this issue, was rather brief. 'I think it will be great to have access to those tents of the Faros people next to us, in case we have many refugee arrivals, and buses at Stage 2 have stopped for the night' Yannis says, 'I do not know about this Yanni, I am too busy here, better ask Alexandros', Iro says dismissively while sorting clothes in the clothes station. Later on Yannis does just that, to only receive from Alexandros the reply that Faros people would subject us to their protocols to use those tents, and he would have none of this. 'Besides, we are fine with what we have, we do not need those tents' he says, 'taking the refugees up to their Stage 2 camp is cooperation enough' he adds tersely and closes the conversation. I can see Yannis barely holding his anger at this response, and then he takes for a patrol. 'I better go to that meeting tomorrow' I tell myself, otherwise the camp's days may be numbered, a confrontation with the local municipality looming three days from now.

Chapter 19: The meeting

The next day, during another lull in our operations (the late afternoon ‘break’ still part of the pattern of boat arrivals), me and Apollo show up at the cafe in Sykaminia’s small harbour in order to have a discussion with representatives from Faros and two people from the village. One of the locals was Soula, the wife of Lefteris operating the tavern at Mouria (where NGO people and us would often eat), and the other was Kostas, a fisherman. Rob was there from Faros, along with Lea, a doctor (they now had acquired one), and another worker from the same NGO, an Indian called Ramesh.

Apollo is another anarchist of the camp, sporting a long thick goatee, wire-framed round glasses, and around 18-20 years old. Not fond of priests (even as our efforts at Sykaminia were provisioned by a charity founded by one), and with the habit of calling his mates beautiful *μπαχαλόκοσμο* (=bachalokosmo) the last word meaning ‘wrecking-crowd’ in Greek (a nickname that probably alluded to their frequent confrontations with police forces in Athens). He was very dogmatic for his young age, and considered all people wearing uniform, no matter if it was Greek police, or the Coast Guard (and of course the Army) as fundamentally flawed in principle. This despite many discussions with Yannis, that correctly pointed to him that the Greek Coast Guard, as well as the Greek police, mostly helped us and the refugees (the Greek police force on the island was cracking down hard on the few individuals that transported refugees for a fee). Still, there was no convincing of young Apollo whose near-religious attachment to his worldviews and lack of any doubts, was at the exclusion of any alternative views. He was a resident of Νεφέλοκοκκυγία¹¹, and he liked it up there. As with Alexandros, all his initiatives and actions on the coast reflected his very different political axioms, but carried also their fundamental boundaries. Today the latter would come to the fore, jeopardizing the very effort we all put on that coast.

In one of the funniest talk-past-one non-exchange-but-foisting one’s views I have ever witnessed, little Apollo gave a brief speech about the anarchist point of view of NGOs, and why they are all tools, and why we would thus keep occupying a piece of public land in defiance of any authority, and not accept any Faros representatives anywhere near us, but yes we could use those tents of theirs, provided they just left it all to us. Soula rolled her eyes, the Faros people looked at each other perplexed with Lea looking really upset. Seeing all this I figured there was no hope, and understood why the mayor of Sykaminia did not want to meet with any of us from Stage-1 anymore, anarchist or not. At the end of that meeting we at least agreed to write up a common protocol of conduct for deciding levels of medical emergency and corresponding responses for the refugees arriving on the coast. After this they all got up and left.

I stayed behind to talk a bit with Soula and Kostas. ‘They just did not consult anybody when they set up that camp, and several locals are upset by this’ Soula tells me, ‘and their continuing manner does not help either’ she continues, with Kostas echoing similar views. I ask her whether I should talk with the mayor of Sykaminia, ‘I don’t think he wants to talk with any of you right now, but I will tell him when I see him’ Soula says. ‘Please understand that many people here do want to help you, but they are upset by the arbitrariness of the acts of the people from your camp’ she tells me before I leave to go back to the camp. I nod in an understanding but resigned way, thanking them

¹¹ Pronounced Nefelokokygia, is the imaginary city of birds up in the sky where two citizens of Ancient Athens go to live, dismayed by the demagogues and the political order of their day, in Aristophanes’ comedy play: ‘The Birds’

and walk back. 'We may need to go to the Mayor of Lesbos, otherwise we are screwed if this goes on' I think while walking back to the camp.

The next day at our operations area I see Manos the EINA doctor and tell him what happened in the meeting. 'I think we should go to the Mayor of Lesbos himself' I tell him, 'only he can save the camp, the local municipality wants it shut in two days...' I tell Manos. 'I went to talk to the Sykaminia mayor sometime ago' Manos tells me, and the mayor's response was one of exasperation, not knowing what to do with our friends behaving so arbitrarily.

'Maybe we should indeed go and talk all the way to the top, the mayor of Lesbos' Manos says, 'Let me talk to Meliades, and Iman (the Greek-Syrian doctor), and maybe we can all go there tomorrow' he continues. 'Great, I will also talk to Yannis to come along' I tell him, 'with all of us helping here but not belonging to the political framework of our friends, it may help to solve this'. We part to go to our various tasks, and agree to meet mid-day tomorrow. The rest of that day saw the arrival of 20 boats, each with around 40-50 people on it, on our segment of the coast alone. This amounts to nearly one thousand refugees arriving within a single day. Ominously Stage-2 and even the more distant Medecins sans Frontieres camp at Mantamados started filling up.

Chapter 20: A Viking priest, and the Mayor

'Listen Nikiforos, we are needed here, so we are not going anywhere'. These were Alexandros' last words to Father Nikiforos, a priest of Greek Orthodox denomination, but hailing from a Nordic nation. The word 'Father' was pointedly absent from this terse exchange meant for resolving the issue of Stage-1, our camp, and whether it was still needed as Stage-2 was slowly deploying more resources. Father Nikiforos was the coordinator of the NGO Faros that manages the Stage-2 camp uphill outside the village of Skala on behalf of the UNHCR. He seemed as the top man in a very top-down pyramidal organization. I saw him a couple of times along the coast, a tall blond man, blue eyes, with a long ponytail, dressed with the robe of a Greek priest typical of the Athos monasteries or those of Meteora. His Greek was almost impeccable. There has been no opportunity to talk to him up to now, his appearances on the coast always brief, him spending most time up at Stage 2. 'Hell maybe I should go and talk to him' I thought, 'and do so before we see the Mayor of Lesvos'. If I were to explain him why we need all hands on this coast, it could still resolve the issue at the local level.

I went up to the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp to seek him out, taking a family of Afghanis along with me, the children tickling my ears and laughing all the way up. Stage-2 was busy, but now, unlike previous times, a substantial line up of refugees was forming outside its reception gate. I arrive at the gate and ask for Father Nikiforos, one of the NGO workers then goes in to find him. While waiting I notice an organizational pyramidal-like graph showing responsibilities and accountabilities, who has them, where, etc. pinned on the tall wire fence next to the entrance of Stage-2.

'The contrast with our operation could not have been larger' I thought. Our camp could reconfigure at the drop of a hat as needs evolved. This adaptability was not due only to its smaller size, but owed much to its fluid, non-rigid, operations. Our doctors needed a bigger tent? Apollo and his friends would step in and have it ready within few hours, was there a need for immediate transport to Mytilene? Patrol a certain place of the coast? It could be done fast by whoever was at hand. Roles, except those of the doctors, could be interchanged, or extended (e.g. our doctors coming along to patrols on the coastline) fluidly as the conditions demanded. This made it perfect for the chaotic and rapidly changing situations we faced on the coast¹². Finally, one should not forget that unlike NGO workers we were not paid for all this (only some expenses for fuel, and occasionally food were covered by a common account, maybe of 'Angalia', I am not sure).

'Hello I am Nikiforos', and there he was, nearly two meters tall, his priestly black robe flowing about in the light wind. 'My name is Petros Father' I tell him, 'It will be great if we could meet briefly to talk about coordination between Stage-2 and Stage-1 camps' I continue. 'Sure, is it OK to do this in one hour from now? Down in the village cafe?' he asks, 'Certainly' I answer. An hour later we sit alone in the cafe owned by Soula. After some small-talk about the happenings on the shore, and in the two camps I breach the subject: 'There seems to be a strong opposition from the mayor of Sykaminia and a few locals regarding the Stage-1 camp, but I think both camps are necessary, even complementary in their roles' I tell him. 'Well the people in Stage-1 did not have the permission to set up on the land where they are' he tells me, 'and Stage-2 will have even more capabilities later on' he continues. 'But Father your operation is not on the coast, we are' I tell him,

¹² I can already imagine some well-paid CEO/manager of an NGO, or even of a run-of-the-mill corporation reading this and thinking of a new 'anarchist-way-of-management' or some other such silliness. To prevent them from producing yet another 'great' management book about the trivial, I can say that this way of doing things is not scalable (much as my anarchist friends would disagree), not to mention the obvious political oxymoron of such an attempt.

'...and there is a lot of need just there when these boats come out' I retort. 'True but in the future we will have capabilities there as well, and permission to operate in the area' Father Nikiforos says. Seeing all this rapidly approaching an impasse, and with the image of rapidly filling up refugee camps fresh in my mind, I lean forward and ask him quietly: 'Do you think that anything, anything, we deploy on this coast will be enough for what is coming Father?', 'What do you mean?' he now asks guardedly, 'Simply that we must keep all the resources we can have on this coast Father...' and after a momentary pause I add: '...because catastrophes like the one we are facing now have a way of surpassing even our best preparations and plans'. A long silence ensues, Father Nikiforos turning to gaze at the sea, 'Maybe you are right' he says twice, in a subdued voice.

'So should I talk to the mayor of Sykaminia and tell him you think Stage-1 remains necessary?' I ask him, 'No better leave this to me, I will do it my way, it will be easier' he says and gently smiles. He gets up to leave, 'What about those two large tents next to us, can we use them in a case of emergency?' I ask him in order built on this new positive climate, 'Yes, but I would like to have one person from us there as well' he tells me. 'I will say that to my people' I assure him, and wave him goodbye.

The afternoon finds, me, Manos, the royal Meliades, and Yannis, driving together to Mytilene to meet the mayor of Lesvos. We carry with us some lifejackets from the beach, one is that of a child. The meeting is to take place without the knowledge of our anarchist friends, as they would certainly object to such an action. Before we meet the mayor we all sit at the cafe Panellinion not far from the City Hall, to hash out strategy on what to say to a man already swamped with various requests and problems related to the tremendous refugee inflows in Lesvos. 'We should simply focus on the fact that any spare capacity to handle refugees is necessary, given the uncertainties', '...that we are the only ones right on the coast' Manos says, 'and that if there is anything certain is that the flow of people has been steadily rising in the last few days' Yannis adds.

The mayor accepts us immediately in his office after we arrive. There we describe what we are facing on that coast, and why we think that the camp must stay operational, despite its controversial origins and well...arbitrary setup. The mayor, is very circumspect at first, and then he starts to list *his* problems to us. The accommodation problem, the stretched resources of the Mytilene main hospital, the lack of ambulances the difficult sanitary conditions that result in a small city of an island that has its population double for weeks on end. 'All this happening without any major racist incidents and a population that overall is tolerant and tries to help' he tells us, '...but people are getting tired, and frustrated' he continues on. 'You see this has been happening for far longer than you people in Athens or the international media know or cared about' he concludes. An uneasy silence ensues, with us not knowing whether his words dismissively meant: 'I have bigger problems than yours to deal with' or were simply meant to give us the big picture. At the end he tells us that he will see to it so that Stage-1 continues operations and that we should not worry. Boy did we spark up on that one!

We thank him for his support. Once outside his office we all hug jubilantly, the secretaries looking on bemused. Before leaving the City Hall we left the lifejackets to the Mayor. Later we learned that he gave them to some EU dignitaries that were visiting Lesvos to see the magnitude of the catastrophe. We left the city of Mytilene with a lighter heart, heading back to Sykaminia. As the deadline of three days came and passed with no incident, the same municipality worker came back with his van to pick up the considerable garbage the camp had after several boat arrivals. He now broadly smiles to us. 'I think he now has orders he likes' I tell myself. Yannis goes up to him for some small talk overtly friendly now, feeling guilty, I suspect, for having jumped at the poor guy

when he came to deliver the ultimatum from Sykaminia's mayor. Our anarchist friends never learned about our actions behind the scenes.

Chapter 21: A fisherman's silence

Την άλλη μέρα ο γρίπος έφευγε, κι είδα τον καπετάν-Γιώργη να κομματιάζει ένα καπότο, μουρμουρίζοντας και κοιτάζοντας προς την θάλασσα...

The next day the fishing boat was leaving, and I saw captain George tearing apart a piece of cloth, whispering and looking out to Sea...

**«Νησιώτικες ιστορίες: Καπετάν Γιώργης», Αργύρης Εφταλιώτης, Λέσβος 1894
"Island stories: Captain George", Argyris Eftaliotis, Lesvos, 1894**

'This kakavia fish-soup is delicious' I tell Lefteris, while Grigoris, his brother looks on with a satisfied look, him being the cook of the tavern today. It is midnight and they kept their tavern 'Myrivilis' Mouria' open, just for Elena an EINA doctor, and me, wrapping up a night watch. That was our only proper meal of the day. Even though the traffickers on the other coast gave us the 2-5 pm break, we were too busy cleaning up the camp, transporting refugees up to Stage 2, re-ordering the supplies, to be able to go for lunch. 'Well, always tell us and we will keep the place open for you people' Lefteris says. 'Thanks, this really means a lot to us' I tell him. Indeed, just thinking that a good meal could be had at the end of an 18-hour day at the coast was a small mind booster of sorts. Then there was the beer, usually on the house, as several of the meals were. I drank more than I should have given the one-hour night drive needed to reach Kaloni. I usually did, for it helped calm my mind for the drive back.

Elena leaves to go to sleep in the monastery where she is hosted. I stay behind a little longer, a second beer comes around with a flourish, offered by Lefteris. I then start recounting to him a bit about the frictions between our operations and those of the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp, even as he is probably aware of them, his wife having participated in that ill-fated coordination meeting between us and the Faros people yesterday in the cafe next to the tavern. 'Listen Petro' he starts quietly, 'I know all this, people of this village know all this, but understand that people here are tired. This has been going on for years...do you understand this? Years!' he says his voice now slightly rising. 'How many' I ask uneasily, he then turns to his brother Grigoris, then Grigoris quietly answers that the first refugee boat, one full of Iraqis, came out here during the Iraq war, back in 2002. Seeing my surprise, Lefteris goes on: 'What did you think? That all this started now? Or only just a year or two ago?' 'No Petro it has been going on for years! We took those poor people in our houses, cafes, did what we could for them, long before you people from Athens, the NGOs, or those North European countries noticed any of this!' 'Sometimes there would be so many refugees that we could not do much, only give them water and a bit of bread. Then they would simply walk up and then head to Mytilene on foot, day or night' 'Can you imagine what this does to your psychology, to have all this going on for so long?' he demanded. 'The nights were the worse' he adds.

'I can hardly picture all this Lefteri' I say meekly, at a loss for words after such a wrenching and complete picture of the catastrophe was set in front of me. 'This is why we really cannot accept any moralizing from the NGOs, or you people from Athens, welcome as you may be because of all the help you provide here now' Lefteris adds, his voice rising further on the word 'any'. A silence ensues, Lefteris looks a bit regretful for his outburst, his voice low and weary now he continues: 'Last year one day he went out for fishing' he says pointing to his silent brother, 'He came upon a foundering boat full of refugees, many already at sea. He started, all alone, pulling people up on his boat. Then he jumped in to save what appear to be a whole family in the water. It was winter. He

managed to pull almost all of them up, but the mother and another man, slipped, just barely slipped from his hands as he tried to grab them from their hair and pull them up to the surface. After this he refused to go out fishing for weeks, he sat alone in the village harbour looking out to the sea, chain-smoking and silent' Lefteris' voice trailed off to silence, his brother not saying a word.

I gave Lefteris and Grigoris a wave and a good night, thanking them for the food and the beers, and left for the car. I walked away with some new appreciation for the villagers of Skala, and thinking of the many such local people across the Eastern Aegean islands. I can only imagine the different impact of such a situation on similarly small communities in Germany, Sweden, Austria for example (commendable as they are for taking in the most refugees until now)¹³ or other North European countries, not to mention Hungary and the rest of the so-called Visegrad countries. To have some of their village and small city populations double with refugees almost overnight, and stay double for many months on end, with migration ebbing and flowing for years! This is what happened in Sykaminia and Mytilene where refugees eventually congregate. Lesvos being an island also meant that these desperate souls could not just walk away from the communities they were unwillingly but profoundly affecting. I think that in other places the long knives would have come out, the bonfires of hate and discrimination burning bright. I was glad that this did not happen here, and found myself thinking with affection even the two 'vultures' I saw removing the outboard engines from the rubber boats after their landfall on the coast earlier today (another mystery solved). Lefteris told me that during rough seas when boats capsized because of large shore waves, adults, children and infants falling overboard, the 'vultures' (as the locals called them) would throw themselves in the sea frantically trying to save people. When a death occurred they would not approach the coast again for weeks.

¹³ This is not to belittle the efforts of those countries in resettling refugees, I really hope the rest of Europe follows their example. However, in terms of impact, and the available resources to deal with this historic influx of refugees the Greek villages of North-East Aegean islands are unparalleled in their efforts to help or at least accommodate. Even big cities like Athens (its port of Piraeus now swamped with refugees), stand out for the efforts from the average volunteering Greek citizen and even from a Greek state that struggles to keep up with the inflows. Here is no glitzy rich Munich or Vienna with gleaming economies and large resources where people nicely applaud refugees arriving in trains, but economically devastated places with 25% unemployment, to which desperate, scarred and scared people arrive on rickety boats after a perilous passage, their fear and desperation still raw.

Chapter 22: Vineyard philosophy with a Pakistani from Birmingham

'My god she is pretty' Ismael says while looking at a young Italian volunteer. Her name was Claudia, and she spoke Arabic. She showed up to our camp one morning flashing a smile asking us whether she could join us. She has lived in Jordan for a while, practicing her Arabic, and here she was now, in Sykaminia, helping us around. 'Yannis the diver is smitten too' I tease him, and indeed that was so, Yannis mercilessly teasing Claudia every morning. She liked it, and returned 'fire' with her Italian-inflected English so deftly and amusingly that I suspect that Yannis did all this again and again only so that he would receive her smart aleck comments with that particular accent. Ismael Khan arrived with a Muslim charity group out of Birmingham UK. They were helping up at Stage-2, but also in the two large tents that the Faros people placed in the stone-fenced olive grove near us (those we requested as a backup in case of emergency). He was a young man, handsome enough to be nicknamed 'the playboy' by Yannis when these two first joked around. Idealistic, but unlike our anarchist friends, his idealism seemingly anchored on his religion.

'Well, that makes two of us' Ismael says and laughs. 'How many are you anyway? It seems that every Pakistani I meet here from the UK is from Birmingham!' I ask him, in a joking mood. 'A lot' he replies, 'we are all over that city, much more than in any other one in the UK'. At this point, refugee families come out of our camp with several little children in tow. Ismael then springs into action and manages to fit all but one family in the small van that the Faros people started bringing down in Skala. Yannis picks up the other one, and the two cars slowly make their way towards the village, and on to the UNHCR/Stage-2, their red stop-lights flashing, indicating refugee transport.

Ismael does not go up with the van, he stays to linger a little longer, along with Lisbeth, another volunteer, a Greek-Swede that came here late last night. 'You know I asked Yannis why he avoids getting photographed with any refugees' Ismael tells me, 'What did he say?' I ask him, 'That he does not do misery porn!' Ismael says laughing. 'Well I share his views on this one, these people at their most vulnerable, should not be used as a spectacle, or props for somebody's goodness and philanthropy' I tell him¹⁴. 'I agree' Ismael says, 'though I saw some people doing this in our group' he adds.

'Still sometimes such photographs are necessary to record events, have you been to Moria?' Ismael asks, 'No why?' I ask, 'It is really very bad there, many many refugees and very slow processing' he replies. 'I guess that has to do with Karatepe being closed for now and all refugees taken to Moria' I tell him, '...and a Europe that has yet to wake up to the enormity of the problem we face here, and the sparse resources of the Greek islands' I add to myself. Then in a hushed and somewhat reverential tone young Ismael leans closer to tell me that an MP of the UK Parliament is among their group, sort of incognito, to see what is going on and suggest some kind of action on the refugee issue after going back in the UK. Myself being disgusted by Europe's governing politicians (with only very few exceptions), and especially so by those of the UK, the country that participated in the Iraq war, the war that arguably started the domino of current horrors, I could not hold back. 'Listen Ismael, I could not care less about any fucking MPs coming here to do any fact-finding no matter how well-meaning' I abruptly tell him. 'Here is what I suggest you go and say to that MP: please go back in the UK Parliament and support a quota to take some of these desperate people in

¹⁴ Besides the political dignitaries, who perhaps could not avoid it, a few volunteers, mimicking various rich people from Athens' financial elite and from around the world, could be seen doing this "misery porn" snapping such pictures and numerous selfies with refugees. On one notable occasion at the entrance of the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp, a certain volunteer asked not to be bothered with a certain task while she took and retook a selfie with a newly arrived Afghani family anxious to get in the camp, her smile during all this of the type found in fashion glossies.

the UK, maybe one based on the tonnage of the bombs the UK dropped in the Iraq war, or the ones is dropping now, along with the USA and Russia, to... correct the ill side effects of the previous bombings.' 'Then who knows maybe USA, Russia, participating in this war 'party', and the countries of the so-called 'New Europe' (as a certain Donald Rumsfeld once put it), those that once upon a time agreed and contributed to the Iraq war, will take a cue and do something similar. Now that would be a good start! And hey it does not have to be the relative tonnage of bombs dropped, any measure of the relative expenses towards these wars can do a fine job determining refugee quotas for these countries to take in. Greece will continue doing what she can, given her current conditions¹⁵.'

Ismael listened quietly to my long angry tirade, and then with a wide charming smile defuses my anger 'Are all Greeks so instantly political as you are?' he asks, 'Oh well, only when the issue is near and dear to our hearts' I tell him, 'and by the way' I add, 'you are in Greece, so you might as well be subjected to a few political tirades and a dose of αμπελοφιλοσοφία (ambelofilosofia)', 'What is that?' he asks, perplexed but now ready for a joke, 'It is composite word made of 'ambelos' which means vineyard in Greek, and filosofia which means well ... philosophy, I say, '...and designates low caliber philosophizing' I tell him. Ismael laughs loudly, repeating the word a few times. The sun is gone now, the night falls, some lights start flickering in the Turkish coast, the skies over us already turned into a deep violet-blue, the hour of the amethyst, just before starry darkness.

We are all very much exhausted for it had been a very busy day with many boats arriving on the coast, their numbers continuously rising since I arrived. We still managed, but today we ran out of some clothes sizes, and some refugees had to walk up to Stage-2 soaking wet. Still, Bryan held his ground with his warm soups and tea, Nikos from Sykaminia and Marina from Mytilene at the tent adjacent to Bryan's kitchen operation managed fine with the dispensing of cookies, milk and child food. Apollo raised an internal partition inside the medical tent to create the special examination space that the doctors asked for. Iro, Martha with Eleni (from the Angalia depot in Kaloni) are now all busy sorting out a new large batch of dry clothes, but visibly tired from having to deal with all the previous waves of people. Today there had been no serious medical emergencies so far. Manos is not with us today, he is aboard the Greek Coast Guard ship, while the royal Meliades is at Moria. It was the two Greek-Syrians, Iman and Hamdi, along with Wolfgang and Alina, our two young German doctors, that staffed the medical tent today. That was plenty, so Iman and Hamdi came out to a few car patrols along the coast, their Arabic indispensable in calming people and giving them directions for walking towards our operations field.

'Hey Petro, why don't you come to our tent, some of my group are there' Ismael says, 'Sure why not' I reply, the time now being past 9 pm when we rarely had any more boat arrivals. In any case, with that tent being next to our operations area, I would be at hand if any emergency arose. I followed him to the stone-fenced little olive grove where the Faros people have set up two large tents. It was the first time I saw them up close, 'these are good capacity tents, great to have them next to us' I tell myself. Then Ismael opens one of them and we enter. There, under the faint white glow of few battery-powered camp lamps, are several young people, mostly young women and a few men. 'Good evenings' and introductions all around, then we all sit cross-legged at the floor,

¹⁵ Greece now hosts around 55000 refugees, much much more than what her economic conditions and population could accommodate. To put this in perspective, 48000 people would be the fair-share allotment of refugees for Japan! a much larger and much wealthier country (OXFAM analysis) that has yet to accept any. The even richer Gulf countries, from where funding of the militias that spread much mayhem in Syria often originated (whether private or state sponsored I do not care), are the true shame of the World in that regard, (so much for pan-Arab solidarity).

drinking tea. They are all from Birmingham (no surprise there), belonging to the same Islamic charity that came here to help. Among them there is an austere-looking imam or some sort of spiritual leader. Soon after I entered he continued what he must have been doing before we enter the tent, reading some poetry to the young ones around him. A beautiful moment I found, even if some of the young ones did not pay a lot of attention to the old man.

After a while I step out of the tent with Ismael, a glory of stars sparkling above us now, calm waves lapping along the shore. 'Man it is so good that we are all here' Ismael says, 'I find it very inspiring and sort of unbelievable that Muslims as well as Christians are out here to help these people' he continues. 'I keep telling to my people how beautiful this is' he says. Unknowingly he had tripped on another 'wire' of mine, for I did not believe in any human-caring God. Worse for poor Ismael, I considered the role of religion in this particular conflict that send those desperate people on our shores downright toxic. Unlike the first time, I now check myself. 'Listen Ismael' I start quietly, 'I think that all religions of the World are fairy tales man, we are all alone, we only have each other'. 'Do you really believe this man?' he asks intensely, 'Yes' I say firmly if wearingly, '...all the tribes of this World drifting in the Cosmos, and those poor Syrians, Afghanis and Iraqis drifting out there in the dark Aegean, we are all alone...' I tell him. 'Man that can be depressing you know' he says. 'So nothing, nobody out there caring for us?' he asks again, waiting for an answer.

'Look, do you see those beams of light from the Greek Coast Guard ship?' I ask him a bit impatiently now, pointing towards two powerful search beams switched on for some time now and doing sweeps in the dark sea, 'Yes' he says, 'those from the dive lights that this crazy diver from Athens shines out to sea?', I ask pointing to Yannis starting his night sweeps, 'yes', he answers again. 'This is divine light to me my friend, divine light! And we are the ones holding it. A beam of light cast in the dark with Humanity on both ends of it...hopefully.' I tell him. Ismael is silent now, only the sounds from a light wind and the lapping waves gently weaving into his silence. I continue 'so no matter what people are out there on these boats Ismael, Syrians, Afghanis, Iraqis, no matter what God they believe in and pray to deliver them from night-dark sea to shore, it is really only us out here looking for them..., only us looking out for us' my own voice now trailing off '...on this shore...and the World over.'

'Man keep talking like this and you will make me an atheist!' Ismael now says, '...don't you believe in anything Petro?' he asks me, 'Well I do believe in the smile of that Italian, and maybe in that of that Greek-Swede' I tell him jokingly now. He smiles a bit, 'No seriously, don't you?' young Ismael asks, 'I believe in Humanity' I tell him, 'the toughest religion of all to follow as she keeps one disappointed very often' I tell him, '...and she certainly won't save my metaphysical ass' I add to myself.

'... you do not need a book or even religion, if you are part of Humanity you know how to be good.' Those simplest of humanist words spoken once by a bereaved Pakistani father whose son was killed by a car in Birmingham during a burst of riots in 2011 came to my mind. I once read them in a newspaper and they stuck in my mind ever since. Now they echo back to me so true on this coast. I turn to say this to Ismael, but he seems absorbed by thoughts now, his easy smile gone. 'I hope that one day you come to Birmingham Petro' he quietly tells me at the end, 'so that me and my family can treat you to a good Pakistani dinner'. 'I really hope so' I reply to him, '...one day, one day when all this is behind us'.

In the chaos of events that followed I never saw young Ismael again except in moments so frantic that neither of us could manage anything more than a fleeting glance and a tired smile. Later that

night Elena came back to the camp and told us that a baby had been born on the coast, immediately after landfall of the boat carrying the mother, in a beach not far from us. The picture made it in many newspapers in Greece, the baby held by a sparkling Katerina that helped the delivery. Her long brown sea-wavy hair, green eyes, and bright smile, holding the little one wrapped in a thermal gold-foil blanket, next to the blue rolling waves of the beach. 'What a great picture' I thought. For my time there, this was to be the last piece of good news we were to have on those shores.

Chapter 23: Alert on the coast!

'Come down to the coast immediately!' Alexandros tells me in a call that wakes me up very early in the morning in the dark of my apartment in Kaloni. "There are boats, boats everywhere!" he says and abruptly hangs up. I quickly get up and rush out after putting on the same soggy pants and shoes from yesterday, soaked when I jumped in the sea to help a boat ashore. I come down, get a coffee and a pasteli from the cafe, rush to the car and quickly drive out of Kaloni. I reach Mantamados and pass by the Medecins sans Frontieres camp outside it. Now unlike all previous days there are numerous families camped out in front of its big tent in addition to a long line of people in front of the entrance of its biggest tent. Within only a few days this place went from an empty camp, its large spacious tents looking adequate to cope with the refugee flows we had, to one filled to the brim. Buses from the UNHCR started arriving to pick up people from there as well (maybe those buses going to Stage-2 were no longer enough?), and take them to Mytilene's port, as to keep the camp manageable. It seemed to work for now, but barely.

I drive on and upon reaching the cresting part of the road, I look out to the sea channel between Lesvos and Turkey. There is the Greek Coast Guard ship, the FRONTEX one, and another boat (maybe the Norway-contributed one) all doing wild interception manoeuvres, wide curves and speed-ups marked by large white-foam wakes. I start towards Skala, and well before I reach the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp outside the village, I realise that this will not be an ordinary day, even by the standards of what we faced up to now. Walking up the steep road towards me, there are several columns of refugees. Not the mere smattering of a few tens of people I saw during my first day, but hundreds! Long columns of people snaking up along the small village road, men in the front, but not far behind women cradling infants, children in tow, grandmothers and grandfathers wearily, slowly, making their way up. Many people are dripping wet, not a thermal blanket in sight, not even for the little ones! A sorry sight to me since I was used to the fixture of gold-foil thermal blankets wrapping up these people soon after arrival on the coast. I get the few such blankets I had in the car, stop, and give them out to the first ones I deemed the most vulnerable, some children. While I am doing so I am swarmed by young people that speak English, Syrians. 'Where is the Mantamados camp? The buses?' they ask me, 'Why are you walking there?' I ask back, 'why don't you stay at the UNHCR camp outside the village?' I continue, 'the Mantamados camp is far, and buses come also to the UNHCR camp' I tell them. 'The UNHCR camp is full, no buses go there anymore' some tell me, to my utter surprise. 'What the hell is going on?' I now find myself thinking. It cannot fathom that Stage-2 overflowed in less than a day. When I passed by it last night it all looked OK, no line up, and the buses have taken most people to Mytilene, the remaining ones all sheltered inside its large tents.

I start doing transports of the people I deemed as the most vulnerable towards Mantamados. At some point while standing there, the car idling, waiting for some people to come in for another transport my mobile rings again. 'Where are you?' Alexandros demands, '...come down here immediately we have medical emergencies for transport to Mytilene, we need you to drive them there!' he says. That does it. I go into the car again and slowly continue downhill towards Skala. The stream of people walking up past me continues unabated, and I have not even reached anywhere near the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp yet. I now roll up all the windows, and try to maintain a look-ahead-only cold and determined look on my face so I can make it past these columns of misery in some fashion, without having to stop all the time to explain why I cannot drive people up or help them in any other way. Still every now and then I glance sideways, and my eye catches mothers cradling infants, and 3, 4, 5 year olds following exhausted in tow. Tired little boys and girls looking back at me..., for a moment I picture my little son among them, or my niece...

'...Shit! I should stop right now put them in the car for transport to Mantamados, to hell with the fucking camp!' I find myself thinking, an ache in the heart every time I pass by such a group, and they were many. I roll the windows down again, and the moment they catch my eye, or try to ask me a question, 'Medical problem' I keep telling them like a drone repeatedly, pointing with my left hand down to the coast, the other on the wheel. Most do not understand, a quizzical look in their eyes making the corner of my eye as I drive slowly past them, some do and manage a faint smile of understanding, a smile that meant the world to me then. I kept on driving.

Now with the shore closer the sight is overwhelming. There are boats, boats everywhere, at various distances and stages of approach from the coast, along almost the entire east-west horizon! It now seems as one long continuous wave rather than a collection of two three discrete ones as in the previous days. It is now obvious what Alexandros meant. I finally reach the level of the UNHCR/stage-2 camp, and I almost cannot see its grounds because of the sheer number of people crowding in the small alley in front of it. For some reason there are no buses, so the number of people that walk up to it keeps piling up. No wonder some decided to walk all the way to the distant Mantamados camp. At the entrance to the camp's inner grounds a Faros employee shouts something in English at the people lining up to get in, 'This will not help much' I murmur, and I slowly continue past it towards the final steep downhill stretch of the road to the village. The road between the village and the operations field is chock-full with refugees. Yannis' car slowly passes through them heading in the opposite direction, it stops next to me, stoplights flashing, he nods, 'Medical emergency to Mytilene Hospital' he tells me, pointing to a family inside and continues on. I finally reach the entrance of our operations field and stop the car as a worn-out-looking Alexandros approaches me.

'It was six in the morning when they started arriving' Alexandros starts, '...and they have not stopped since' he tells me. 'Worse was that the landfalls were scattered almost along the entire coast, each boat full to the brim, and with more children and old people than the usual' Alexandros says. 'We could not cope with them all. So those that landed far had to make it out on their own and simply walk here, we took immediate care only of those that made landfall close to our position.' I look around our operations field, every station is full! In the baby station alone there are four babies been changed on the table, as many as it can hold, with several mothers and their babies waiting for their turn. In the clothes station any semblance of order is gone. With so few volunteers, we now simply point to the various cartoons containing the dry clothes and the changing place for women, and let the refugees sort it out by themselves. We manage to help some vulnerable cases, but still, it is far from adequate. Bryan looks sad for the first time, staring at his empty soup pots, all this within the course of a few hours, scattered empty Styrofoam cups all around. Even the numerous packaged food supplies kept in the tent next to Bryan's kitchen are exhausted, only a few milk cartoons left. Marina and Kostas, two volunteers from the village working in that tent today, looked around incredulously, not believing what has happened. 'We have nothing to give but water from now on', she says, 'unless we can re-provision today or early tomorrow' Marina adds. Outside the medical tent there is a line-up of 15-20 people, all waiting to see the doctors. At some point Meliades comes out, the easy royalty of his manners absent, weary-looking he enters the tent again, now with a young Afghani mother and a wailing infant and Khalid in tow for translation.

As the night approaches boat arrivals are tailing off, maybe this one aspect of the pattern of arrivals will hold, who knows. There have already been 40 boats, each having 30-40 people arriving on it, an astounding 1200 to 1600 people arriving on the coast over the course of a single

day! I start taking up people to stage-2, helped by another man from Athens, also called Yannis. He drives a small beaten-up green car, and he is also filling his car with people to the brim as well. Fortunately, buses returned to Stage-2 later that day, taking many people to Mytilene and unclogging the UNHCR camp. This meant that the people we were taking up there now could sleep sheltered for the night. Later on Yannis (the diver), returned from his medical emergency transport to Mytilene's hospital, and joins us in this camp-to-camp transport. In a funny scene that took place in the small alley in front of the entrance of Stage-2 camp (where we momentarily parked our cars for people to get out) Yannis stops his car very tightly next to that of another volunteer doing such (stage-1)-(stage-2) transports: 'So here I see my favourite neurosurgeon in Lesvos!' Yannis says loudly, the window from the other car then rolls down: '...and here is my favourite diver in Lesvos!' another voice exclaims, it is Hamdi the Greek-Syrian doctor, they both laugh, U-turn their cars (a tough task in a small alley filled with refugees), and down they went to pick up more people to bring up.

Later in the night a minivan, driven by Dutch volunteers from an NGO whose name I do not remember, came to our operations field and picked up few people, mostly families, that were still there and took them to the camp OXY near Molyvos to spend the night. This was a welcome first, since relief workers from that NGO and camp dealt primarily with refugees arriving to the western end of the coast, near Molyvos, well beyond our range of operations. In another first, Rob from Faros, I suspect without authorization from his boss up at Stage-2, let us use one of the two tents to shelter about 20 people, 5 children and one infant among them, the last refugees left in our operations area.

'Rob what is going on man?' I ask him stunned by today's large wave of people that so unpredictably came rushing to our shores. 'I do not know' he says faintly, his face one of subsiding shock and rising tiredness, 'I do not know' he repeats to himself rather than me. 'Maybe the good weather was responsible for it' Rob continues, looking unconvinced by his argument. 'That cannot be the only reason Rob' Yannis interjects. He had just come back from the last transport of people up at Stage-2. 'We had good weather before, and nothing of this sort of surge happened' Yannis says. 'Maybe something political has gone off over there, or one more Syrian town got sacked by this or the other army of fucks' Yannis says.

'We barely managed to shelter people for tonight' I say, 'this is worrying, we should be prepared if this happens again' I add. 'I agree' says Rob. Then there in the darkness, exhausted, we quietly made an informal pact. That we will use all the resources on the coast, the two large tents of Faros next to us, even the small ones we had at Stage-1 (to store material that needed to be dry, and only temporarily house people awaiting doctor examination or transport to Mytilene's main hospital), we would use them so that nobody would sleep outside once nightfall comes and temperatures drop, nobody. We would do this without waiting for any damn authorization from anybody should this red line be approached again.

I stayed at our operations field for a night watch together with Yannis until one in the morning, should any surprise boat arrivals happen. They did not, so afterward, after eating at the tavern of Lefteris and Grigoris (they kept it open again for the two of us), we left Sykaminia. I arrived at Kaloni a ghost, and went to sleep after setting the alarm for six o' clock in the morning.

Chapter 24: Inter-camp shuttle service

In the morning I checked my mobile for any phone calls from the people on the coast, nothing. 'Maybe it will be quieter today' I am thinking hopefully. I wash my face where an eight-day beard grows, put on some dry clothes this time, get coffee, a pasteli and leave. As I approach the village of Mantamados, I find large refugee crowds in the village itself and beyond it. 'Has even the Medecins sans Frontieres camp overflowed?' I wonder. As I drive out of the village and come into view of the camp I see so many people there now that they extend its size way beyond the area of its tents. The big alley in front of it where buses come to transport people to Mytilene has now quite a few families camping there, a small smattering of still smoking fires indicating that some people must have spent the night in the open. 'This does not start well' I tell myself.

It is now seven o' clock in the morning, and as I continue on driving large columns of people are walking from Sykaminia towards Mantamados, indicating an overflowing UNHCR/Stage-2 camp. Having received no urgent phone calls from Alexandros, I decide to start doing transports of people towards Mantamados. I drive to the back of a particularly long column, U-turn and then slowly drive alongside them to spot vulnerable cases. I find a mother cradling an infant, herself limping, and two small children in tow, 'Get in' I tell her after I stop and open the car doors. They come in alright, but then quite a few more people come up and offer me their children alone for transport. 'Families only' I say, 'Families together' I repeat, simultaneously making the sign of my two index fingers rubbing together. I am trying to adhere to a protocol of not separating families, no matter what. There are smiles all around, 'maybe they understood me' I think, then one man comes up with two more children, and says 'family, family!' pointing to the woman and the children already inside the car, she looks out and without missing a beat she says 'family family!' I smile, they smile, and a bunch of young Syrians laugh. 'Well OK get in too' I say nodding towards the car. That makes two adults, one sleeping baby, and four children in it. I drive slowly towards the Medecins Sans Frontieres camp, and still manage to fit a young couple with a small girl along the way... 'I am getting good at this' I am thinking as I arrive at the camp's big reception alley. The people then come out and all the little ones array themselves for hugs. Tender if brief moments. Then they all leave to join the now long line-ups at the entrance of the main tent. I was about to glance away when one little boy, no more than 5-6 year-old, turns back to smile one last time, waving his little hand. That little face, all alone in that river of people, looking back, almost cracked me again...

As I slowly drive out of the camp's front alley to go and repeat the transport pattern another car arrives in a fury, a beaten-up green one. Looks familiar. Then several refugees sitting in the camp's front alley rise, waving and smiling towards it in unison... It screeches to a halt, and out comes Yannis that other Athenian that was with us last night, along with... eight(!) people packed into his car, picked up presumably from those long columns that kept walking out of Sykaminia. He drops them off and takes off again. I turn to Kostas, the guy at the tent's entrance who has witnessed the entire scene, "He has been doing this for many days now" he says guessing my question, "many refugees in the camp, even if they usually stay here for just a day, recognize him and his car since he does this many times a day" he says. "...a hell of an inter-camp shuttle service" I tell Kostas, "seems a rapid one too..." I add jokingly. "I once saw him bring up 9 people in that small car, I do not know how the hell he did it" Kostas tells me. "At some point the police stopped him to check whether he was taking a fee for all this" Kostas says. "What did he do?" I ask, "...well he send that police car up here for us to verify he was indeed a volunteer, and registered it and his name with the police headquarters on the island" Kostas tells me. "After this he became literally unstoppable, doing his back-and-forth sometimes until late at night"

I leave Kostas and the Medecins Sans Frontieres camp, and head towards Sykaminia to continue bringing people back here. After a few such transports (still no telephone from Alexandros) the columns of people walking from Sykaminia towards Madamadros are still substantial. Later on, agonizingly slowly Yannis the Athenian and me manage to finally 'thin' these refugee columns from the weak and vulnerable people. As this happens we have to drive way back, closer to Sykaminia to find families with children or old people still walking towards Mantamadros in need for a lift. I am about to give this up, and leave it only to Yannis, when I chance upon an astonishing sight.

Right in front of me, on a steep uphill part of the road close to Sykaminia there is a refugee pushing a wheelchair...a damn wheelchair...! with a man with abnormally short legs on it, the face of the man doing the pushing straining with the effort, sweating a river. "How the hell did they make it to Lesvos?" I ask myself incredulously, trying to think how this could happen using a rubber boat out of the Turkish Coast, what it would have meant if they landed on the rocky parts. Still here they are... I stop and nod them in. The man with sort legs slowly comes off the wheelchair and into the car with his panting and smiling friend. The wheelchair folds, great! I load it in the back leaving the baggage door open as now it cannot close. I pick up another family along the road, and drive them to the Medecins Sans Frontiers camp. Before leaving I go up to the man arranging the order of people boarding the buses. I ask him to give priority to the two people with the wheelchair, even if they had just arrived to the camp (and long rows of people were waiting to board the buses). 'No worries!' he answers, and goes to pick them up to bring to the bus. When I finally head to Skala is already mid-day. On my way out, the beaten-up green car of Yannis from Athens wheezes past me, with yet another load of people.

Chapter 25: All camps are full!

Alexandros had not called me not because the shore was quiet but because they were utterly overwhelmed, even more so than yesterday if that was possible, with 30 boats having already arrived by mid-day, landfalls continuing unabated when I arrived at the operations field! The coast was so full that for a while I could not see any volunteers, either from our own operations or those of 'Faros', our numbers swamped by the numbers of refugees already at the coast. Finally, I see Apollo, 'What is going on?' I ask, 'Same story as yesterday' he tells me, '...only with even more boats' he adds. I join the volunteers at the clothes station, we can barely keep up with people asking for dry clothes. Later on I see Bryan wandering about, a stunned look in his eyes, 'I guess no soup today' I think. Later it turned out that poor Bryan did not even cook a new set of pots, no provisions arrived today, and he had exhausted his supply of vegetables yesterday.

The Greek Coast Guard and FRONTEX ships are doing wide-arc interception manoeuvres, yet this does not deter the traffickers, as they keep sending out boats. At some point I see the Coast Guard ship slowly towing a large inflatable to the port of Molyvos. Khalid is absorbed solely by translator duties now, there is no point him looking out for boats launched and coming, we knew they were there. All I remember from that part of the day was that I was running from station to station, helping here, helping there, yet having the feeling I was merely treading water. Then news reaches us of a refugee boat that foundered near the small cape of 'Korakas', a mother with her child drowned, the Coast Guard recovered their bodies from the coast this morning.

Angry at our inability to do anything about such events happening in inaccessible parts of the coast, I am thinking of taking the car and drive on the steep downhill and uneven dirt road that nearly reaches that cape, to search for the rest of the people that must have come out, give them water and thermal blankets and guide them out. 'There is really no point in doing this Petro' Marina, the local woman volunteering in the food tent tells me, 'those that made it there will have already left that place by now and be on their way to Mantamados' she adds. 'If they made it out' I add to myself...

As the day progresses we run out of dry clothes to give out. There is only tea to be had at Bryan's station, milk and cookies at the packaged food tent. A group of young Syrians, all wet, come up to me and ask whether they can get dry clothes somehow. I am astonished to find myself angry, momentarily thinking of our inability to help as in the previous days, somehow to be their fault. "Too many boats..., too many boats! No more clothes!" I tell them loudly now and repeatedly, "30 boats already! No clothes!" I find myself saying. Then, one of them simply puts his hand on my shoulder, "Do not worry" he tells me smiling, "we know, we know that you do all you can do for us, and for this we have only thanks". This checks me and in a low voice that now contains all my weariness, and sense of defeat (and the day is not even over yet), I tell them how much we would like to help more. Then, another one of these young guys tells me: "We are safe here, no bombs, nobody is trying to kill us, so no worry, this is already Paradise, no worry!". "Hell, here we are, people out of a war zone doing psychological support to me" I find myself laughing at this thought¹⁶. I make some small talk with them, all young professionals out of the war zones of Syria, an engineering student here, a young dentist there, a computer programmer..., the human smithereens of the exploded middle class of Syria. "European countries should be fighting over

¹⁶ This repeated a few times. Now if a rookie volunteer is to offer only one advice to the professionals of the NGOs is this: talk to the people you are trying to help, do not just wave them through from one stage to the next. Even if you lack a particular capability you would like to have to help more, tell them this, express your frustrations to them, and every now and then, you may be pleasantly surprised at the moral boost they may give you when you just needed it.

who is going to get more of them rather than trying to pass the buck or worse..." I find myself thinking, news of water-cannoning of refugee columns up on the Balkan corridor having reached us recently.

At around 3 pm there is a lull in boat arrivals, "maybe the 'break' that the traffickers usually give us is here" I think hopefully. I was ravenous with hunger, as there was no soup today. I guess many in our operations felt the same way since unlike past days when we stayed in the camp to clean up and organize ourselves for the next wave, we found ourselves sitting in a long table at the 'Mouria of Myrivilis' tavern ordering food with near murderous intentions. I savoured even the ordering of the various plates. Our orders then go to the kitchen, and we do some small talk with Grigoris. Smells of grilled fish waft from the kitchen, a quiet anticipation in many faces while waiting for the food to arrive.

'Boats, many boats are out!' says Alexandros after bursting into the tavern, the food yet to arrive. 'Shit' I tell myself, 'There goes the damn lunch' Yannis says cursing the traffickers across the considerable range of curses in his vocabulary. In near unison everybody gets up, and then in complete disarray, tumbling over tavern chairs, we all run back to the operations field. I find Khalid on the beach looking intensely towards the North-Western coast, while Yannis immediately leaves for that part of the coast along with Manos. As I look out to sea another large wave of boats slowly materializes in the horizon, its largest concentration heading towards those difficult shores.

An additional 10 boats arrived during the supposed 'break', making a total of 50 boat arrivals. This amounts to nearly 2000 people arriving on the North shore of Lesbos within the course of a single day. Many have been taken care of by the people at the OXY camp near Molyvos, but a great many walked towards our operations field, or have landed right on it. Then, as the night progressed and we were giving out the few things left to give, word reaches us from the UNHCR/Stage-2 not to send any more people up there anymore. The camp was full. There would be nowhere to shelter them if we sent them up, we were told, and with buses no longer running, refugees sent there would have to sleep outside for the night.

'Rob lets go and prepare those tents' I say to Rob who has just come down to the coast. 'Yes but if we do, with so many refugees still around here, we will be quickly overwhelmed. They may rush the tents...' he tells me and he is right. 'There is not enough space in the tents for all of them' he adds. To make matters worse, one of the Dutch volunteers that have just arrived from camp OXY driving their small white minivan tells us that OXY is full as well. 'We can do only one more transport to OXY besides this one' she says, 'after this, it is over for tonight, we are full' she tells us firmly. 'How long will it take until you are back here for that last one?' I ask her, 'About an hour' she replies. I check out her van, it can take in 15-20 people, I make a mental note of this, as it means that we could afford such an overflow at Stage-1, provided she and her friends from OXY indeed come back for that last transport. 'Yes' she assures me, 'Do not worry, we will come back!' and then she drives off towards the west coast and OXY, with the van crammed with refugee families, its red backlights blinking in the dark.

'Here is what we will do Rob' I start, 'we will not reveal the presence of the two tents to people still around in the camp, we will fan out among them, and quietly pick the most vulnerable, families and old people, and then individually lead them in the tents, until they become full' I tell him. 'This sounds good' he tells me, 'let's hope we can shelter at least those with children' he adds. In my mind, this silent scheme of selecting people to take to the last shelter we had left, without the entire camp noticing and rushing the tents could work because of the darkness. Moreover, these

two tents were behind a stone wall, inside a small olive grove, making them nearly inconspicuous to anyone walking along the coastal road, unless he purposely came near to the entrance of that olive grove.

Thus, me, Rob, and Yannis whom we let into the plan, and another worker from Faros start going around the many people still left in the camp. As the temperatures dropped many of them started shivering, several with wet clothes still on, or only partially changed to dry ones because we have run out of various clothes items. Many children, many old people among them. All waiting for us to do something about their miserable state, silently waiting, just looking at us, sometimes smiling in the dark, as we fan out. 'This will be a difficult one' I tell myself, 'I wish they were talking to us, asking us, so I could explain that we have ran out of shelters...' Their silence, their eyes, makes it so much more difficult, I steel myself and start.

I go up to a family, the mother with an infant in her arms, two young children around her, no man in sight. 'Come with me' I tell her quietly, nodding in the dark. She smiles, calls her two little ones to come along, and then in the most business-as-usual walk I take them along the coastal road for the few minutes walk to the two tents near us. It is good that the clothes 'station' of our operations field is towards the same direction, so for all practical purposes we simply go there for some dry clothes. While we walk, a man comes up to us and smiles, she smiles back, the father joins us. I reach the entrance of the olive grove where a Faros employee takes them, after marking down the number of people. I go back and repeat the pattern a few times, along with Rob and Yannis. One of the tents, the one where I sat with Ismael and his group some days ago, is slowly becoming full.

Finally, after I bring one more family there, the Faros employee tells me that this is it, this tent is now full, the rest must go to the last one remaining. Before she zips that tent shut so that the people in it can sleep, I take one last peek inside. In an image that I will remember for all my life for its heart-breaking fragility and unintended tenderness, all, all of Humanity seemed to be sleeping in there, huddled up under the soft white glow of a low-energy camp lamp, really it was the whole World in that tent. Children, babies, all huddled up fast asleep next to mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, some young people still awake softly speaking to each other, the faintest of murmurs, joining the quiet breathing of so many souls. Such loneliness and such fragility under all those stars sparkling above¹⁷.

I walk out as the Faros employee zips that tent, and go back the operations field to pick more families. Knowing the capacity of the one remaining tent, and the rough number of people still in our camp, I could make a mental calculation of how many will be left out tonight. Yet every time my mind was tempted to do this, I would send a diversion of this or the other thought, refusing to mentally add the number of people I see all around me. In a fundamentally unreal sense I just hoped that the numbers simply did not add up to this many people.

I do one more low-key selection of a family to take to the remaining tent. As we walk quietly along the coastal road towards the small olive grove next to our operations field, some people now start coalescing around us, walking in the same direction, silently. As me and the family reach the camp's clothes station and we must now walk past it I can no longer pretend that this is simply some walk in the camp. I turn around and see quite a number of people following us now, several young men and women, some mid-aged ones, even a family. 'You cannot come with us, only

¹⁷ Away from the immediate vicinity of the few lamp posts dotting that coast, there was very little light pollution and the view of skies blazing with stars was typical, a constant reminder of the Cosmos at large, the far out frame of Humanity's strange and tragic canvas.

families' I tell them, they stop and look at me quizzically, some faintly smiling. I did this well before approaching the vicinity of the olive grove where the two tents were. Then I try to resume slowly walking with the chosen family towards the tents, yet the people kept following us. 'This is not working' I tell myself, 'if they see the tents, that would be it', so I turn around once more, 'Please go back to the camp, I can only take families with me!' I tell them. 'Sleep, some sleep?', a young man asks. 'I guess they know or must have guessed' I tell myself. I now find myself increasingly exasperated and angry, 'Don't they damn understand?' 'I cannot leave babies sleep outside!' I think. I turn around and say exactly this to the young man, pointing to the young woman I have with me and her infant boy sleeping in her embrace. 'The baby must sleep inside!' 'I am sorry!' I tell him. He backs off, nodding some understanding. I resume walking towards the tents once more, several people kept following us! I stop once more and repeat my mantra in an increasingly angry tone: 'Only families, I am sorry, only families!' I tell them. Then another young man, an Afghani I think, tells me those words: '...we all family, all family' improbably pointing to all those people around us.

Those simple but devastating words shone right through the fog of my tired mind. I stop once more. 'I am so sorry, but all camps are full' I find myself telling them in a resigned voice. A young Syrian among them is now doing the translation to the rest, 'you will have to sleep outside tonight', I continue, '...but we try not to leave children and babies to sleep out in the open', 'I am sorry'. The young Syrian turns to me, smiles, and then in flawless English says: 'We know you do all you can, we understand' he smiles and nods. 'Thank you' I tell him, and he stays behind for the moment to talk to the rest, while I take the family to the tent. After a short while that second tent also became full, the entrance to the olive grove is now closed by a Faros employee with an improvised plastic fence, and all lights are turned off to keep the location of the tents secret.

Chapter 26: Grief

*Στα ανοιχτά του πελάγου με καρτέρεψαν, με μπομπάρδες
τρικάταρτες, και μου ρίξανε...*

*In the open waters they have set an ambush for me, with 3-masted
warships, and they fired upon me...*

«Άξιον Εστί», Οδυσσέας Ελύτης, 1959
"The Axion Esti", Odysseus Elitis, 1959

It is now near midnight, the temperatures keep dropping, even if I, because of my constant moving around, did not feel it much. Yet people all around me, some wrapped in thermal blankets, some in some ragtag blankets, are shivering. I survey the camp, there is still several tens of people, many families with children left out of shelter. Apollo goes to look for any blankets we may have in one of the tents so that we can distribute them around. He comes out with several. People take them and start going to sleep in all places around the camp. As I walk by, my flashlight muffled by my palm in order not to startle them, I see many of them trying to sleep under only one miserable blanket they try to stretch to cover an entire family, pieces of cardboards around them made into buffers against a light wind that now makes the atmosphere colder still.

My impromptu Syrian translator from the tent episode, is still with me. He is from Aleppo, a 23-year old engineering student, left in a haste as his city rapidly became the ultimate urban battleground in the Syrian civil war. I deliberately kept him around, even as the need for his translations diminished, with people around us going to sleep. He did not know this, but his presence and the discussions we had that night about Syria and the state of the World, helped me stave off a growing sense of defeat and helplessness. Many months later I would still remember his face, even if we talked only under the intermittent illumination of flashlights and low-level camp lamps.

At some point, while wandering around the camp, I notice an old man sitting on a rock next to the clothes station, cocooned in a blanket (he must have gotten this from Apollo I guess), only his face showing. The faint illumination, him being wrapped up like this, led my eyes to focus on his face. He seemed to be around 70-75 years old, with a moustache, and an uncanny resemblance to my late grandfather from Peloponnisos. I go up to him, and to my distress I find the old man shivering, his clothes wet since the landfall of his boat a few hours ago. A quick glance at our empty and ransacked clothes station makes it immediately hopeless looking for any clothes for him. He sees me, smiles, then slowly gets up to greet me, the blanket dropping to his feet. He rises up to nearly two meters high, his shivering momentarily gone, there is a regal patriarch in our midst!

I smile widely at this near-instant transformation, then my Syrian translator friend comes along, greets the old man, and tells me that they were on the same boat, and that several members of his extended family are with him. I hug the old man, 'he is indeed a giant' I think as I do this. Then I don't know what has gotten into me just then, maybe anger on its way to become resignation, but my next words to him were exactly these: 'Ah Papou Papou (Papou meaning grandfather in Greek), what the World has come to? You being here like this, you should be enjoying life back in Syria, surrounded by children and grandchildren...', my words meant to release my 'steam' rather

than be understood by the old man¹⁸. Then, in another surprise, without waiting for any translation from my Syrian friend, the old man replies: 'Ah yes yes this World, such a trouble, these days, such a trouble...the World...' and smiles again serenely but sadly, with one of the most beautiful smiles I have ever seen, that patriarch from the East.

Later the Dutch volunteers with their minivan arrive back to our operations field as they had promised, for one last trip to take people for sheltered sleep at OXY. We first put one family with an infant in it, then the clan of the old man appears, and starts filling in. Many people, sensing that this as their last chance for a sheltered sleep, keep piling in and nearly leave the old man out! I get angry again, and demand that he gets in, berating them for this rush. Before he boards I take the old man aside, I hug him again, not really wanting to let him go, he gives me one last smile, 'Sokran', he says and climbs on. Then I turn to Simpli my young Syrian translator for that night 'Now you get in as well' I tell him, 'Really? I can sleep outside Petro, really no problem' he tells me, 'let's go around and see if there is anybody else we can still squeeze in the van?' he continues. 'No, you get in as well' I insist. He stands hesitant for a moment, then he extends his hand for a firm handshake that quickly becomes an embrace, 'Thank you very much' he says in Greek, and climbs on.

The red lights of the van are dimming into the distance, and I must now turn my attention to another problem. Just after the first trip of the Dutch volunteers from our operations field towards OXY, I took a family aside, a mother and father, two boys and a girl, and put them all in my car, the engine running, to keep them warm. The intention was to put them into the van once the Dutch volunteers came back for the last trip to OXY. Now the van is gone, and in the dim car cabin light I left on (so I could check the state of the family from afar) I see them all fast asleep. As I walk closer I see the father in the front seat, asleep, his little boy on top of him gently asleep as well. 'What the hell should I do now?' I ask myself, the thought of waking them up to tell them to join the rest sleeping out in the cold around the camp hitting me in the stomach. I stay silent, looking at the car, the family sleeping inside, the darkness around..., not wanting to move one bit or do anything, all options bad.

'Maybe Stage-2 can get just them?' I ask myself. Then I entertained the idea of taking them all the way to the Medecins Sans Frontieres camp in Mantamados on my way back to Kaloni, 'but that camp was full today like the rest' I am thinking. It was well past midnight, bus trips out of the camps having stopped hours ago, so there is no way that that camp's state would have changed.

I get in and slowly drive the family up to UNHCR/stage-2 camp as they sleep. I see many people sleeping on both sides of the road, my headlights momentarily waking up a few. Up at the camp itself it is all quiet now, a few low-level camp lamps, islands of soft foggy light break the darkness around, and people, many people sleeping out there in the open, in the small alley in front of the camp, further up the road, everywhere! I go up to the solitary guard at the door, tip-toeing around the people asleep, and ask him to bring some blankets for them, he goes in and brings a couple of good wool ones. I then finally wake them up, feeling shit, and tell them we have arrived. I leave the family behind, and drive back down to Skala. All workers have left now, and I wander ghostly about in the grounds of our operations, people sleeping all around. Our red line had been crossed, tonight we were really beaten, even by the minimal standard we set for ourselves last night. I went to the tavern ate and quickly drank quite a few beers. Seeing my state, Grigoris, says nothing,

¹⁸ Typically, old people did not understand English, which is we relied on the young ones for translations if no Arabic and Farsi translators were around.

except at the end, 'It was bad today no?' he asks, 'Yes' I answer, and along with a mutual 'Good night' that was our whole exchange for that night.

It was well after midnight when I started my long drive back to Kaloni. While driving through a forested region, today's images swirled in my mind, all those children and old men and women sleeping outside tonight, our tall regal patriarch of the 'troubled World', Simpli's face, the image of that little boy, the age of my son, sleeping peacefully on his father's chest in my car. I held up alright, I was sad, but I held up fine, boy was I strong! I can do this forever...!

Then I just remembered one poor guy I got angry with for wanting to get his large and heavy bag inside the van to OXY, 'why the hell did he want such a large bag anyway' I thought back then. It is funny how little of a crack it takes to become a slinging open trapdoor to grief, that thought started my free fall. 'What would *you* take you damn idiot, if you were given a notice to leave house, all past life and country behind?' I asked myself while driving, 'I bet you bastard, you would need a truck and not just one fucking miserable bag like the one that guy was pulling about...., you would need a damn truck!!...and you rushed that guy??! How could you??!!!' That did it, that silly thought cracked me, bursting the gates open for grief to come flooding in.

I don't think I merely started crying then, I think I really went underwater... I was beyond crying, grief was howling out like a wounded jackal, I was lost and could not find myself. I gasped for air and howled. I would stop mid-grief, bang my fists on the steering wheel, the dashboard, on the left rolled-up window, on the windshield... Then, as if on the dock of some imaginary court hovering just outside in the darkness in front of my windshield, I would loudly exclaim amidst sobs towards the night sky 'But they are alive!' 'They are all alive!' They made it Sir! Yes, they all did! They all damn made it! They are safe now! Safe!!, Do you hear me?! Safe!' I screamed and howled, while barrelling down the empty country roads towards Kaloni. This sorry performance would act to temper my howling grief for a while, only for a while, then all those images of today's despair would reassert themselves in my mind, and I would be underwater again..., cycles went on and on, tidal runs of grief continuing unabated.

The next day our operations area looked like some strong wind had gone through it, and in a sense, it had. We were all too tired last night to clean anything. In the morning when we came many people have already arrived, leaving no time to order and clean things up. Another continuous wave of boats without any mid-afternoon lulls, breaking all past patterns, swamped us. Around 8 pm it appeared to diminish, and we dearly hoped that it would stop for the night like it did yesterday. It didn't.

Chapter 27: A Syrian Princess

*Ίσως ήταν της αθωότητας το πρόσωπο, ή ήταν τα Δάκρυά σου,
Ή το φως που σ' έφερε έξω από τις Σκιές...
Δώρα που μόλις μπορέσαμε να κρατήσουμε στα χέρια μας
μια Νύχτα του Χάους.
Τι κάνεις εδώ Πριγκίπισσα;*

*'Maybe it was your face of innocence, or it was your Tears,
or the light that brought you out of the Shadows...
Gifts we could hardly hold on our hands in a Night of Chaos.
What are you doing here Princess?'*

**Ανώνυμος ποιητής του Αιγαίου, 2016
Anonymous poet of the Aegean, 2016**

'Why are these people with their life-jackets still on?' I ask, pointing to a family of Afghans with three small children, all wet and shivering in the dark next to our clothes station. It was around 9 pm and they were there part of an earlier wave of arrivals. They seemed to improbably waiting for their turn to change to dry clothes, while all other refugees have gone on a ransack mode looking through our clothes stock themselves, any order now gone after the multiple waves of arrivals all day long. Despite a large stock of clothes delivered today from Angalia's depot at Kaloni, there had been no time to sort it out and lay it properly in the clothes station as people kept arriving on the coast. So we resigned ourselves into simply pointing the various clothes cartoons to the people and let them find what they needed. It made for one sure mess.

Khalid comes by and asks the Afghans what they are waiting for, indeed they are waiting for their turn! 'Hell, what a surrealist thing to do in this chaos' I thought. Truth is I often saw Afghans shyly waiting by the wayside in moments like this, while Iraqis and Syrians went for it. A pecking order even among refugees perhaps, the Afghan war being the forgotten one, save for the recent fall of Kunduz back to the Taliban that have made it into the Western news, the Syrian civil war the more recent and well-covered. I started helping them, taking off their life-jackets and trying to find some dry clothes amidst all the mess. Soon Iro comes along with Eleni, and take over from me, as Alexandros asks me to drive a large family up to UNHCR/Stage-2 camp. It remains full, the morning bus rides to Mytilene not having made a dent because of the continuous boat arrivals. In all the other camps the situation remains equally desperate.

I let the family out of the car, and they join the long line up outside the entrance of Stage-2. Then, just as I am about to go into the car and drive back to our camp, a group of young and frightened Syrians comes up to me. 'Please help us' they say in English, 'What is going on?' I ask them, 'A boat is out there, its engine not working' they tell me, pointing in the general direction of the sea, 'They need help!' a girl tells me. 'How do you know all this?' I ask her, 'They just called us' she tells me, waving her mobile. For one brief moment I am stunned, 'Of course' I then quickly tell myself. The distance between any boat drifting out there and us sitting prominently above the village of Skala, overlooking the sea passage between Lesvos and Turkey, can be covered by any mobile. 'Ask them where they are' I stupidly tell them, as if those people were lost somewhere on land. There is a frantic exchange of sms's (to preserve battery I guess), and then the coordinates arrive in latitude and longitude(!) the person on the boat, having used a mobile application to obtain them. I then quickly call the Coast Guard and tell them about the incident and give the coordinates, only to receive the answer that there are no available Guard ships to send! And FRONTEX is not out either.

There is nothing I can do but worry. As I drive back indeed I see no patrol boats out there, no powerful beams of light sweeping the dark sea, no hope for drifting boats until morning. There is nothing I can do, I kept saying to myself many times...

I came back to our operations field around 10 pm, the last boat having arrived nearly two hours ago. 'I hope it is really over now' I tell myself while surveying the absolute chaos prevailing in the camp, people falling asleep everywhere, the two tents of Faros next to us full. We are now resigned to all this, and just do our best to provide blankets around, cardboard pieces, some milk for the children. We are beyond exhausted, for much of the day operating on adrenaline and as it now wears off, tiredness makes a full out assault. An hour passes by and we try to wrap up the night as best as we can. The EINA doctors that were with us today have left for the night, so is Aline and Wolfgang.

Then suddenly at the west end of our operations field I hear cries, wailing, Yannis and Alexandros shouting words, words swamped by an increasingly rising commotion. Then a large crowd, the equivalent of at least two boats, emerges from the darkness, illuminated by the solitary lamppost near the 'mouth' of the dry riverbed where our ransacked clothes station is.

'There have been boat landfalls to the west, many people in very bad condition came out, they are all marching towards here!' Alexandros tells me. He had gone for one last night patrol with Yannis, and they came upon a large crowd of refugees whose boats came out on a rocky patch of the western coast. 'Now we are done in...' I tell myself upon hearing this, 'there is really nothing we can do to help anymore'. Then they started streaming in, women and children crying, men with fear in their faces, limping people, old men and women supported by younger ones that could hardly walk themselves, and it went on and on... So many people filled our clothes station area, that our few feeble camp lamps could no longer penetrate through the shadows cast by so many people, and the night around us kept producing those shadows wandering around the camp crying, mumbling, screaming...

Yannis takes his car, parks it inside the dry riverbed, and turns its headlights on to illuminate the clothes station. This helped, but it also created an outlandish side-ways illuminated landscape that accentuated the chaos of those moments. Khalid kept yelling out something in Farsi, people were ransacking an already many-times over ransacked clothes station, having ran out of everything except water, a wave of helplessness fully washed over us. My eye catches Iro, she is trying to help a family put on dry clothes. I nearly laugh madly when I see her doing all this amidst a sea of people all dripping wet. I gave up doing anything. I just stood there motionless and numb for I do not know how long. People kept running around, Alexandros was saying something loudly, but at this point I do not think I could understand even Greek...

Then there she was! Shivering and softly crying when I first saw her. Her life-jacket still on, her face, suddenly illuminated by a shard of light from Yanni's car headlights, was that of an angel, framed by long wavy honey-brown hair. 'My my...what are you doing here?' I ask myself 'How could you even land here amidst all this chaos beautiful one?' I go up to her, bent on my knees to look closer to her face, and try to comfort her, but it wasn't working. She was the most beautiful 5-year old girl on the planet Earth. An angel made it across the Aegean in the deep of the night and came among us poor disoriented devils...

Her father, next to her, was another standout as the only man I saw smiling and even laughing amidst all the misery of that night, and did so often. 'I was the Captain!' he exclaims happily and

boastfully when I ask him about the boat they came with (the refugee that the traffickers put in charge of the outboard engine). The rest of the family assembled around me, the mother and a boy, Syrian-Kurds. I turn my attention to the little girl again, she was still softly crying. I bend down again, look into her eyes, listen to her sobs, my previous numbness gone. Then a most determined attitude up-welled, 'This one I will take care of...' I tell myself, '...the rest of the camp can go to hell'.

From that moment on, it all took the quality of a dream, as I mentally subtracted all the chaos around me, the screams, the wails, the misery, and I completely focus on that little girl and her family. The happenings of that other world, the camp at large, Khalid shouting, Alexandros, Apollo, Iro, running around, the complete disorder of the night, all now reduced to a slow motion blur of light and shadow. I first went to find her a blanket, I found one, went back, took her life-jacket off, doing some funny faces all the time, her father next to her still impossibly smiling. 'What the hell is he thinking?' I kept asking myself.

I wrap the blanket around her, and hug her to warm her up, she then slowly stops shivering. 'Some good clothes for her now...' I nod to the father to keep her hugged and warm, and go about the clothes station. 'Red would be great' I think when I see a small red sweater which I then grab from a huge pile of clothes. Then amidst the now ruinous state of the clothes station, I find myself impossibly, ludicrously, looking for matching red clothes while various hands around me intrude into my field of view and disturb the piles of clothes, all images beyond it cut off in my mind. This takes time, so periodically I go back to the little girl, to check out how she is doing. She is no longer crying, but regards me with some big-eyed seriousness, sometimes a faint little sob still comes out. She now feels safe enough to study me, and with my frantic back and fro, a dive light hanging loose below my shoulder (given to me by Yannis, that I used to go about places in the camp not illuminated by the camp lights) there are strange enough happenings for her to study alright.

I went back again at some point (still no dry clothes), all her shivering is gone, and there is the faintest of smiles at my funny faces. 'A brave one' I think, 'for I must more scary than funny, not having managed to shave my beard of so many days, and with that dive-light of Yannis dangling, switched-on, below my shoulder, illuminating my face, and hers, in all sorts of scary angles'. I go back to my mission, and after a while I manage to find long red socks, a reddish skirt, and even a pink scarf. 'I am nearly done...' I tell myself.

I return to her, and with the help of the father we take her wet clothes off and put on the ones I found. Slowly she is being transformed into a beaming image of red. I take her in my arms, and she now laughs and giggles. 'Hell I am missing shoes' I am thinking, I give her back to the father, and go for another round of search. I find some small red booties, and grab them just before some hands are about to snap them. 'Now I am really done' I think and go back to them. I put the booties on her, a bit large, and there she is! A princess with appropriate clothes at long last. Civilization came back to our miserable camp, a meteor of joy! The mother also managed to dress her little brother in a patch of dry clothes, but herself and the father are still in wet ones. 'Not much I can do about that', I am thinking, most dry clothes for adults exhausted several hours ago by the previous waves of arrivals.

'There is no way I am going to leave them around here' I tell myself. So I nod to the father to follow me, and with the little girl in my arms, we go to my car. "Bonama?, Bonama?" the father loudly asks me from the seat next to me, waving his wallet¹⁹, as I slowly drive them up. He wants

¹⁹ In Turkish "bonama" means a reward.

to pay me. "No bonama" I tell him, the little girl now smiling to me from her father's lap. We reach the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp, and I go up to the guard and tell him some nonsense about a medical problem, and why these people must get in the camp and not stay to sleep out. It's OK, he will let them in. I hug them all, and then take the princess in my arms, and plant kisses on both her cheeks. She gives me one last giggle and her beautiful smile, and then I hand her back to the father. I see them all quickly vanish behind the high wired fence of the camp in the dark, a catch in the heart right then...

Many months later, back in Athens, I often thought of all this as my only real feat during my days in Lesvos, the calming, the improbable dressing of that five-year old Syrian Princess in near-matching red and pink colours amidst the chaos of that night. I would not give those moments back for the whole world. Her smiles and laughter that night was already that for me, and I will remember the Princess for a long long time to come. I dearly hope she is safe somewhere in Greece or up in North Europe with her family. I also hope that one day she comes back to Lesvos and Sykaminia as a young woman, looks up to the stars one night, in peace now, and then she smiles that smile of hers once again...

Chapter 28: PIKPA's Heaven

'Shit! Listen, listen people! If we are to operate like this, we should be saving and helping only the pork-eating atheists among them!' Apollo says, and then he abruptly hangs up, visibly frustrated. That was the end of an intense exchange I chanced upon. He was probably talking with his some of his comrades from the anarchist-autonomous, whether those in Athens, or from a similar cell in Mytilene, I did not know. 'Poor little Apollo', I thought, 'some of his comrades, away from our realities, must have just given him some taste of dogma in reverse'. Still I could not see this making this citizen of Νεφέλοκοκκυγία rethink any of his axioms anytime soon. It was very amusing to witness nevertheless.

Today we finally managed to restock everything, foodstuff included, so Bryan happily cooked his huge pots of soups again. We even managed to reorder the clothes station after the human tsunami of last night, aided by a few more volunteers that arrived early in the morning from Athens. Elena, the blue-eyed EINA doctor, is in the medical tent today together with Aline and Wolfgang. The weather is calm, and boats arrive at the high rate we have been experiencing for the last three days. We are better prepared now, no longer shocked, while both the UNHCR/Stage-2 and OXY camps have been unclogged somewhat by an increase of the bus transports.

It is early in the morning, and I help clean around, the first refugees already streaming into our operations area. I stop in front of a small tent to check out how things are with a family with three children, Syrian-Kurds from Kobane, that I sheltered there last night. I did this after I came back from transporting the Princess and her family up to the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp, because it was the only family with small children that would have been left to sleep outside last night (other such families we managed to send to OXY). We were not supposed to have refugees stay in our operations area, our few tents, except the medical one, meant to house only supplies. Still I figured that nobody would notice as chaos became a steady state of affairs in our part of the coast, plus the damn tent was nearly empty. 'Hello?' I say tentatively while bending over at the zipped entrance of the tent, 'Hello!' comes back with a small child giggle, from inside, along with some faint snoring in the background. 'Good morning' I whisper in jokingly, 'Goody mornny!' and multiple giggles come back. 'I guess the adults are still asleep, and the little ones are up' I think. I leave it at that, they need all the rest they can get, I tell myself, and then go about to continue cleaning.

At around 4 pm there is a reduction in boat arrivals (but no longer a complete pause), and Elena asks me to drive her to the medical department of PIKPA²⁰ in Mytilene so we can bring back some necessary medical equipment for our medical tent. Wolfgang and Aline stay to deal with any medical emergencies and Yannis also stays back in case and emergency transport is needed.

We arrive at Mytilene and PIKPA around 6 pm. This is an institute for children with special needs, but in Lesvos it has taken also the role of housing numerous refugees, many of them also with special needs. Its small complex of buildings provide shelter for numerous families of refugees that have applied for asylum and are waiting for the results, displaced family members waiting for reunion applications and transfer to other parts of Europe. As I enter PIKPA's grounds, it feels a world apart from the chaos, the despair and the tragedies of our coast, and even from the ordinary bustle of Mytilene's city around it. 'Hello sir' a smiling little girl, probably an Iraqi tells me in Greek, serenely passing by with her smiling mother. 'I wish the Syrian Princess and her family could be brought here' I wistfully think. Then Elena and me make our way to PIKPA's modest

²⁰ PIKPA is an institute for caring for children with special needs.

medical centre, and to the office of Peristera the principal doctor here. She is the one we have been in telephone contact regarding the medical equipment and the medicines we needed back at Sykaminia.

'Hello! Welcome to PIKPA, hi Elena!' Peristera warmly greets us with a wide and beautiful smile. She seems in her late thirties, and one of those rare people whose face and manners exude such human warmth and quiet enthusiasm that puts you immediately at ease. 'How are things in Sykaminia?' she asks us, 'Very bad' we tell her, 'we can barely cope with the number of arrivals' Elena continues, and then she goes on to recount some particularly difficult medical cases the EINA doctors have faced there and on the Greek Coast Guard ships. 'It is difficult all over the island' Peristera says, '...and it may get even more difficult in the future' she adds. Then she goes on to recount stories similar to those that Lefteris told me that night in the 'Mouria of Myrivilis' tavern, of all the difficulties they had before anybody was here to help them. 'They will not be here for long...' she says for the NGOs and the UNHCR, 'so these days I am stocking up, stocking up supplies from them, before they all leave' Peristera tells us with a smile, one that she keeps even while delivering her pessimistic opinion for what is to come. 'You want people like her left behind when everybody else leaves but disaster stays...' I am thinking, her enthusiasm and quiet strength infectious.

The more we talk, the more I admire her and her staff here at PIKPA. If Europe could only lay foundations for places like this all over her troubled lands, places of support, education and quiet cultural contact, and then let them do their good work for decades, how far we could go in truly rebuilding Europe, a Europe that instead seems to be tearing herself apart²¹. 'Let's go around so I can show you the place a bit' Peristera says, and we follow her. We first go to the kitchen where the food for all of PIKPA is cooked. With around 80-90 refugees hosted here, on top of the families from Lesvos that PIKPA hosts, this is one busy place. There are several volunteers helping from around the world. During my visit I distinctly remember an Australian volunteer cooking some huge pots. I also remember that I got instantly ravenous when I went inside that kitchen (I had only one cup of Bryan's soup since morning), and the Australian cook filled a plate with goodies for me. I start eating on the spot, while Elena goes up with Peristera to sort the medical supplies that PIKPA would give us.

After my quick foray in the kitchen, I walk around the facilities by myself, there are children's paintings all around. It is early evening and some families are still around strolling in PIKPA's playground. Everywhere I go I am greeted in Greek by the little ones, and often even small conversations in Greek ensue with them. The peace of this place is so pervasive that I feel like sitting on of its benches in the playground and stay there for days, simply breathing and looking at the children and their families peacefully going about. I find myself not wanting to go back to Sykaminia, actually not wanting to even come out of PIKPA's leafy, tranquil, grounds, to the bustle of the city of Mytilene. An oasis of peace, and I don't want to leave it...

'You can have all these, but please bring this one back when you are done' Peristera says to Elena, pointing to a piece of electronic equipment that seems to be for some specific diagnostic work. 'We will, when we do the next refugee transfer to the Mytilene Hospital' Elena tells her. 'Thank you so much for all this Peristera' Elena adds, 'No problem, keep me informed if you need anything else that we may be able to supply' Peristera says. I load all the boxes to the car, we hug her, and leave

²¹ To those cynics that would say all these are naïve pipe dreams, I will answer using the words of a very prescient wise old Jewish man born in Ulm, Germany, when he was told this about his proposal on how to pacify societies and avoid another World war (he has lived through two of them): What is the alternative? he asked.

PIKPA's grounds. After stopping to a Pharmacy to pick up the medical oxygen, we continue on to Sykaminia. We reach back to our operations field with our supplies late at night. It is full again, with news of another capsized refugee boat, this time in the waters in front of us, the Coast Guard announcing many people drown, children among them. 'So much for rescue, and barely a relief..' I find myself thinking, Peristera's smile and PIKPA's peaceful heaven, suddenly made very distant.

Chapter 29: Moria's Hell

'My my how little this one is!' I say whispering while looking at a small baby wrapped and sleeping in a gold-foil thermal blanket outside the medical tent. 'She is only a few weeks old' Meliades tells me while holding her, 'she must have been born on the Turkish coast or while travelling towards it' he adds. Then I see a little wound, with a scab formed on her little head, and to see wounds, even apparently healed ones like this one, on a baby this small is really heart-breaking. Royal Meliades has seen things like this before I guess, so he remains calm, royal and doctor-like when he tells me: 'She must be taken to Mytilene's main hospital today, I think there is some infection and she needs to have blood tests.' 'I will take her' I volunteer, 'where is the rest of the family' I ask him, 'Right there' he says pointing towards several people hanging about outside the medical tent. I go up to talk with them, while Meliades goes back into the tent to prepare the baby for the trip and write the referral letter I must take with me to the hospital for the baby to be admitted in.

They are from Iraq, an extended family of three women, two men, and two children (besides the baby girl), none of them speaking English. One man is young around 20 years old, the two women are in their early 30's, and the third one must be around 40 years old. Then there is an old man, the patriarch I guess, that must be around 65. Claudia, our Italian Arabic translator, is nowhere to be found, so I start trying to explain to them that we must take the little baby, along with father and mother, to the Mytilene hospital. I use the most general of the English words, with plenty of gestures and pointing towards my car that I will use for the transport. They seem to understand, 'So far so good' I tell myself. 'Mama?' I ask, and the woman in her forties comes forward surprising me somewhat as I am used to much younger ones as the mothers of babies and small children during my days here, 'Papa?' I continue, and the old man steps forward, '... maybe papa means also grandfather in the Middle East', being unsure, I ask again twice 'Papa?', "Papa, Papa" the old man says pointing to himself with a shy smile. 'Well, what the hell...he is the father after all' I tell myself, now even more surprised. He is brown-skinned with light brown eyes and a demeanour that reminds me of a shy child rather than an old man. He walks frailly, with a cane. I ask Anna-Sofia, one of the Norwegian nurses, to come with us so that I will feel safer transporting this fragile little one on a 1.5-2 hour journey to the hospital, and she immediately hops in to the front seat. Then the mother holding the baby wrapped up in some new clean clothes gingerly steps in, and the father next to her. Before I drive off, I take a look towards my Syrian-Kurdish 'neighbours' in the little tent. I kept them around, violating the informal protocol about not having people stay in our operations theatre, and did this two days in a row now. The father is outside with his little ones, joining a fresh stream of refugees in front of Bryan's kitchen, 'Late lunch' I am thinking smiling. As I am about to drive off he turns and we catch each other's eyes, he smiles knowingly, I smile back and leave for Mytilene.

We reached Mytilene's main hospital at around 5 pm, and the nurses take the baby, and the mother to stay in the hospital so that they both can undergo some blood tests. The old man however cannot stay, so we must take him to Moria a bit outside Mytilene itself. With KARATEPE closed to prepare it for the winter, Moria was the only refugee registration centre Lesvos had during the October of 2015. We get our directions from the hospital personnel and I drive off. After several wrong turns and dead ends that exasperate me but not the cool Anna-Sofia we finally find it. How could I miss a place like this! The sheer number of people milling about it makes it well, hard to miss. I park the car at the place on the road where a huge number of people, and the buses parked near it, make it look like the entrance. Anna-Sofia and the old man stay inside the car while I get out and go up to the large group of people that drew my attention in the first place. I am looking for some gate behind them marking the entrance of Moria's processing camp, thinking of

all those people being in front of it and obscuring it. I find no gate behind them, only more people as I walk in a now increasingly dense crowd. 'Where the hell is the gate?' 'where is the damn entrance?' I keep asking myself as I walk past more and more people.

I give up and go back to the car, 'Maybe this is not where the entrance is' I say to Anna-Sofia. 'But this must be Moria' she tells me confidently, and I know she is right. After all, just by applying the exclusion principle to the places we have already zigzagged around, this must be it. ...but where the hell is the entrance?! I go back to the same group of people but this time I ask them, not expecting to be necessarily understood, 'Moria camp? Entrance?' I ask them. They seem to understand, and then they all impossibly point towards the direction I have walked previously when I did not find any entrance.

I start again towards the same direction until I finally realize that I am walking along a road, a wide one at the beginning that gradually narrows. It was the sheer number of people, and the gathering dark (it was already 8 pm), that obscured this during my first foray. I keep walking until the road narrows further and starts going steeply uphill, remaining crammed with people, only now it starts looking like a line-up of sorts, but one several rows thick, and not moving forward at all. 'Where is the gate?' I keep asking, and they all keep pointing up. I see men, women, and children sitting or lying down left and right of that frozen river of people in various stages of despair. Little fires lit to keep them warm, and needless to say that even if one wanted, it would be really hard to uniformly provision this surrealistically long line-up of people with water and food. It amounted to an impromptu refugee camp set outside Moria, the only differences with the other ones, a somewhat one-dimensional distribution of people (towards a gate I could still not see) and having none of the amenities that the camps could provide²². Ismael was right.

The road now became a narrow uphill footpath, and ahead of me I see the end of this impossible line, at an entrance gate illuminated by high-powered beams from tall lampposts. If that is what it is, it is nearly half a kilometre up from the road where I have left the car with Anna-Sofia and the old man. 'There is no way I will dump the old man at the beginning of this fucking long line-up' I tell myself, as I now make my way down back to the car. 'Yet with many old people around here, I certainly cannot use his age to get him ahead' I am thinking. Finally, I reach the car, and deliver the news to Anna-Sofia, 'It does not look good at all' she says. I decide to drive the car up that road for as far as I can, so at least I can spare the old man some of that walk up. We slowly drive up, the crowd around us parts for us to pass through without any protests, still it is very slow going.

We finally reach the part where the road becomes a narrow footpath and the car can no longer proceed. I stop and we are surrounded by something like 100 or more people, all waiting aimlessly along a line that does not move. Then the happiest thought of that day comes to my mind, 'I will simply say that he has family checked in the hospital, and he must register as fast as possible, so that they can join him here' I am thinking, '...and I still have that referral paper from Meliades!' (the nurses only looked at it and then gave it back to me) 'I will show it to the police, and it might just do the trick' I conclude. I tell Anna-Sofia about my plan, she thinks it might work, given the policy of keeping families together. However, just in case it doesn't, I do not want to drag the old man all the way up to that gate, only to be told to go back down again and put him to stand on that impossible line. 'Anna-Sofia, please stay in the car with him, I will go up and discuss this with the

²² I have been told that this changed for the better with the opening of KARATEPE. Still I shudder to think of other such bottlenecks leaving people despairing, and especially those created by the complete shutting of borders in the so-called Balkan corridor. Early signs of what was to come were showing even back in October of 2015.

police' I tell her. 'That is OK, but please hurry, I am a bit afraid here' she says, 'it is only men on this part of the line' she adds.

After these words I take a look around. The scene around us could have come from a civilization-has-collapsed movie, little fires burn, people huddle around them in a grim state. Indeed, as Anna-Sofia noticed, this part of the 'line' consists mostly of young or mid-aged men, the old ones and the families are further back, or simply have left the line to rest further afield. 'Do not worry, it will only take 5 minutes!' I tell her. Well, it took much longer than that, but I got the OK. I went back to the car, Anna-Sofia is waiting outside, the old man sits inside. The people around them calm, but with a look of deep resignation in many faces. I take the old man with me for the final walk up to the gate of Moria's registration center. As he slowly walks up with my support and his cane, the lines of young men around us gracefully part, while he looks up stoically towards the gate. 'Moses is walking up on this hill...' I am thinking, but the gates of heaven are locked, and those guarding them no angels.

We finally reach the gate, Greek riot police guards all around it, but now there is a different commanding officer than the one I talked to when I went up earlier on to get the OK. 'Where are you taking him?' he asks sternly, 'For registration, he has family taken in Mytilene's hospital today' I tell him, and I flash Meliades' referral note to him. 'Brief and business-like should do the job' I am thinking, '...plus an official little note, even with Meliades' wiggles...'. A tense one minute ensues while he looks at me, the old man, and the note. 'OK' the officer finally says, and nods for the old man to walk in. Then an inner tension I never knew I had, coils pressed deep inside me, suddenly all unwind at once, I breath the deepest sighs of relief, and suddenly I feel very very tired.

Then, there in front of that gate, under the beams of strong flood lights, heavily equipped riot police around us, I turn and really look at the face of the old man for the first time. 'What a beautiful beautiful old man he is', he smiles gently at me now, 'Sokran, Sokran...' he says. I smile back, look at him for one last time, and hug him. One of riot police breaks ranks of sorts and smiles too, the others remaining expressionless. He takes the old man in. 'Do not worry, he will be alright, we will send people in the hospital to get his family' the commanding officer now tells me. Yet before I go back down, I must solve one last riddle, so I ask him: 'How many people are in there registering refugees?' pointing at the compound behind the tall wire fence where registrations take place, 'Two' the officer answers²³.

I went back down, and made a purposely long coastal night drive back to Sykaminia with Anna-Sofia. I left her to the village where she was staying, and then continued back to our operations field. I arrived there around 11 o' clock, Yannis is still there, playing his dive lights out to sea. 'Boat arrivals stopped two hours ago, and most people have left' he tells me. I start recounting to him what happened in Moria. When I was done he turns to me and says: 'Well...from the sound of it all, it looks like one of the old man's last 'shots'²⁴ placed him ahead of the worse line-up on the planet Earth..., not bad, not bad at all' Yannis says while steadily sweeping his dive light beams out to sea. 'You bastard!' I cried out, doubling down in laughter...

²³ In October of 2015 no FRONTEX personnel was there yet to help with this task, while the dramatic increase of the refugee flows through Lesvos leapfrogged ahead of all preparations, KARATEPE being closed made matters even worse.

²⁴ Yannis's not so subtle way of indicating what it takes (from a man's point of view) to make a baby.

Chapter 30: A swastika at midnight

Φως και Σκότος? Πάντα μαζί θα βαδίζουν!, αλλά αυτός δεν είναι λόγος να στρέψεις τα μάτια σου μακριά από τα άστρα.

Light and Darkness? always together they will march! but that's no reason to turn your eyes away from the stars.

**Ανώνυμου Έλληνα του Αιγαίου
Anonymous Greek of the Aegean**

'I refuse to help this man! I refuse! Take him out of my sight!' Iro screams from the clothes station. It was around midnight, two refugee boats have made landfall near us a short while ago, and people started streaming into our operations area. Yannis had again parked his car with its headlights switched on and pointing into the dry riverbed, creating that strong and outlandish side-illumination of that area where people change to dry clothes. Sharp shadows with a strong halo around them created by the bright headlights, and the occasional transiently illuminated human face is all I see from where I stand. 'He has a swastika tattooed on him!' Iro says indignantly and rushes out of the area. From the place where I was I see a tall, muscular guy, standing there, naked from the waist up, trying to change into dry clothes. He looked dumfounded at Iro's reaction, smiling awkwardly, his vicinity steadily illuminated by a faint camp lamp.

I saw him coming into the camp earlier on, a muscled scary looking man, and if I had a stereotype of how a former military or committed militia man would look like, that tattooed man was it. I guess with Assad losing ground, many men from his army defecting, some must have joined the refugee streams. Not all of them would be poor conscripts ordered into a dictator's army, a few of them must be committed bastards, maybe he was one of them, who knows. Earlier in the day, after a brief and tense exchange of Arabic, two also well-built young guys that arrived on the same boat came into blows in my presence. I tried to intervene to no avail, they were oblivious to it, and they only stopped after several blows delivered and them figuring that neither of them could win.

These two events, the only ones of this kind I witnessed during my stay in Lesvos, initially surprised me (and certainly poor Iro). Thinking about it later on I concluded that they shouldn't have been that surprising. At the end of the day, when you strive to help large numbers of people, you get a good piece of Humanity in your hands, and thus there will always be bastards, and dark characters among them. This is just societal statistics asserting itself no matter if it is the current Exodus out of the Middle East, the Mariel boat lift out of Cuba²⁵, or the massive immigration out of Mexico and Central America towards the USA. In the current refugee catastrophe Europe is facing we are also talking about a large piece of Humanity running scared and scarred out of war zones. In this case I could easily imagine such a societal statistics shifting a bit towards hardier souls or selecting harder character aspects of otherwise ordinary people to bring up to the surface. Even peaceful suburbia could produce an extra murderer or two out of ordinary people if it was to be pillaged and bombed repeatedly while visited by bands of assassins and rapists on a regular basis.

It would have been an easy thing to single out that one scary man with the tattooed swastika or some other certified bastard of this sort or another that came ashore with these refugees and then use this to fall back and away from all the effort we put on that coast. Indeed, I can easily imagine

²⁵ It was the boatlift where Fidel Castro opened up the jails of the island and released many criminals along with the political dissidents to join a large flow of Cuban refugees sailing towards Miami.

the yellow press here in Greece, or some glossy tabloid in the rest of Europe, snapping a picture of that scary individual, or the blows I witnessed on the shore today and run headlines accordingly: 'Neo-Nazis among refugees!' or 'Unruly crowds wash on our beaches!' or some other such silliness. I guess much of this does happen with today's media, and not just about the refugee issue, and boy do they sell. Humanity's way of staying tribal in the age of vast and fast information flows.

As far as I was concerned our efforts out here were about saving and helping neither angels nor devils, but Humanity's brethren at large, us. 'Here I am again, ambelo-philosophizing' I say to myself, 'I wonder where Ismael is these days, maybe he went back to Birmingham..., haven't seen him lately'. Looking back at the dry clothes station, after I was done with my work, the scary man was gone, melted back into the crowds, and Iro was busy distributing clothes to people.

As another night of work on the coast slowly winds down I take one last walk along the shore in front of our operations area. I see the Coast Guard ship doing beam sweeps again. Momentarily the beam flickers around one point at sea repeatedly, I stand still watching it. Then it suddenly switches off and the ship continues on, only its green and red side lights betraying its presence in the surrounding darkness.

Chapter 31: ...and a good time was had by all!

Δεν έχω δρόμο ούτε γειτονιά να περπατήσω μια Πρωτομαγιά...

I have no street and no neighbourhood to walk once on May 1st...

**Ελληνικό ρεμπέτικο τραγούδι
Greek rebetiko song**

‘Turn that fucking camera off! I am telling you!’ Alexandros shouts to a cameraman and a reporter that came to film around our operations today, while Yannis tries to calm Alexandros down. ‘Why? What...what is the problem?’ the reporter asks perplexed, while the cameraman still holds the camera on his shoulder, ‘If you do not take this camera down I will break it!’ Alexandros shouts, his eyes darker, and at that point the cameraman lowers it. The reporter looks taken aback, I guess he is not used to this happening in a peaceful humanitarian operations camp. I can hear Yannis asking Alexandros why he did this, ‘...because they are part of all this!’ Alexandros answers, making his views about the mainstream media plain. The vehemence and emphasis he put on these last two words: ‘all this’, also making it clear (to me at least) what he meant by them, the refugee catastrophe, the mainstream politics of business-as-usual (until business blows I guess), its custodians, and well...the media covering all of this.

I found myself sympathetic with some of these views. Still I considered a shutdown of the media reporting on this catastrophe too much of an absolute position, and maybe also projecting one’s political theorems too strongly on a disaster too big and complex to be so readily (or even correctly) interpreted by them. I now see Yannis taking the poor reporter aside, and giving an expletive-free interview (very tough for Yannis!) on camera, explaining the woeful lack of resources, the rapidly rising refugee flows, things that Europe at large was only beginning to realize. Later I heard that it had been aired on Euronews. With the media attention on this problem rising, more and more reporting crews started arriving on the coast. In another such incident, little Apollo attempted to keep a French crew away from the medical tent, trying to overrule...the doctors who actually wanted the crew to film the difficulties they faced. At this point Yannis stepped in rather more forcefully and told little Apollo to fuck off, if the doctors wanted this filmed, it was not his business. Manos the happy-go-lucky EINA doctor was of the same opinion, albeit more quietly, and Apollo left the scene silent.

‘Why he did not want this filmed?’ the French reporter asks me, in Greek, and without an accent. It turned out that he is Greek-French living many years in France. This particular combination of nationalities allowed me to explain to him some of the particular political vagaries involved here, which I could not easily do with the English reporter from Euronews, unfamiliar as he would be with the outliers of Greek politics.

‘Where is your cameraman from, he looks a bit of an international bastard’ I jokingly tell to the reporter, intentionally within earshot of the cameraman. ‘He is from France’ he answers, ‘That makes him a bastard’ I joke, ‘I am also from Tunisia’ the cameraman interjects laughing, ‘A French-Tunisian?’ I exclaim, ‘That makes you a double bastard!’ I tell him, and we laugh about. They continue filming around a bit longer and then they wrap it up. I did not ask about the news outfit they worked for.

Late at night I found both of them drinking in the cafe next to the 'Mouria of Myrivilis' tavern, the one owned by Soula, the wife of Lefteris. The tavern itself was closed tonight, but we could get snacks in that cafe even later. I arrived there past midnight, having finished another gruelling day. Rob was also there with some of his fellow workers from 'Faros'. I greet them happily and go and sit to a table next to them. Soula kept bringing snacks and beers. Then suddenly three tall uniformed and burly guys stepped in the tavern, their appearance made sudden by the complete darkness outside. They had uniforms I could not recognize, one of them, a man with a trimmed beard, having significantly more insignia than the other two. 'Who are you guys?' I ask them, 'FRONTEX' the insignia man answers, and here they were the first ones I came across during my days in Lesvos. The insignia man was the captain of a FRONTEX patrol ship. 'Where are you from?' I ask him, 'All from Portugal' the Captain answers. This made them easy targets for my mood as it had now...well...evolved. 'You know that you are on a famous island Captain', I tell him, and then I continue on delicately: '...famous for his sea-food cuisine', 'Really?' the Captain says, 'Yes' I tell him, 'in fact they can cook bacalao (cod) here in more ways than in Portugal' I tell him, delivering the punch. 'This is impossible!' he exclaims leaving behind the near-military guarding of his words. 'Well it might true Captain, so you better try some seafood before you leave Lesvos, and steer away from stupid moussakas and souvlaki, leave them for the summer tourists' I tell him, and now the entire FRONTEX crew laughs.

'Hey people!' the cafe door opens again, and Father Nikiforos, the Viking priest, literally storms in, holding up his guitar like a damn machine gun. I have not seen him since our meeting about Stage-2 a few days ago. He seems in good spirits, and quickly sits among his crew and starts strumming the guitar. Some singing flares up in the tavern, and the beers keep coming.

I do not know whether this is a general thing among people working in humanitarian relief operations of this sort, so I will only talk about myself here. After some time, you reach a state where you simply want to claw (that's the right verb: claw!) a day or a night out the long succession of days and nights you work, and burn it bright with the good life's bonfires. It felt like such a night tonight.

Yannis also came in the cafe later on, followed by another Yannis, one of the two 'vultures' I saw operating in our coast, and they sat down to have snacks and beers as well. Soula puts on some Greek music, thank God it is not 'Σκυλάδικα!' (Skyladika)²⁶, and Yannis (the diver) started singing, the other one staying silent and just drinking. It was all going well, until a particular song, a rebetiko, one about the dispossessed and the exiled, came on, and Yannis kept singing it loudly. Now that struck a deep bad resonance in me... the song..., those faces on the boats..., but before it could do any real mood damage I turned around to joke loudly with the French reporters next to me, until that particular song was over. More beers came, and then some of the Greek police officers on patrol along the coast also came in briefly for some snacks before they headed out again, followed by the FRONTEX guys. We stayed until around two o'clock at night before we slowly started filing out of the tavern. It was a great night and a good time was had by all...

²⁶ 'Skylos' meaning dog in Greek, these are cheap love songs, getting their name from the type of singing which for some ears it resembles barking or howling dogs, they are popular in some places, and hence my initial fears that night...

Chapter 32: Prayers for an unbeliever

Today I had to say good-bye to the family of my Syrian-Kurd 'neighbours'. After three days they decided to finally leave the little tent in our camp and get on to one of the vans that started coming from the UNCHR/Stage-2 camp to pick up people from our operations field. It is a testimony of the chaos of the last few days that nobody in the camp noticed them! The large number of refugees constantly streaming in and out of our area making the presence of my 'neighbours' in one of our tents inconspicuous for three days in a row. That would certainly not have happened during the first days I was here, with much fewer refugees around. I almost gotten used to them, sad seeing them go to the buses and then into the great anonymity of the 'refugee flows' (I have come to hate that term).

At ten in the morning Meliades and Alexandros ask me to make another transport to Mytilene's hospital, it is a family again. This time it is a pregnant woman that has been hit hard in her stomach, she did not tell us how and why. She asked to be examined to see if there was any damage to the baby. With the equipment we had available in medical tent the EINA doctors could only make a rudimentary examination regarding this, so they referred her to Mytilene's hospital for imaging tests. I took them there and again the nurses and doctors of Mytilene's hospital kept the woman, an Iraqi, to do the tests. This time they also kept the rest of the family, her husband and son on the hospital grounds, and promised me that they will call the Coast Guard or the police (whoever was available) for transporting them all for registration, when the tests were done and if no reason for staying in the hospital would emerge. 'Great, no Moria for me!' I tell myself, and then get on the car to drive back.

On my way back to Sykaminia I passed by the Medecins Sans Frontieres camp outside Mantamados. The camp is now completely full. Seeing the number of people in and around it, I could not believe that when I first arrive in Lesvos, eight days ago now its tents were just going up, and there were no refugees around. Not only it was full, but all these continuous waves of arrivals on Lesvos' North shores where we operated, forced many people to walk on the road from the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp to the Medecins Sans Frontieres one. Now there are even people walking from Mantamados camp towards Mytilene, the buses unable to cope with the inflow coming from Sykaminia.

As I drive I look around for the beaten up green car of Yannis the Athenian, 'maybe he is still around operating his inter-camp shuttle service' I am thinking smiling. Then at the end of one long column of people I spot a family of Afghanis with three children and an obviously tired father holding his little boy in his arms and staggering forth. The boy must be so tired (or maybe sick?) that he is asleep, mid-day with an overhead sun, his limbs spreading out of the embrace of his father, his little head also 'overflowing' from his father's arms. I bring the car into a halt, 'Get in' I motion them. They smile and all file into the car and I drive them to the Medecins Sans Frontieres camp.

I keep doing these transports for a while. It feels like I can really help when I am doing this, while at the operations field work can feel sometimes like treading water, especially with these large numbers of people arriving during the last few days. Some of the refugees already there have started noticing this back and forth of mine, and on arrival I get waves and smiles from many of them, Kostas is still at the entrance of the big tent. I ask him about Yannis the Athenian, and he tells me he has not seen him today, but yesterday he was doing transports.

'Please, please! Let's go back and look for my brother!' a young Afghani woman asks me in excellent English, after I brought her and her family to the Medecins Sans Frontieres camp. She has the beautiful, almond-shaped eyes of the deep East, and a beautiful but rather serious smile. Then there was that mantilla that she covered her hair with. It is so brightly coloured with flowers that it made a contrast not just with the grey and deep blue clothes she was wearing, but with the entire damn camp there. A Spring's blink of an eye in the middle of Autumn. I take her on the car, and we start driving slowly along the columns of refugees marching towards the Medecins Sans Frontieres camp, her eyes anxiously scanning the columns..., no sign of him. Because we drive slowly, many people think that I am doing this in order to pick the next family for transport back to the camp, so many hail me to stop, pointing to tired children, grandmothers and grandfathers trailing behind them.

We are driving for nearly half an hour now, past the mid-point of the road between the Medecins sans Frontieres and the UNHCR/Stage-2 camp. Her eyes are slowly turning from anxious to sad. We press on, and a few minutes later, and after a few more false leads, her whole face brightens up, even the mantilla changed mood I think, 'There he is!' she says, I stop the car, she rapidly gets out and this brother's keeper runs out to embrace her brother jubilantly. Then they both come into the car, he much is younger than her, his laughter making him younger still. When we reach the camp, they come out, and after many thank-you's and goodbye's she turns to me for one last time and says: 'I will be praying for you...'

Chapter 33: The Angels of the Aegean

Looking at the gently lapping waves along the coast one early morning after another day and night of struggle with waves of human fear and desperation, I see the usual debris of destroyed or near-intact rubber boats and the occasional wooden ones floating about near shore. Unmistakable among all those life-jackets, discarded usually with joy, but often with trepidation during landfalls. Several children's life jackets are among them, a few in joyful colours and patterns, in stark contrast with the grey and black rubber inflatables or the lifejackets of the adults. 'Nothing to worry about' I tell myself, 'they all made it... all made it.' Then, while scanning the horizon with high-powered binoculars for boats, I catch a glimpse of a few empty life-jackets adrift far out at sea, bright orange ones.

'Backflow shore flotsam' I calmly tell myself, repeating these three words often, trying to plaster my mind with them, as to leave no room for any other interpretation. Suddenly that image of that 3-4 year-old Syrian toddler found lifeless, yet almost like gently sleeping on the opposite coast, bursts through. So did other images of this kind that documented similar deaths since I arrived here. So did yesterday's news about yet more loss of life in a foundering boat that the Greek Coast Guard had found. A time-delayed grief strikes me again, charging up like that jackal of grief did a few days ago during my night drive back to Kaloni. Time-delayed it would find me as the fast-evolving dramas around us kept one busy and focussed on the immediate, until a lull, a quiet moment would arrive, like the one now...

We did all we could to save people, to give them a helping hand, and a real shelter. The first one they would have in their long and tortuous journey from the burning East to us. There is one precious Greek word that encapsulates the meaning of such a shelter: 'Απαντοχή' (=apandochi) and is of female gender (so 'Απαντοχή' is a 'she'). She was nowhere sweeter to give than it was to children. Still we lost quite a few people on that beautiful coast, many children. We will never know their last dreams, or the dreams they had about the World in their once sheltering homelands, and what those dreams would have become had they reached Europe alive. 'Loss' is too poor of a word to use for all this, as one can also lose one's damn car keys. 'Tragedy' is a better one perhaps, or maybe no single word can ever do, the horrors we set forth surpassing even our language. For me, that life's preciousness is an axiom rather than a theorem deriving from the love and value given to it by a human-caring God, all those deaths are loss of Light and encroaching Darkness. Darkness not as a metaphor for evil as religious and even non-religious views would have it, but simply one like that of the night-dark seas of the Aegean, indifferent to humans and their affairs, where luminous us drift all alone.

Howling grief comes a bit closer barking at me now, then suddenly it quietens again, leaving only sadness in its wake. It will probably come back later, during some other detached moment of solitude. White-hot anger sometimes comes out as well, blindly barking about towards many directions, from grand-scale geopolitics, to an old man quietly sipping coffee in a cafe in Mytilene, or a couple in front of a store mulling about what to buy. 'Don't they know what the hell is going on??!!'. This anger fades out much faster, barely leaving a trace. Later, back in Athens, waves of sadness became rarer with time and with the bustle of ordinary life all around me, but they do sneak up on me every now and then.

I hope that one day monuments on both the coasts of Greece and Turkey will be there to commemorate all this loss of life, perhaps with names and ages of all those lost, as many as we can gather. Humanity eventually does manage such acts of compassionate self-consciousness even if

too late to make any difference for those already lost, or alas, to stem future mass madness like the wars that have set of the current wave of human desperation engulfing the islands of the North-East Aegean.

After my return to Athens, during a quiet afternoon under the Acropolis, near the Ancient Agora, a blue sadness washed over me once again while thinking of all those deaths at sea. Suddenly a beautiful and popular folk song of the Eastern Aegean islands played out somewhere in the distance. Since then I have been unable to shake it off my mind as an unlikely and, at first, unintended tribute to the deaths of all those children. It is a song played in many Aegean island summer fairs, and is well-known also in mainland Greece. Because it is such a happy song, instantly evoking summer island joy I had to weigh it very much before suggesting it here for such a role. Then a much more solemn rendering of that same song, using only a santouri (that beautiful instrument that came to us from the East) and the voice of a solitary child²⁷, rescued me somewhat from the dilemma. Still I hope that my fellow Greeks, and especially those from the Aegean islands whom I especially love, will forgive me, and even quietly understand why I lay it here translated for the foreign reader of this account as a lasting tribute to all those children lost in the Aegean Archipelagos. Finally, I also hope that the many many children we did save make it to be the new citizens of Europe, spreading across her and reconnecting her with their dreams, those ones realized at long last. Then one day they may come back to Lesvos, Chios, Kalymnos, Samos, Leros, Kos or tiny Kastellorizo and spread flowers over the Aegean, roses perhaps, in remembrance of all those little brothers and sisters that did not make it across. Here is the song:

Title: In Aegean waters (Μες του Αιγαίου τα νερά)

In the Aegean's, oh come out and see, in the Aegean's, the Aegean's waters, oh in the Aegean's waters, angels are fluttering. And while they flutter, come out my star, and while they flutter, roses they scatter. My Aegean, oh help my Virgin Mary, oh my Aegean calm your azure-blue waters, so that they come, come out to see them, so that they come your children from foreign lands. So that they come, your children from foreign lands to your desired islands. Rosewater, come out my little star, rosewater do become, Ah rosewater let them become my Aegean, your waters²⁸...

For all those little angels from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and all other tortured lands lost in the Aegean Sea.

²⁷ Such a rendering, but of only half of the song, can be found sang in the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympics: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VX1S_30_s6M. For a similar solemn execution with the solitary voice of Nena Venetsanou, see also: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQwsky7dCLU>. I hope that one day the full song, using only a santouri and one child's voice is produced as a lasting tribute to those refugee children lost in the Aegean.

²⁸ The translation is mine. I have not translated all the repetitions and turns of the island song's verse, but I tried to keep the meaning intact (in some versions of the song the opening verse is: "In the Aegean's island", the rest remaining the same).

Chapter 34: Leaving

I took the night ship back to Athens, after having bid my farewells and seen my old teacher Sakis for one last time. The EINA doctors have left two days ago, but Alexandros, Khalid, Yannis the diver stayed on, along with Apollo, Bryan, Marina and Nikos from Sykaminia, while a new crew arrived from Athens to help them at Sykaminia. Wolfgang and Aline our two young doctors from Germany are also staying on. The day I left Skala, the Spanish coast rescue team was still there doing its great rescue work, and of course so was the reception 'committee' of the three grandmothers from Sykaminia sitting at the bench next to Bryan's kitchen.

I booked a cabin this time, knowing the ship would be full of refugees heading to Athens. I needed a long secluded sleep. I thought this might help me re-emerge back in the world I left behind by giving a dreamlike hue to all these days I spent in Lesvos. Up on the deck, I see the ship slowly slipping out of the beautiful port of Mytilene, the city lights reflecting on its waters. A group of excited young Syrians and Afghanis, men and women, was hanging on the rails, giddily looking out. They told me of their families already scattered across Europe, of those left behind, the wars, the future plans they had. Back then I already knew of the clouds gathering for them upstream Europe, but I was too spent, too tired, and chose not to say anything. As on the coast of Sykaminia, I found myself once again secretly hoping that moments like these, them hanging on the rail of a passenger ship looking out to the port of Mytilene glistening at night, would somehow inoculate them for what was ahead. I wished them well, and went back to my cabin. The deep throbbing noise of reversing ship engines, a faint roar of cars, alerted me in the darkness of my cabin that we reached Piraeus. I open my eyes, dress, and step out in the early morning, some stars still sparkling up in the sky.

Epilogue and a tribute

*...ότι δηλαδή πρώτον μεν έχουμε τας πύλας της πόλεως μας ανοικτάς εις όλους,
...that first of all we have the gates of our city open to all.*

**«Ο Επιτάφιος», Περικλής, 431 π.Χ.
“The Epitaph”, Pericles, 431 BC**

This personal account of the rescue and relief efforts on the North coast of Lesbos would be incomplete without a tribute to the people of that island. For their deep hospitality, one easily transformed into resilience and resourcefulness, while standing at the pinch point of the largest refugee movements since WWII. Long before we came from the rest of Greece and the World to help them, and before the current constellation of NGOs arrived, they, together with a heroic Greek Coast Guard, plucked refugees out of often unforgiving seas at all seasons, years before the current crescendo of refugee inflows got the attention of the rest of the World. Poor fishermen of Lesbos and other islands of the North-East Aegean, with no other resources except their fishing boats and their courage would sail out in winter-cold and grey seas to save people again and again. When they failed, they alone, together with the anonymous Greek Coast Guardsman, would have to shoulder the lonely deaths of people they never knew.

The people ashore would do all they could to treat refugees in their taverns and homes, long before we arrived. They have seen much worse and on a more unforgiving scale with respect to their available resources, than we ever did. This is a story that has unfolded in various degrees in many Aegean islands, and I am sure in other islands of the Mediterranean Sea such as Lampedusa in Italy. They should all be proud of all their efforts. At the end of the day it is them that gave back to Europe the most important thing that makes her worth defending namely, a **living** humanist tradition.

Finally, this is a tribute to the Greek people in general. During times of near apocalyptic conditions of their economy (by any measure the bean-counting managerial/banking class of ECB, the IMF, or Brussels cares to use) they took up another enormous challenge history has thrown at them. They kept the dark forces of racism and intolerance mostly at bay while sheltering lives of tens of thousands as best as they could.

As I write these lines, the borders of the Balkan corridor are shut, no serious relocations of refugees are taking place to alleviate the burden on the Greek islands, on the port of Piraeus, or Northern Greece. Yet there are heartening reports of people up in Kilkis opening their houses to refugees, the Veroia library sending a mobile book unit to them with emphasis on children's books, schools in Arcadia participating in the "Take my hand" campaign to pair Greek schoolchildren with refugee ones, proposals by deans of Greek Universities to organize English and Greek language courses for refugees during their stay here, numerous doctors volunteering their services, people bringing food and medicine, and the list goes on. There is also a proposal for bringing the refugee children into regular schooling in the Greek schools, I really hope that this materializes. All this coming from people which, especially in the countryside and the villages of the Greek islands, face serious difficulties providing for their own families. Given all these challenges I consider their stand a victory, a victory second only to that against overwhelming fascist forces in another uneven battle that started during another October 75 years ago.

I do hope that one day history will remember how a small nation of Europe, at a time of considerable troubles of her own, and scant initial resources, stood bravely and compassionately while at the pinch point of the largest refugee movements since WWII. She stood there, and did not let the beacons of Humanism (Ανθρωπιά!) go out. She used them instead, as best as she could, searching the dark seas of fear and despair where entire nations are adrift once again, much like our search lights did during all those nights along the coast of Lesbos in that Autumn of 2015.

A note to the people of Europe (written in the summer of 2016)

The efforts by some of the poorest people of Europe (island and country-side people of Greece and Italy), to help the people forming these extraordinary refuge flows should put to shame other parts of Europe where, even back in 2015, the mere transit of refugees was met by rising fences, police cordons, and routine water-cannoning of the march of the desperate along the so-called Balkan corridor. What a fine defence of Europe that was! Bravo to all those 'brave' individuals involved!

I am sorry but for me human civilization is more than cities with fine concert halls, museums, great parks, cafe culture and lifestyle choices. These are great 'ornaments' but even graves can be adorned with such. The ongoing squabble about how to distribute these people among European nations, the equivalent of 0.5-1% of the total European population, makes the stance of certain parts of Europe even more pathetic. I hope one day, not too late, they realize they are part of Europe and even of the planet. It is unfortunate that, at their present state, many European societies would buckle if they were to be put on stress tests (with apologies to the bankers and the ECB beaurocrats) similar to those that segments of Greek society had been through because of the refugee flows. They would buckle releasing the darkest forces we know all from our collective European history. The likes of Geert Wilders in The Netherlands, Marie Le Pen in France, Frauke Petry of the AfD and the PEGIDA people in Germany, to name a few²⁹, would have been in power in short order. False and dangerous prophets of a road back to romantic illusions of nations that never were³⁰.

We do have such forces in Greece as well, ranging from Michaloliakos and his Golden Dawn gangbangers, to milder elements in central-right parties. Yet they have been held in check by a starkly different consensus of the Greek society at large, shaping a reaction that is worlds apart from where these extremists would like it to be. The peaceful evacuation of Eidomeni from tens of thousands of desperate people stranded there after the shutting of the Balkan corridor is one such example. The renewed proposal to start incorporating refugee children in the Greek education system is another.

Still I will not pretend here that this overall positive consensus can hold on indefinitely without help from the rest of Europe, the economic realities of Greece remaining stark. Recently local councils in Crete refused the relocation there of a mere 2000 refugees that are currently in Ellinikon in Athens to Crete. Finally, I am not one to deny the huge impact that the multiple terrorist attacks had had in France, Belgium by European-bred Islamist fanatics living in the margins of their respective societies, and similar attacks in Turkey. The climate of fear they induced across Europe is real, is not to be underestimated, and is in a bad resonance with the economic crisis and stagnation that plagues in several places of Europe for many years already. The near periphery of Europe, be it Egypt or Libya remains in trouble and even deteriorates, the next launching pads of boats.

²⁹ While not knowing any of them in person, I do know what they advocate in their respective countries, and I take them at their (political) word.

³⁰ Closed or controlled 'vessels' of this tribe or another.

The inexorable change of Earth's climate and the competition for ever scarcer resources are powerful multipliers and even inducers of crises. More worryingly they also act to bring together the strong turbulent eddies of the various isolated crises, merging them in ever larger geopolitical storms. The reaction of political elites around the World? Well, it can be summarized in one word and its derivatives: 'isolation', of nations, of political factions, of crises, a banking crisis here, a refugee one there, some wars inconveniently close to our borders, and so on.

Yet the stark truth is that we cannot keep enjoying the benefits of peaceful post-war Europe while the rest of World around us burns (while also it keeps handing us resources at the rock bottom prices of neo-colonial convenience). Sooner or later there will be sparks, and what these sparks will be called every time they flare up is not terribly important. Calling them by some name(s) can even be disorienting towards well... isolationist-type of 'solutions' of all kinds³¹.

Conveying this starkest of truths to the citizens of Europe across national borders, honestly and relentlessly exposing the falsehood of national-level solutions (which do not even buy much time these days no matter how illustrious their political peddlers are), is not high-minded idealism, it is cold hard realism to the face of large-scale catastrophes. Still it is not enough, for even if magically the leaders of various European nations acknowledge such truths in front of their national audiences, the tools to act are not there. Resetting the EU on a democratic foundation rather than the one she has now is the other decisive step needed. Only then knowledge can become action, dictated transparently by citizens of a legislating European Parliament rather than unelected Technocratic committees behind closed doors (for the good of all of us I am sure...).

Under such radically new conditions we can then double down and boldly see the current refugee currents as a second chance, a chance to enlarge, and enrich European Civilization. This time doing it with more confidence, and hopefully knowing the heavy price of leaving large sectors of our societies marginalized, and with no stake in them. A price that has nothing to do with religion, the ethnic origin, or any other identifier of the group left behind, for marginalization will do its work regardless, only the 'valves' releasing the 'steam' will differ. We now have a second chance to make the EU work along the ideals behind its foundation, I hope that we all finally rise to it.

While writing this last note I caught myself asking the question that a non-European citizen of the World could certainly ask (and these days quite a few people from Europe as well), namely: 'Why do you rant so much about Europe?' 'Maybe she is a spent force and maybe she deserves it too.' It is because in principle she is still the only place in the World where three key elements coexist namely: a) a humanist tradition as deep as it can historically get, b) a large critical mass of people and industrial power, and c) Memory, memory of large scale societal catastrophes. The first provides the axioms, the second gives them a global sway, and the third reminds one, on one's own soil, what happens when things go fundamentally wrong. Unfortunately, Europe these days is only an aimless b (pun intended).

Finally, it is because I was born and raised in a magical place of Europe called Greece, where the concept of Human (Ἄνθρωπος) as the measure of all the miracles abound in the known Cosmos was born and celebrated. Now there is a fundamental optimism that goes with that, and this is one ship I will never abandon.

³¹ Lock them up on islands like Australia does! That apparently is the latest 'bright' idea about the refugees should the rickety EU-Turkey deal collapse, bravo to the fellows that thought this on up, very humanitarian indeed!

A short note to the Visegrad countries

I really do not wish to use the cover of my anonymity to insult entire nations and their representatives, my anger notwithstanding. All I want to tell them is this: What has happened to you? For you were brave once and I can even put dates to it: 1956 for Hungary (the date of Imre Nagy' ascension to power and the tanks rolling in), July 1968 for the (then) Czechoslovakia ("The two thousand words" manifesto and the Prague Spring), and 1943 for Poland (the Warsaw ghetto uprising). So don't let your leaders, the Viktor Orbans of this world, sell you so short in the much easier fight (given what you did back then) that we now face in Europe. We know you can do much better. Finally, if you decide not to join, at least please spare the rest of us any high-minded talk about defending European Civilization.

Για τους Έλληνες

Δεν θα ασχοληθώ εδώ με τους δειλούς που θεωρούν μερικές δεκάδες χιλιάδες ανθρώπους, στην πλειοψηφία γυναικόπαιδα, απειλή τρομερή της Ελληνικότητας μας. Το περάσαμε αυτό το διαγώνισμα πολλές φορές, την τελευταία φορά μάλιστα κράτησε και τέσσερις αιώνες και ήταν απείρως πιο πολλοί και κρατούσαν γιαταγάνια. Ας αφήσουμε αυτούς τους φόβους για άλλους λαούς.

Για μένα τα σύνορα της Ελλάδας, του Ελληνικού Κόσμου, δεν είναι μόνο αυτά με τα συρματοπλέγματα και τις γραμμές πάνω σε χάρτες, είναι και άλλα, πάντα κάπου εκεί έξω στον κόσμο, άυλα, των μεγάλων ιδεών... με κάποια γλυκά φαντάσματα να τα φυλάνε ακόμα. Τα διαπέρασαν βάρβαροι πολλοί και άλλοι μες στις ομίχλες των καιρών... και γύρισαν πίσω μιλώντας Ελληνικά. Αυτά τα σύνορα ας φυλάξουμε παιδιά αυτούς τους δύσκολους καιρούς, αφήνοντάς τα να περάσουν και μέσα από τις καρδιές μας, γενναίοι όπως πάντα, στις θερμοπύλες αυτών των καιρών.

Ξέρω πως είναι τίποτε όλ' αυτά και πως η γλώσσα
που μιλώ δεν έχει αλφάβητο

*I know that it's nothing of all these and that the
language I speak has no alphabet*

Αφού και ο ήλιος και τα κύματα είναι μια γραφή
συλλαβική που την αποκρυπτογραφείς μονάχα στους
καιρούς της λύπης και της εξορίας

*Since the sun and the waves are a syllabic script to be
deciphered only in the times of sorrow and exile*

Κι η πατρίδα μια τοιχογραφία μ' επιστρώσεις
διαδοχικές φράγκικες ή σλαβικές που αν τύχει και
βαλθείς για να την αποκαταστήσεις πας αμέσως
φυλακή και δίνεις λόγο

*And the motherland a fresco with successive overlays
Frankish or Slavic which, should you try to restore,
you are immediately sent to prison and held to
account*

Σ' ένα πλήθος Εξουσίες ξένες μέσω της δικής σου
πάντοτε

*To a multitude of Dominions foreign, always through
your own*

Όπως γίνεται για τις συμφορές

As it happens for disasters

Όμως ας φανταστούμε σ' ένα παλαιών καιρών αλώνι
που μπορεί να 'ναι και σε πολυκατοικία ότι παίζουνε
παιδιά και ότι αυτός που χάνει

*But let's imagine that in an old times threshing-floor,
which might be in an apartment-complex, children
are playing and whoever loses*

Πρέπει σύμφωνα με τους κανονισμούς να πει στους
άλλους και να δώσει μιαν αλήθεια

*Should, according to the rules, tell the others and give
them a truth*

Οπότε βρίσκονται στο τέλος όλοι να κρατούν στο
χέρι τους ένα μικρό

Then everyone ends up holding in his hand a small

Δώρο ασημένιο ποίημα.

Gift, silver of a poem.

**«Το Φωτόδεντρο και η Δέκατη Τέταρτη Ομορφιά: Δώρο ασημένιο ποίημα», Οδυσσέας Ελύτης, 1971
"The light-tree and the fourteenth beauty: Gift silver poem", Odysseus Elytis, 1971**