

IT WILL HAPPEN ANYWAYS

Asylum Seekers in Kalim Valley



A fictional story by the students of the second-year Master

International Development Studies

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Foreword

It will happen anyways / Ça arrivera de toute façon is a fictional story written in February-March 2021 by students of the Master's degree in International Development Studies. The story was initially written in English, then translated into French. It is the result of a workshop supervised by Cristina Del Biaggio and Karine Gatelier, in January 2021, on the Matheysine Plateau and in the Vallbonnais.

With this workshop, we wanted to introduce the students, some of them foreigners, to the realities of citizen reception in the French current political context. Although the accommodation of asylum seekers is an obligation, and therefore a duty, for states which have ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugees, since the 1980s we have witnessed increasingly restrictive and hostile state policies towards asylum seekers. These policies, based on the idea of dissuasion, produce a precariousness of migration trajectories. This is true for border crossings but also for reception (or non-reception) in dedicated accommodation structures.

Confronted with this reality, cities and local authorities are creating networks of refugee cities; while residents and citizens are organising themselves into solidarity groups according to various different forms depending on the territory where they are located.

For the time being seldom studied in France, these collectives of welcome in the mountains deserve to be better analysed: they provide concrete answers to the institutional non-reception and invent a new type of hospitality.

Through an immersion in the field and the discovery of its most involved actors, the students were able to better understand the emergence and the values of the mobilisation of one of the

collectives in the region, the Collectif d'Accueil des Réfugiés en Matheysine - CARM.

Between January 11-15, 2021, the students conducted 14 interviews, including 3 with municipal teams, as well as a series of interviews in the market of a village on the plateau.

The workshop received funding from Labex ITTEM under the title "La montagne en solidarité. Contre-récit ethnographique de l'accueil des personnes en migration dans les Alpes" (The mountain in solidarity. An ethnographic counter-narrative of the reception of migrants in the Alps), and from the Institut d'Urbanisme et de Géographie Alpine (Université Grenoble Alpes).

We would like to thank all the people who welcomed us during our winter stay in Matheysine: their warmth accompanied us way into these pages.

Thanks to Jeannine Ginzburg for the drawings and paintings that illustrate this story.

Thanks to Isabelle Saint-Saëns for the translation into French.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank the students for their commitment and motivation in the workshop: they will find it reflected in the inspiration of this fiction.

Cristina Del Biaggio: assistant professor, IUGA

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PACTE laboratory

Introduction

Hi there! I am here to tell you a story. I am not much of a storyteller, but I thought I should give it a try. Okay... It is actually my first time telling a story, so I hope you can go easy on me. It is not that I have never thought of telling stories before, but I have not really reached that moment when I said, ok, that's the story. If I told you every moment I've witnessed during my endless life, well, you wouldn't live to know the end. You humans have such short lives. You're not like us. I don't even know whether I am capable of dying; I have already been around for 135 million years so we will see how much longer I last. I know you humans think immortality might get boring after a while. In my case, I cannot imagine anyone hoping to die just so they don't get bored. Life is amazing! But I agree: 135 million years may be too long to live. Yes, you heard correctly. I said 135 million years. This is my age. I am quite frankly surprised that I remember my age; but don't worry, I still feel young inside and out!

I have told you my intentions and my age so far, but I suppose I should give you my name. I know you are curious to know it. A person without a name is a stranger to you. Normally, I don't have a name but I've lived long enough to know that humans expect names to identify things and people, so I can share one with you. I decided to call myself Coco. First, I should make it clear that I talk about myself as one being but you should know that we are more of a collective. I chose the name Coco because we are made of $\text{CaMg}(\text{CO}_3)_2$. This incomprehensible collection of letters and digits comes from some complex geological science that I have never bothered to understand. Apparently, this material that makes us, the layers that constitute our substance, is a product of shells

which have been lying around for over 200 million years - they must be quite lazy.

I don't want to give you the wrong impression, but science is not my strong suit. I learned all this from humans. I have picked up a few things in my time. Here again, I am talking about a very long time; but, for as long as it took you humans to evolve, the evolution of your minds and your knowledge has been incredibly quick. I am quite impressed. Mind you, you are not always making progress towards the better; still, you are active learners, and I am impressed by this. Now, let me tell you what we are.

We are - or rather - I am a mountain range called Camygacoco overlooking the Kalim Valley. Humans have called me beautiful, grand, majestic, imposing, wild, omnipotent... well enough talking about myself. I don't want to give you the impression that I am some sort of narcissist. I am just a mountain range. It's not like I am the Mont Blanc, so what is the point of being a narcissist? I am just a regular humble set of mountains that has been privy to the many human and animal lives that pass through my valley. I have witnessed so many stories and now, for the first time, I am choosing to share a few of them with you. I will start from my birth to give you the proper context, but then I want to take the focus away from myself into the depths of the lives I have enjoyed observing. Shall we begin?



Before I was born, this place was just hot and damp, covered with forest and wetland. The plants started to lose their leaves and, in time, these leaves collected together in swamps and bogs. After millions of years, sediment and shell remnants accumulated, and the weight of these new layers which would eventually birth me, compressed the old plants until they transformed into a rock, a substance you eventually named “coal”. Coal is of no importance to me but in time, it became very important to you because you use it for producing energy... but I’m jumping ahead in the story.

At this point, while I was still in my infancy, the coal found itself a home lying deep inside of me. Then the sun came... the wind... and then the rain followed. Not long after, the snow accompanied the others; each of these forces shaped me and turned me into what

I am today. So, in fact, it is hard for me to identify the moment of my birth, yet by these processes, somehow, I did come to be. After a long time, plants, mushrooms, and animals started to appear. They grew along my hillsides and ran through my valleys making me more beautiful and helping me feel less lonely. Then, with humans, things started moving much more quickly.

Around 600,000 years ago, the Neanderthals arrived and, about 40,000 years ago, *homo sapiens*, aka the Humans took their place. I have to admit that this was a bit unusual for me at the beginning, but then I got used to it and kind of enjoyed watching their processes of learning. Things weren't always easy on them. They seemed to have a harder time here than the animals, especially in winter. The cold has only been a comfort to me, adorning me with beautiful snow, but what about them? I welcomed them as they huddled in my caves to keep warm, and marvelled as they learned to light fires which they tamed to burn only to their desired extent. Until then, I had never known the lovely sensation of fire in my coves, tickelling me from the inside out. Those were the good times when you made me laugh. Then, around 5,000 years ago, your ancestors began to tame the plants as well, they started intentionally placing little seeds into my womb. This was a game-changer in their survival. This is what you named... hmm, wait a second.... I know this one... Oh yes! You call it "agriculture". This whole agriculture idea grew so fast. Your ancestors were quite good at it; they kept me very impressed as they continued to find ways to make it easier and faster, constantly increasing food production.

Then, as agriculture continued to evolve, humans began to care which plants and resources belonged to whom. So, they started setting borders around their territories. I think at one point I became a buffer zone of unclaimed space between two groups of people who were hostile to one another. There were also some exchange areas whereby groups could trade goods by taking turns

leaving things behind and avoiding face-to-face conflicts. I had seen animals marking their territories before, but it was nothing like this. I must admit I thought the Earth should have been big enough for the relatively small number of humans to exist without conflict. But who am I to know? Besides, my opinion didn't really matter. I might be huge and splendid, but no one was asking for my approval. Not then - and not now.

I did find this buffer zones idea clever, though, because at least they were constructed to avoid conflicts. It seemed your ancestors' first rule was not necessarily "live in peace" but more so "do not live in conflict". Today you are more strongly emphasizing the importance of peace, yet somehow conflicts keep arising. Sometimes it seems that conflicts are your only way towards peace, which I certainly do not understand. I don't want to cause offense, but sometimes I think the early humans made more sense than you "modern" ones.

I mean, think about your ideas around "freedom of speech" which you have established as a right and yet you don't specify who is privy to that right. And your ideas about territories, you say you want peace and yet you do not welcome people coming in peace.... Sorry, I am getting off topic. This process of storytelling is really getting me into reflection, I can't believe how much I need to talk. My apologies for stepping away from the story. Try to live as long as I have without talking to anyone; then you would understand. I promise, I will really try to stay true to the essence of my story. Let's continue, shall we?

Eventually, these buffer zones took another turn. You started building fences and walls to distinguish and separate your lands. Watching from way up here, I could still see the unity of the land, so the walls seemed so useless to me; but I understand this is your way to feel "safe". Nevertheless, these barriers did not seem to

function as you wanted them to. You primarily wanted them to keep strangers out. Yet, regardless of walls, foreigners still came.

Trying to build something like a wall, hoping that it will last and bring stability forever is the most ridiculous thing to me. This behavior does not exist among animals. Every living being has some sort of obstinacy to protect its area, but none of them build physical barriers thought for standing forever. None except humans. A wise woman once said, the only thing that remains constant is change - and the mountains. Well, I might have added the mountain part, at the end. Just ignore my jokes, but listen to her wisdom: change is inevitable.

Let's move on to the 18th Century - naming the passing of time as centuries is very particular to humans but you like to call it that way so I will do the same. Over the 18th century, you amplified your claim on enormous pieces of land. You killed for it and died for it. I have never understood why humans were so obsessed with boundaries and why their fights on boundaries demarcation had to be so bloody. And this greed on conquering more and more lands... What is your obsession with size? You are so narrow-minded with this. Anyway, how about jumping one century further?

In the 19th Century two countries laid on either side of me. One of them and on which I will tell you stories later has been called with a promising name: Speranza (hope in Italian). I somehow felt strange - alienated from my very self. I know that this whole national boundary thing does not really apply to mountain beings. Yet, even though borders do not exist in my world, I couldn't help but think from time to time that due to your boundaries. The result is that some parts of me did not belong to the same country, and I felt deeply sad. I was happy once when there was no such thing as boundaries and people cutting me into two. However, despite my displeasure, these boundaries, borders, and countries all stayed.

Eventually communities in one country had some economic problems. So, some persons living there wanted to move to the other country. I could witness that, and I can tell you that, it is not very easy to pass over me to go to the other side! It is not that I do not want you to do so, but I am just a big old couch potato lying here, doing little but observing. I tried my best to be of assistance but I really couldn't do anything.

When coal was discovered, you kept digging down deep into the heart of me, but you lacked manpower to get as far as you wanted. Local authorities were worried about not having enough working force, so they encouraged foreigners to come and work as miners.

So, newcomers arrived in the region to dig my belly... oh what do you call them?... I guess, immigrants?... They were coming to work, to earn some money, and to have a decent life. I don't think they expected more, but from what I saw, they were unwelcome from the beginning. It was just a job and a roof they needed. Yet indirectly - but also sometimes quite directly - they were told to be different from the "original" residents. This is the reason they dare to treat them with disrespect. They seemed to forget that all the residents of the region were also newcomers not long before. Remember, I have been here long before any humans were alive and I remember the transitions of the first humans who settled here. If anyone can make a claim to this land it is me, but I am not. I think anyone should be welcome!

I should clarify that it wasn't necessarily the residents of the valley who were unfriendly; it was often authorities and leaders who posed the newcomers the hardest time. The importance humans give to artificial structures is really surprising for me. These immigrants were from just next door, living on the other side of the border you built made them so different as to justify treating them badly? The day they arrived, immigrant workers were

escorted by government officials to men and women in white clothes. Workers were pricked with needles, their gums were examined. Muscles, eyes, strength, and agility were tested. They took some blood samples. This whole thing seemed quite strange to me, considering they came just to get a job. I could understand that a medical check-up was necessary, but this was going well beyond, affecting their dignity as human beings. Their heads were downcast; their disappointment and discouragement were visible even from up here. Then, I asked myself a profound question: If I did not exist in the middle of these two countries, would they have been one country, and would there have been no difference, no exclusion, no humiliation between them? I guess we'll never know.

Over the years, immigrants took the hardest jobs, working deep inside me and all around me. They labored daily in the mines over precious coal and sweat as they toiled in the agriculture fields. They built families, enjoying at least this precious joy in life, and not them, but their children, and their children's children, slowly became invisible within the population. So, as time progressed the humiliations slowly ceased.

At this point, I would love to say: *"And they lived happily ever after."* Unfortunately, this only happens in your movies. In reality, there is no such thing. Life is full of ups and downs and the way one responds to these bumps in the road is what makes life valuable.

A few years ago, new people came to the region. They were not from next door, they traveled from very far away. They were called by the authorities and local population asylum seekers, or refugees, or even "illegal migrants". The term "illegal" is so absurd to me because the world does not and cannot belong to anyone, especially to some artificial entities that you call "countries". Not even mountains claim any border. As small as you are, you humans think you are so smart. Yet in all of your intelligence you have not learned how to live with one another.

Searching for new opportunities just like the old travelers, these new immigrants first arrived in a small town amid my hills. Some spoke the same language as the residents, others not. Everyone was very confused about how to find a place to stay and work. Thankfully, some people came up with the idea to build up a network to assist and support newcomers. Ordinary local citizens started hosting immigrants for as long as they could. This was clearly a quick and appropriate response compared to the slow, ridiculously tiny means and efforts that authorities allocated to accommodate people who, seeking a refuge, have the right to a roof over their heads and access to some basic services, including health.

Unlike the immigrant workers who arrived for the mines in the past, these immigrants did not really have a chance to find a job or build a life. Why? Because the rules set up by your government decided so. From the moment when national borders were established, it is up to the State to decide who is allowed to settle in the country and whom not. Unless a person is seeking a refuge, and in that case an international convention has decreed that anyone can cross a border to seek protection. But still, it is the State who decides if yes or not this person waiting for a decision on his or her request, has the right to work. The rules set by the State of the Kalim Valley says that for the first 6 months, the asylum seeker cannot work and has to rely on public assistance. How illogic is this? So many young and strong people who could live thanks to their own activity, obliged to wait with arms folded until the final decision on his or her case... What a waste! So, the only thing they can do is to wait. In some cases, the waiting takes years. In the end, there is no guarantee that they aren't sent back "home" or elsewhere.

Some of these newcomers were represented as suspicious in the media before anyone really knew them. When they were passing

over me, I had the chance to observe them. Some of them were coming from really difficult experiences. I guess it must be normal to show great anxiety in this case even though psychology isn't my major. Anyways I am grateful that the people who chose to get to know and give a hand to these people had completely different views. They showed real solidarity. Others were simply indifferent to the situation. Some others were referring to "cosmopolitan rights". I did not really understand what it means, but I believe it refers to the rights any person has when he or she comes to a new place. At least, this is what seems the most natural and logical to me, considering that everyone is a newcomer on a territory, at some point of History. Unfortunately, the authorities did not seem to know this term, or they were at least very slow to enact it.

I think some of you, humans, think that being born on a piece of land is where you belong to. I told you all, this is only in your head. There is no such thing in reality. Just look at the sky! Do the clouds have passports? Are the birds "illegal immigrants"? Sure, some of your pet animals have passports, but do they know about them? I don't think so. This is something you made it up; and then, once you have decided these rules you suddenly have decreed who is eligible to live on that same land and whom not. What about nomadic people? Aren't they proving that there are different systems? Yours is not the only one, nor the best one. I wish you would all proclaim the truth spoken by Diogenes of Sinope: *"I am a citizen of the world."*

Borders and other administrative obstacles are artificial. Otherwise, all my siblings and I would have been separated from each other when you drew your lines, but we don't see any separation. Borders make you prisoners to yourselves. Do not keep the ones you see as "undesirables" outside of your territory. In your history you established roots of trust, kinship, solidarity, and humanity. Lean into them.

I bet these stories of people I have been watching will melt your hearts. I don't want to spoil it for you, but do you remember the ups and downs I told you about earlier? They are what make their story beautiful. All the difficulties they had to face and all the good things that came out of these difficulties are some of my best stories. So, let me begin...

Tout individu a droit
à la vie, à la liberté
et à la sécurité de sa
personne.



Chapter 1. The announcement

The Daily News



In two weeks, on March 15th to be exact, Kalim Valley will be welcoming asylum seekers into the local community. They are working alongside the association, L'ASSO. This group has set up a volunteer based network that will host asylum seekers as they await their official refugee status from the

government.

The association was created in order to provide support and solidarity to those coming into the country by providing them a safe place to live and help them on their journey towards a new life.

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On the day of arrival, the association will host a small welcome gathering at the town square for those who wish show their support and give the asylum seekers a warm welcome.

Upon arrival, the asylum seekers will be staying in the homes of volunteers from L'ASSO. The collective has asked the municipality to supply extra housing arrangements, but the town hall has yet to respond to their request. When questioned on this, one member from L'ASSO stated:

"It is wonderful to see the overwhelming commitment of the citizens in this integration process, which is why I, along with the association, are a bit shocked that the town hall has yet to respond to us, nor seem willing to host a council meeting in order to discuss this subject further. We believe this would give council members the opportunity to become involved in the process, but we are still waiting for a response".

Meanwhile, L'ASSO encourages everyone in the community to participate in any way that they can. They are hoping to have many more volunteers sign up to host in the coming weeks.

Let's start from the day your printing station sent out that written article which caused such a stir. It was quite an experience to watch the differing reactions to something I would call a simple request.

This paper raised all kinds of reactions. On his train ride home, Dramor (stranger in Welsh) finally got a moment of peaceful silence to consult a newspaper left by a former passenger. The school trip children around him had just fallen asleep; but this tranquility didn't last long. Reading the first page article, sparked the nervous worry that had eased with the lulling of the train. In frustration Dramor wondered: "Why do we have to receive these asylum seekers? Call them what they are... Foreigners! This is getting out of hand. We have our own problems already. We should not create new ones by bringing criminals into our country."



Meanwhile, in a small cottage on the outskirts of town, as the smell of coffee and toasted bread spread evenly across the house, Plaku (elder in Albanian) flipped through its newspaper to find the same article. A few minutes later and after a thoughtful reflection, Plaku turned to its beloved Majka (mother in Macedonian) and said, "Look, honey! There is an association welcoming asylum seekers, I think we have enough room to house a few, don't you think?" With no response, its lover pensively stirred its coffee and let him continue, "I would be glad to finally do something for them, I feel awfully concerned about all they are passing through... risking their lives crossing the human-made-boundaries and being constantly persecuted by the police..." Its roaming mind suddenly landed on a memory, "Do you remember the story of that girl named Blessing, who passed through four countries to finally land in France? She was arriving with two others who had crossed the

border by night. But she was in an especially difficult position because she had injured her leg on the journey. Suddenly, the police found their caravan and began chasing them through the underbrush. In the end she and her other companions escaped... but days after, she was found dead in a river. Her injured leg had failed her, and she died. All because she had to flee from the police...” It trailed off of his story and remembered its original question, “Anyways we should definitely use our room to host them! Don’t you agree?” But the only answer he received was a serious look of concern as she continued buttering her toast.



While the paper was evoking different reactions from each of you, the place where I saw the most extreme responses was among your Valley’s elected representatives. I really don’t think they understand what “cosmopolitan rights” really means. It seems that the association - L’ASSO you called it - had somehow humiliated them by making a “public request” for their help in the final words of the article. In response, they called for an extraordinary, and extremely heated, meeting of the local council. I watched the elected representatives gather together in the town hall, and start fuming around a large table.

“Because of that article, we have our back against the wall. We need to make a decision now or we will lose our credibility,” the Mayor of Turvaline said firmly, sliding the newspaper to the middle of the table. His voice was calm and composed; but the councilors around the table could feel the anxiety behind each word.

One of the councilors, Dramor, had already made up his mind about this initiative when he first saw the article on his train ride home. Prepared to voice his opposition he spoke up quickly, “Listen, it’s simple, those are strangers and our citizens - our village

and valley - don't accept strangers," he said, staring sternly at the Mayor but directing his comments to everyone in the room.

Another attendee, Madra (dog in Irish), couldn't stay quiet after that statement. "No. We have to respond!" he declared, trying to mimic his colleague's strong tone. "It's simple! We already have free social houses which can easily host a family or two! Can you imagine all they've been through? We have no idea the tragedies they have seen in their home countries and along their journey. Now that they are here we can at least offer them a roof! It's simple and it's just the way it has to be done." His urgency had him out of his chair as he spoke but in the silence that followed he gently took his seat.

"I agree with Madra," added Hotza (howl in Basque) in support, "Moreover welcoming those people will replenish our classes with a fresh batch of new kids! It will help show the world that Turvaline Village is not a dying place..." Noting a pause in his argument, another opposition voice, Madu (snake in Estonian), jumped in, "But who will pay for this apartment free of charge? It will be our own citizens! Do you think they will find it acceptable? And what about the day, one of our citizens' families would be in need? It's not fair, we will be leaving our own people in dire situations for the sake of helping complete strangers." Dramor took the bait to drive Madu's knife in even deeper, "Mandu's right, and a citizen left in a dire situation is a citizen that won't vote for us next time. Don't pretend you don't care about our public reputation."

Hotza looked like he was ready to get up and fight with Madu after that comment, but Madra sensed the tension and shouted sternly, "Listen up! Our compassion as humans goes further than those meaningless things! You want to talk about reputation? Welcoming those individuals in need could get us far more credit than pleasing the selfish part of our population!"

“But someday our families might be in need...” began Madu, while Madra wasn’t finished. “Their families are in need NOW.” He interrupted with his deep, brooding voice, “their malnourished bodies won’t wait for another meeting! We are desperately lacking time and we should prioritize the needs of newcomers who need our help now over the potential future needs of our own citizens just because they are from here. What if, for some reason, you had to flee this country with your wife and kids? What if, after years of living in a refugee camp in terrible conditions, you had the opportunity to make life better for your family? And what if you were never given the opportunity because the higher-ups in their ivory tower decided to reserve your seat for a person who - not now - but only one day, might hypothetically need it?”

The room was silent; you couldn’t hear anyone’s breath. Outside, there was a gentle rain that was slowly coming to an end. In the midst of this tense quiet, Madra dealt a final blow to his opponents: ‘Martin Luther King once said: ‘I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character’. I, as Madra, say: ‘I look to a day when people will be helped not based on their country of birth, but on their needs... moreover when we have an available house for them!’

The Mayor had said nothing since his beginning of the conversation, but Madra’s speech gave him food for thought. He intensely surveyed the assembly: Madra was regaining his breath. Hotza was bewildered, a tear in his eyes. Dramor had stood up and was muttering profanities to himself, as he stared out the window. Madu was helping himself to the *saucisson* which had been brought for everyone to enjoy, though none but Madu was stomaching food at the moment. Finally, at the end of the table, there was a simple and shy man who had not yet spoken. He was looking indecisively at its hands, and seemed to be locked in a state of mutism that had overcome him from the beginning of the meeting.

“...Trusis?” The Mayor said gently. “Do you have any thoughts?”

Trusis (rabbit in Latvian) tried to lift his eyes to the group, but in observing the questioning faces, shot them straight back down to his hands. “I am... not against it... but... um.... What will they do here? In the middle of nowhere. With people speaking only Esperanto.... I mean, we live in a place where there is not even a shop where to buy a pack of cigarettes! I don’t know if we will be helping people to host them here.”

“And how will their bodies keep up with the rough terrain and climate of our mountains? We are tough, I certainly don’t think they will be.” Dramor added.

“Will you get along for goodness’ sake?” shot the Mayor. “I am tired and angry - also hungry - and I just want to get this issue over with.” He placed his head in his hands with a deep sign. The councilors were left to say nothing, settling also into their own anger and frustration. Then Trusis’s soft voice broke in one last time: “And if their asylum claims are rejected? What will we do then?”



I watched the whole proceeding from so far away in disbelief. In the meantime, a storm was creeping up over my highest peak. It looked like the end of the rain was only temporary after all. And I wondered: what will the council finally do? It’s not like they do anything to protect me though I have certainly been here longer than them. I wondered if they would shift their mindset to protect these “strangers”.

Chapter 2. The arrival

I do have a sweeter memory of many other humans, there was one special family who helped settle my heart a little over this whole matter. I remember that day very well.



It was early in the morning and the sun was yet to pass over me to bring warmth and light to the valley. Suddenly, the morning silence was unexpectedly disrupted by a large grey vehicle driving through Kalim Valley. As the vehicle stopped across the central square of Turvaline, the door of the passenger seat slowly opened to show a woman wearing a big jacket, well equipped to protect her from the valley's low temperature. Having slipped on her snow gloves, she quietly placed her feet on the snowy pavement just outside her door. It was clear that she was respecting the silence of the environment. Then she gently walked to the other side of the van and opened the back seat door. Another woman got out. She was huddled as she seemed surprised by the cold. I wondered, could this be one of the asylum seekers?

She appeared not quite as prepared as the one I first saw. She was wearing only a pair of fabric shoes and a flowy summer dress under a light winter jacket. She was carrying a small backpack. She also seemed to be quite dizzy, I suppose from the countless turns along my winding roadways. The two women were having their own quiet conversation of which I could not hear a word. Sometimes I cheat by asking a nearby oak tree or a passing deer to tell me what people are saying, but something told me to give them their privacy. After their brief talk, they started walking together down a narrow alley where they arrived in front of a house. Suddenly I realized that the warmly dressed woman was a

representative of the L'ASSO organization; her name was Yardım (assistance in Turkish); and this house where they paused was about to be a new home for Inyoni (bird in Kinyarwanda), the woman in the summer dress and winter jacket; and her new hosts, the owners of the home, Majka and Plaku.



Majka and Plaku had lived in that house since they had been married years ago, and they seemed to care for each other and the house just as much as they care for their friends. After reading the newspaper's article and discussing the perspective of welcoming refugees to their house, they joined L'ASSOCIATION and attended several meetings to prepare Yardım and Inyoni's arrival. When they opened their door to them, it was obvious they were pleased to welcome new guests.

Seeing smiles on everyone's faces, Plaku reached out to shake Yardım's hand. "Hello Yardım! Thank you for accompanying Inyoni to our home." Not knowing what gesture was appropriate, the old man simply nodded his head kindly to greet Inyoni who was standing behind Yardım. "Please, enter, it is so cold today."

Noticing her shyness, the man simply invited them into the house. "Inyoni, do you like cats?" Plaku asked, pointing to the kitten in the living room, "Lulu brings peace and joy to the house and I hope she will make you happy as well". Inyoni peaked to take a look, and saw a well-fed brown cat calmly licking its paw. What intrigued her even more was the fact that Lulu had her own bed and some toys laying around it. "Cats are treated like queens here," Inyoni thought to herself.

When her husband finished the tour, Majka invited the women to come into the kitchen and offered them a cup of tea. Yardım kindly declined the invitation and explained that she needed to

accompany other people who were waiting to arrive at their host-families. Before leaving, she reminded the welcoming event organised by the association on the following Saturday where they would share a meal and a friendly moment to get to know each other better. She turned to Inyoni and hugged her tightly. Yardım left Inyoni her phone number on a piece of paper and assured her that she is in good hands now, but if she ever needed anything she could give her a call. Inyoni's worried eyes followed Yardım as she took her leave through the main door of the house and it slowly closed behind her. With her first acquaintance gone, she was now overcome by the feelings of discomfort and uncertainty. She was quite used to these feelings by now, but dealing with them never became easy.

At this point, Inyoni did not know what to expect from these two people standing in front of her. She felt cold and overwhelmingly tired. So, in an attempt at communication, she looked at Majka, put her palms together, pressed them against her tilted cheek, and closed her eyes. Majka clearly understood Inyoni's gesture, smiled at her, and immediately stood up to show her to her room. She took some time to show Inyoni the rest of the house as well as the bathroom in case she needed to take a shower. Then she left her to settle in.

About an hour later the old lady knocked on the door of Inyoni's new room to check on her guest. Inyoni, wearing a set of new warmer clothes, opened and saw Majka smiling while holding a mug of warm tea and some biscuits. She moved to the side so that Majka could enter the room. The lady placed the mug on a small table next to the bed and left, allowing Inyoni to have some privacy. Inyoni then sat gingerly on the bed, took the mug in her hands, and brought it close to her face. She closed her eyes and took a moment to feel the warmth of the freshly made tea.

Suddenly, tears start sliding down her face and hundreds of thoughts start swirling in her mind.

As the tears settled, she set the now half empty mug on the bed side table and laid back onto the bed. Still cold, she covered her body with a heavy blanket that Majka had left for her. Though settled in her new space, she was taken over by a vast, dark feeling of complete loneliness that contrasted entirely with her new room and kind hosts. Though it was still morning, she was overcome by exhaustion; she fell asleep crying.



Later on the same day, Majka was cooking lunch in the kitchen and Plaku was reading his newspaper next to the fireplace in the living room, next to him sat beautiful Lulu. Inyoni, having woken from her long nap, built up the courage to walk down the stairs, and enter into the living room. As she looked around her, every small detail seemed to catch her attention. A painting on the wall, a very strange coat hanger stand, and the cat walking towards her. Plaku suddenly realised that Lulu was no longer next to him and looked up to her brushing against Inyoni's leg. "Leave her alone, Lulu!" he said, "Come back over here." Majka, hearing the exchange, peeked around the corner and saw Inyoni looking a little lost. "Come into the kitchen," she said warmly, waving her hand towards herself. Inyoni smiled and accepted the invitation; somehow the small kitchen was more welcoming than the large living room.

She looked around the kitchen with the same acute attentiveness. The room was very homy, but the ingredients Majka was using for her food did not look familiar at all. Inyoni was quite confused. "Where are the spices? What are these vegetables that she is using?" she asked herself. Meanwhile, Majka was fumbling to find a way to explain her homemade casserole and soup across

the language barrier. Eventually she just said a simple phrase in Esperanto accompanied by a gesture leading Inyoni to understand that the soup is great to eat during the cold weather. Still, Inyoni's expressive face couldn't hide her discomfort and lack of interest to even try the meal.

A few minutes later, lunch was being served. Plaku had set the table in the living room and Majka was bringing in the plates full of food. It was clear to Inyoni that they wanted her to join them for lunch but Inyoni looks confused. She did not want to eat, not this strange soup and not together with her hosts. She had become very used to eating alone. Majka noticed her hesitation to join them, but she was insistent, this was an important opportunity of getting to know each other and she was not going to let it slip.

She asked Plaku to borrow his tablet and started typing into her translator application. Content, she presses the voice output icon and the tablet read aloud in Inuoni's language, "My dear Inyoni, in our home, eating together is something more than a tradition. It is a way for all of us to spend quality time together, talk about our days and share our thoughts. Essentially it is a way to get to know each other better and learn how to get along. When we invite you to join us for a meal, it's because we would like you to become at ease and consider this place your home! You should know that you are invited to sit with us during all our meals, but you are free to eat wherever you are most comfortable. Still, there will always be a place set for you."

Inyoni listened carefully to every word and as soon as that voice stopped, she looked down at the floor having regretted her behavior. When she regained her confidence, she looked up at them and smiled. "Let's eat!" she said in her language and she sat down to join them. They enjoyed the hearty meal together, silent but content around the table. Little did Inyoni know, these were the first steps to this couple becoming her "family".



Chapter 3. Steps forwards integration

The kindness shown to Inyoni should be that of all you humans could show to one another. It did not take too much hard work for Plaku and Majka to bring a smile to that young girl's face. But, I've noticed that in some ways it is easier for people who are traveling alone. They can go in and out as they please and they don't take up too much space. When you travel as a family things can get more complicated. You have some emotional support by your side but you also have the fear of being separated from each other or not finding a space where everyone can fit. Some families were very lucky if the L'ASSO found them their own place to stay.



November 14th, 2020 - 15h30

“Jen la ŝlosilo de via apartamento!” said a member of the L'ASSO in Esperanto. She was holding out a shiny new key with a big smile on her face. No one in the family responded.

“This is the key to your apartment!” she tried in English. No response still.

“Esta es la llave de su apartamento”, she attempted in Spanish and actively placed the key into the mother's hand. Still, no reaction.

It took three more attempts and the use of a translator application until the family finally understood that the place they were standing now was truly their apartment. They actually had a place where they could rest, all together, in one space. Apparently, L'ASSO had managed to persuade the municipality - after their tumultuous meeting - to indeed offer up the available community

housing to asylum seekers. It was a huge blessing to the family and they were very grateful to have it.



The family enjoyed their first few days getting acquainted with life in Turvaline. They had their own space and a beautiful green park nearby where their young daughter could play. But when a few weeks had passed, they began to worry. The money which was supposed to be provided to the family by the Speranza government somehow had not yet been paid. Without the promised financial support, Kove (life in Guarani) had to start actively looking for work to cover his family's expenses. Well... 'a job'... not a "real job", since as a freshly arrived asylum seeker he is not allowed to work. But whatever the law says, he needed money to sustain his family, so he would accept whatever job, including "black".

This is so obviously illogical when you view it from my height. The man is able to work, he is ready to work, he wants to work and yet authorities want him to wait. They want him to sit on his hands until his papers come through, and only then start searching for a job. All this when he was ready to get to work the minute he got his family to safety. Sorry, I got distracted from my story again, but this was one point I really wanted to drive home. Anyways, soon he was out looking for a "job"...



December 1st, 2020 - 6h00

It was a dark and cold morning as is typical during winters here. Kove was sound asleep dreaming of his father again. In the dream he had waved his hand and smiled at him: "Try your best, my son, hang in there!" he said. And then, he started drifting away. Kove wanted to chase his father, he ran faster and faster "Baba,

Baabaa...” but he could not catch up. He covered his eyes with his hands to make sure it was real. And then... he woke up.

Realizing it was a dream didn't stop the memories from flooding back. Kove's father had passed away many years ago in an accident, exchanging his life to save the life of his wife and child. Kove was only seven years old at the time. This nostalgia was broken by the melody of his alarm, Chopin Nocturne No.2, cutting through the silence of his room. He instinctively grabbed his phone, shut off the alarm and looked sideways; his wife and daughter were still sleeping soundly. He sighed with relief. But he was still longing to be back in the dream again, to be with his father to have someone to support him.

In this land, where no one was close to him, things were not easy. Kove looked through the window, it was pouring rain. There was a similarity between the scenery outside and the feeling inside him: glacial. The cold usually made people want to lazily bury themselves in warm blankets, but Kove was on a mission. He told himself to protect his wife and his daughter at all costs. He would give up his very life for them, the way his father had done to rescue him and his mother those many years ago. Therefore, despite the freezing weather outside he was ready to face it. He kissed his wife gently and prepared himself for the new day.



December 1st, 2020 - 8h00

Kove left his house. For several days he had been trying to find a job that matched his abilities. He knew his strengths; he is healthy, agile and dynamic. A few days ago, while passing through a house construction site, he came up with an idea to ask if he might lend a hand for finishing building the wall and painting it... but the owner already had a mason. That day, December 1, 2020,

was an important day for him. Thanks to job seeking support from L'ASSO, he finally had an appointment with a woman who ran a painting company. If all went well, maybe he would get a job before New Year's Eve. What a gift that would be to his wife and daughter!

Making sure to be on time for his interview, he was trying to follow the GPS instructions on his phone. The directions were hard to follow in Esperanto. He passed by street signs that were hard enough for him to identify, much less to memorize. How he missed the more chaotic yet more familiar streets of his home town which he knew by heart. "Ting ting", he heard from his phone... Low Battery... "Oh no!" he thought. Last night, in the rush of preparing for the meeting, he forgot to charge his phone. The red signal indicated that the phone battery was running low. With no GPS, how could he go to the appointment? Kove thought of his dad and knew he would not give up.

He tried to ask passersby if they could show him the direction to the meeting place, but all his requests were made in broken Esperanto and nobody could understand what he wanted. He pronounced again and again very slowly "CASA... NOVA... PEN... TRADO...". Then watched as each confused face shook their head and kept on walking.

Finally, with the help of a kind high school student, who took the time to actually understand his foreign articulation, Kove was able to reach his meeting point. He climbed to the third floor of an ancient five-story building. The woman who welcomed him at the door seemed to be his mother's age - maybe 50 - and equally gentle and kind. She invited him in smiling and immediately asked, "Ĉu vi ŝatus teon?" (Would you like some tea?) in Esperanto. Kove strained to understand. "Ohh tee.. teon... tea" he thought to himself proud to have identified the word. "Ho ne, dankon

sinjorino” (No, thank you Madam) he responded, in what might be identifiable as Esperanto.

Throughout the conversation, Kove found it very challenging to understand the woman. She had a different way of speaking than the young people who had been teaching him a few phrases here and there. Thankfully, she was kind and tried to speak very slowly, but he still could not understand most of what was said. When nothing else worked, he tried to use body language to show that he was very capable of painting houses or doing any manual labor, but this too seemed ineffective. When the interview finally came to a close he understood the woman explain that she would contact him later if she needed his help. But based on his performance, he knew not to expect as much.



December 1st, 2020 - 20h00

Snow started falling as Kove began his long walk home. It was freezing in this place! He missed the sunny days in his home country and missed his mother very much. Being deep in thought, he didn't pay any attention to his surroundings, and was walking closer and closer to the middle of the street. A truck rushed by him and honked loudly. The driver shouted at him, and the tires had sprayed him with mud, but he didn't care. He missed his dad, the brave man who died while trying to save him and his mom, "Dad, what should I do now?" No one answered him. He raised his face and shouted out loud: "I just want a normal life! Why is life so difficult for me?"

He took his time walking up to the third floor when he got to his apartment. It was still snowing and watched each snowflake as it splashed and then blurred on the surface of the large stairwell

windows. He could not help but think that their indisctness was a reflection of his own future.

He tried to put on a smile before he unlocked the door. He was joyfully welcomed home by his wife, Kerayvoty (hope in Guarani) and daughter Tekombo'e (education in Guarani) who were ready with dinner on the table. He pretended he was totally fine. He just did not want to make his wife worry about him.

In stark contrast to him, his wife had exciting news to share. Thanks to her extensive experience making spring rolls, she found a small job in a sushi shop down the street. The friendly shop owner agreed to let her work as a kitchen assistant after seeing that she was very agile and able to roll nice sushies quickly. He said she could start work immediately the next morning. It would be a busy day because tomorrow was also their daughter's first day of school.



December 1st, 2020 - 23h00

Kerayvoty took her glass of water into the bedroom and turned off all the lights on her way to sleep. "No!" Takombo'e sighed, "Don't turn off the light, please."

"Ah! You are still awake, my love." Her mother walked over to stroke her hair, "Tekombo'e, honey, it's late and you have to sleep, tomorrow is your first day of school."

"But, mum!" she said, fear filling her voice.

"Don't worry," she reassured her, "the school is a good place, people there are welcoming. You are going to meet new friends and learn new things."

"Okay. But can we still leave the light on, mum?"

“Yes, we can leave the light on. Now go to sleep!” she said as she gave her a goodnight kiss. These words made Takombo’e feel better for a moment but the improvement did not last long. She was so worried about her first day of school she may not have slept at all that night.

Kerayvoty was lying awake too. Tomorrow was a big day for mummy too. She was proud to be dropping her daughter at school - proud and afraid. She remembers when she was seven, she asked her own mother: “Why can my cousins go to school but I can’t?” The answer she got back was quick and bitter, “Because” said her mother, “you’re a girl.” From that moment she knew never to ask the question again. But she didn’t want the same for her own daughters. With the memory of rejection burned into her mind she promised herself to raise her children to give each of them the best education they could have. Following this hope, she had carried her child through war and through mountains to give her the very best. She still believed the best was yet to come.



December 2nd, 2020 - 7h50

Tekombo’e and her mother arrived at the school. The school is on the way to the sushi shop, so Kerayvoty decided to accompany Takombo’e. It was hard to tell who was the most anxious and who had the biggest smile. Kerayvoty gave her daughter a kiss on the head and a nudge on the back, directing her to enter through the giant double doors. Tekombo’e’s heart was racing and her hands were fidgeting nervously as she walked into her new school. At that moment Tekombo’e saw a young woman coming to her. “My teacher”, she thought and hoped, since she looked very kind and greeted her with a warm smile. “Hi Tekombo’e!” said Liverita (book in Esperanto), “welcome to your new school”. Tekombo’e

looked back at her mom. She was waving happily now that she met her teacher. She blew many kisses to her mom, and smiled proudly.

The encouragement was settling but seeing the signs in the corridors and above the door, in who knows what language, causes her to doubt herself. Now that she was inside the building, she felt scared. She has no idea how to communicate with anyone else and felt as if she was an alien on a distant planet. She wondered, “if I can’t even read my classroom label, how am I going to understand the teacher?” However, trying to stay unnoticed, she just followed one of the teachers and took a deep breath before she walked into her classroom.

Immediately all her classmates looked at her and seemed to whisper something that she could not understand. The teacher also said something incomprehensible but at least, she had a comforting smile. The teacher tried to speak directly to Tekombo’e many times but it was hard, she simply didn’t know the language.

After a while, the teacher gave each student a blank paper to write about their holidays. Tekombo’e didn’t understand the instructions and the only thing she knew how to write in Esperanto was her name, so she wrote it all over the paper. Tekombo’e proudly inherited her name from her grandmother, but it was a tribal name, so even if she could write it in Esperanto, no one could pronounce it correctly. Examining her assignment, she didn’t like how alone and separate the letters of Tekombo’e stood in this new language. The loneliness of the letters reflected just how she felt in this new school.



December 2nd, 2020 - 10h30

The children were all let out for lunch break. Everyone was running and screaming, playing and eating. “This place feels different from home,” Tekombo’e thought to herself.

Then she found a place to huddle amongst some bushes in the school garden and began speaking to a little tree in her own language, “Back home my school had clear rules for everything. I knew how to dress, how much I could eat in the cafeteria, how to respect the teachers.” This tree seemed to be the only being she could connect to in this place, “My previous classmates looked like me, spoke my language, and we all liked to eat the same food. Here not only am I different from everyone, but it seems everyone is very different from each other... How did they learn to understand each other?” Waiting for the tree to give her an answer, a smile came to her face as she remembered the beautiful Moringa tree in her home village to whom she used to share her secret thoughts and questions.

“What are you doing?” a little boy said, interrupting the pleasant moment. His name was Aki (bright in Japanese), he was a shy and curious boy, about the same age as Tekombo’e, “Were you talking to the tree?”

Tekombo’e was almost sure she understood the question, she wanted to answer but she could not speak in his language. She tried to communicate a question through hand gestures, “Don’t you ever speak to nature?” He just watched her motioning between herself and the tree, decided he didn’t understand, shrugged and ran back to the playground to join his other classmates.

When the break was over and they were all sitting back in their classroom it seemed almost nobody noticed Tekombo’e’s presence. She sat through the teacher’s lecture, periodically checking the clock on the wall, she became quite sure the darn

thing was not moving. On the contrary, the teacher was moving from one side of the room to the other as she spoke. She looked like a ping pong ball in a table tennis competition.

Finally, the end of school bell rings and Tekombo'e rushes outside and runs into her mother's arms. Kerayvoty just closed out her first shift at the sushi shop and hurriedly came to school to pick up her daughter, excited to hear about her first day. The excitement died however, when Tekombo'e melted into tears against her mother's warm coat. Kerayvoty had no words to comfort her child, she had never been to school herself to know the experience. But in that moment she understood the loneliness her daughter had been feeling all day long, she could sense how the other parents were astutely observing her; she was a foreigner to this country and a foreigner to this school, even if her teacher was kindly welcoming her in the class.



I was pained watching the way residents and newcomers struggled to communicate with each other. I mentioned before that some people are just indifferent to foreigners. I saw a lot of that in relation to this family. They were trying to live their lives like everyone around them but it was exceptionally hard on them because they had come from somewhere entirely different. Yet most people, rather than taking the time to be kind to them, become quite unsure how to help, and then go along their way.

I am grateful for the kind souls who put in extra effort - like the high school student who led Kove to his interview, and the man who offered Kerayvoty a job. But sometimes with the language barrier, it seemed even the people who wanted to help were limited in what they could do - like the old woman who was hoping to hire Kove, or the little boy Aki on the playground trying to befriend Tekombo'e. Sometimes it is not enough to just be kind,

it seems that there is an extra amount of effort that people have to exert to welcome newcomers and make them feel at home. I wish there were more of you humans who were willing to put in that kind of work, because it seems beautiful relationships can come out of it.



Chapter 4. Necessary healing

Inyoni was staring outside the windows of the bus, the lake was not visible anymore. The snow covered everything, as if it was a new landscape, “The symbol of a blank page on which to write a new chapter of life,” she thought. The last time she was in Turvaline the autumn leaves were still on the trees covering the mountain with a bronze coat. It was before L’ASSO had found her a more permanent location to live in the City of Lights, a few hours train ride from what had become a beloved town. She was still getting settled in the big city, enjoying the diversity and grandeur of the place, but she still retired to Turvaline almost every weekend just to spend some time with her previous host families around a cup of tea heated by the chimney fire.

This time, Inyoni was arriving home on Christmas eve. Majka and Plaku were not yet home but she had her own key and could show herself around the house. She began to prepare a fire as she waited for her host parents to come home from visiting their grown children and young grandchildren for the holidays. When she got the fire going, she sat down on the sofa, pulled Lulu into her lap and flipped open a photo album. She saw a sweet picture on which they were sitting together with Majka gently holding her arm, they were both smiling joyfully. Inyoni remembered when she did not want anyone to touch her. Anyone, but Majka who, with the energy of her gentle hands, healed Inyoni’s mistreated body.

Inyoni remembered her difficult past. She was treated so badly along the road to her final destination here in Kalim Valley; she was physically abused in multiple ways and her body showed visible signs of these happenings. Ever since then, Inyoni was incredibly sceptical of being touched by strangers. She often hated her body and all the memories that flooded her mind when she would look

at herself in the mirror. Some nights, she had trouble sleeping; the memories kept her awake.

When she first moved in Majka and Plaku's home, she did not want any physical contact, "It is better to keep yourself distant otherwise they may abuse your trust." But Majka knew that she could help ease her tension through healthy human touch. She noticed how Inyoni looked physically exhausted, and knew she needed to relax her body and her mind.

One evening she asked Inyoni, "Would you like to lay down on this table for a massage?" Being an elderly couple, Inyoni had seen Majka and Plaku use the massage table in their guest room to flesh out the typical aches and pains of old bones and joints. At first, she wanted to refuse, but by now she really believed that Majka would not do anything to hurt her.

She hesitantly allowed Majka to lay her down on the table - and found that she was comforted by her touch. Woman to woman, in a warm, cozy home she felt safe as Majka massaged the tension out of her abused body. After some minutes of reconciliation by gentle human hands Inyoni said: "Majka, do you know what? I think I will sleep tonight." And she was proved right. The first time for a long time she slept, a long and peaceful sleep. For months this house had grown to feel like a safe cocoon - and, after Majka's healing touch her own body felt safe too, safer than it had in a long time.

Inyoni was happy reflecting on that day from many months ago. Feeling warm and safe on the comfortable sofa she pulled out her phone to text Majka. "What time will you be getting home?" she asked her via SMS. "PS" she added, "I am really needing a Majka massage this evening!". I scanned to the other side of the city to watch Majka receive the SMS. She had a big smile on her face as

she read and said to Plaku “Knowing that Inyoni needs my message... yes, this is the best Christmas present.”

Chapter 5. The administration

“It will be on Valentine’s day!” Kerayvoty noted to herself as she opened the long-awaited letter for their family’s appointment in court. So many months waiting for something, a sign, a hope. And now the paper was just before her eyes reading: “14th of February, Palace of the Right to Stay, City of Lights.” It was a bother to travel during a holiday but this was something they had been waiting on for too long to be disappointed.

Oh the City of Lights... Kerayvoty dreamt about it since their family began their travels. And they would be going there in just one month, to get international protection, and hopefully then a refugee status. But what if they were rejected? Caught up in the excitement, Kerayvoty had forgotten that the outcome could be negative: a rejection. This mix of feelings, between stress and excitement, disturbed her for a while. But she soon settled into her daydreams, to the possibility of remaining here and obtaining a long-term residence permit for herself, her husband and her child. How is it that such a simple piece of paper can decide a family’s freedom or dependence?

She immediately decided to let their L’ASSO representative Yardım know right away. Yardım had helped their family so much during the long and cumbersome legal procedure. It has been almost two years since they have been in Speranza. Two years that she and her husband have been filling out and signing tons of papers for their refugee status to be finally recognised, with Yardım constantly by their side. Kerayvoty will never forget Yardım’s first comment when they realised the endless length of the procedure, “It seems the State does everything they can NOT to welcome refugees.”



On the day of departure, Kerayvoty and Kove made sure they were both dressed in their finest clothes. They left Tekombo'e home with the neighbors so they wouldn't have to worry about entertaining a child during the long day of boring procedures. At the train station waiting for departure, a feeling of worry suddenly overcame Kerayvoty. The outcome of their two years fight seemed so close now; what if they didn't come out with a good result? But Kove, sensing his wife's nerves, put arm around her shoulder: "Look," he said with a subtle smile, "aren't you excited? I am bringing you to the City of Lights on Valentine's day!" She managed a smile too, he was not wrong.

I watched their train depart from the station and was as excited and worried for Kerayvoty's family as she was. I hoped that the people in the City of Lights might behave reasonably, but I had seen so many of you behave otherwise that my hopes were not too high. How foolish it still seems to me that some humans who from my perspective only just arrived here are now dictating to new humans whether they also have the right to stay. Such strange systems you people have created for yourselves...

Anyways, the City of Light's is too far away for me to see, so I had to ask for details from a fellow mountain range who relayed the rest of the story to me. Here is what it told me.



As soon as they arrived in the city they were completely immersed in a bath of light, Kerayvoty was amazed by the beauty of the architecture and the few emblematic places they had the chance to see. It was everything she imagined it to be. But their purpose was obviously not for sightseeing and as the time of their appointment approached, her nerves grew.

When the couple arrived in the building hosting the court, the civil servants split them into two separate rooms. Kerayvoty tried to resist the separation but the legal staff insisted. Now, she knew she was in for a challenge. Kerayvoty usually relies on Kove's for translation, as he became much stronger than her in Esperanto, but in these next few hours it seemed she would have to do without him.

Despite the presence of an interpreter, Kerayvoty found it difficult to understand the questions. The interpreter spoke her language, but with an accent from another region, which was difficult for her to understand. For sure, she felt overwhelmed with the amount of questions asked by the judge: "Can you give me the names of the persons who threatened you?"; "Did you know them personally?"; "Did the other members of your family have been threatened too?"; "Did you file a complaint at a police station?"; "No? Why didn't you?"; "What is the name of the street where the prison they brought you to is located? How many persons were in the same cell as you?"; "Which date did they release you?"; "Why and when did you decide to leave your country?"; "On which date did you cross the border?"; "What color was the car you used to pass the border?"; "How many checkpoints did you pass?"; "What do you fear if you come back to your country?".

These questions began scrambling in her head. Each question brought back buried memories that she tried throughout all these months to forget. Caught up in this nervous uproar, she tried to answer as accurately as possible. But sometimes she was mistaken, often she stammered, and then she went back on her words, and stuttered again. They were asking about events from so long ago, and that she had been hardly trying to forget. She wasn't even sure if her answers were credible. The judge remained unreadable. He stood there like a robot, executing each question with very little

interest as he does every day, with every person. And asking questions while typing her answers, without raising a single time his eyes from his computer. To him, she was just one of so many.

When she came out of the room, all her nervousness fell off. She felt so exhausted, dried, and empty. Kove, having finished first, was anxiously waiting for her as she exited her interrogation room. Without saying a word, he immediately wrapped her in his arms and held her for a long while. Speechless, they left the building and walked together along the Yellow River. They passed by the Fireflies Garden, the Illuminated Church, the Place of the Phoenix, the Glittering Tower... This stunning view and the sound of the water soothed them both a little. They could breathe again. But walking through the beautiful city, immersed in a bath of light, couldn't stop them both from wondering, "What will be the outcome? Are we leaving or staying?"

Still in the midst of worry Kerayvoty let a small hope build inside her. She looked up at her husband and said, "Well, at least we were together, in the City of Lights on Valentine's Day."

Chapter 6. Finding home

On Wednesday morning, as usual, it was “market day”. Inyoni woke up in a positive mood, still enjoying her vacation with her host family. She got ready and went down the stairs to find Majka preparing pancakes and tea for breakfast. “Come in my dear” Majka said, waving at Inyoni to come into the kitchen. Inyoni was feeling energetic, “Good morning!” she said smiling. As soon as breakfast was ready they started setting the table in the living room. Plaku joined them and, as usual, they all sat down to eat together.

Plaku turned to Majka, “Are you going to the market after breakfast? To buy groceries and maybe pass out some of those flyers we printed yesterday to promote L’ASSO’s activities?” She was startled for a moment, she had completely forgotten that the market was today! Unfortunately, she couldn’t go because she had a medical appointment for a routine check-up that she had scheduled several weeks in advance. Inyoni, listening carefully to follow their conversation in Esperanto, understood the problem. “I can go to the market!” she said, happy to be of some help.

Inyoni didn’t mind going to the market alone because she loved to see the bustling town and sometimes meet new acquaintances. The culture of the market was very strong in Turaline, and one could meet just about anyone there. Inyoni never admitted it to Majka, but she also enjoyed going to the market to have a change from the weekly administrative visits she was obliged to attend while her asylum status was pending. These administrative meetings were always cold and stressful, while the market was able to give her a slight feeling of normalcy.

First stop: the bakery! Inyoni said “hello” to the girl behind the counter who she had seen several times before. She asked for the usual, paid, left her a flyer as she exited the shop. This was the same

tour Inyoni had done countless times before, with Majka by her side, when she was still living in Turvaline. She was happy to find her rhythm again, knowing almost by heart the familiar stands and faces. She was pleasantly surprised when the cheese vendor remembered her, preparing her and Majka's favorite cheese without Inyoni needing to specify.

As she was walking on the street, though, she could still feel the weird looks that some locals were giving to her. But at this point she was determined not to let that upset her. She didn't experience the same otherness where she was living now, in the City of Lights. There were so many people from so many different places that she could just melt in as one with the crowd. Back here though in Turvaline, she was still considered different. She pushed the awareness of stares aside and focused on smiling instead.

As these thoughts were passing through her mind, she instinctively continued her route and soon found herself in front of the local butcher shop. Majka had asked her to buy some chicken for supper. She went inside, greeted the owner and asked for a kilo of chicken. This owner knew her best and was happy to see her since her time away. "How are you enjoying the City of Lights?" he asked, and they enjoyed making simple small talk as he prepared her order.

Interrupting the pleasant exchange, a second customer entered the shop. Without saying hello to the shopkeeper and barely noticing Inyoni, he demandingly placed his order. Trying not to be bothered by his rudeness, Inyoni approached the counter to receive her package and leave a flyer. The other customer, Mr. Chimp, saw her and immediately knew the flyer was for L'ASSO, as he had already received one at his doorstep and had it thrown away.

Enraged, he shouted at her, “What do you think you are doing? Who do you think wants you in this town? I cannot even understand why you all don’t just go back to your countries?!”

Inyoni could not find the strength to react; she just let him scream, her eyes glued to the floor. The butcher stood up in her difference, “How rude! Remind me of your family name, if you are brave enough! Isn’t it “Chimp”?! If I remember correctly this name is not from around here. I happen to know for a fact that this name has its origins in the Ferreros islands. So you are the last person who can judge this young woman or any other, based on where she came from! Now please take your order and leave my shop!”

Mr. Chimp looked angrily at the shopkeeper and then back at Inyoni, grabbed his order and slammed the door behind him on his way out.

Inyoni was extremely moved, she didn’t know what to say other than “Dankon”, thank you in Esperanto. She placed the carefully covered chicken in one of her bags and gratefully took her leave from the store. She knew, after that encounter, she didn’t have the energy to finish her turn around the market. She wanted just to be safe in her room, alone.

Thankfully when she arrived at the house no one was home. She gingerly put the groceries in their place and crept slowly up to her room. Then she laid softly on the bed staring at the ceiling, no tears came but I could sense the deep sadness. I have been observing the people of this land for such a long time, I know when things are troubling them. I wish I could explain to her how the butcher was right, all of these people have come from somewhere at some time, she was just the newest arrival. There was no reason to feel shame, these borders crossed to get here are all just human made anyhow. I was glad to see that sometime later she had let the sadness pass and fallen asleep.



Hours later Majka woke her with a knock on the door. Turvaline is a small town and word gets around fast. Someone already told Majka a part of what had happened in the butcher shop, enough to make her worried. She wanted to see if Inyoni was okay. Once given permission, Majka entered the room quietly and sat down on the bed next to Inyoni. “How are you feeling sweetheart?” She asked in a motherly tone, “Please tell me, what happened exactly?”

Inyoni, knowing that she couldn’t explain the whole story in Esperanto, first reassured Majka that she was alright. “I am ok.” she explained. “Can I use it?” she asked, pointing at the tablet in Majka’s hand. She wanted to use it to translate everything she had to say. Majka gave the tablet to Inyoni and waited as she typed. When she finished and pressed play the electronic female voice started reading, “I am fine. What happened today was very peculiar. I went to the butcher shop to buy the chicken that you needed for tonight’s dinner. The owner was very friendly and tried his best to make me feel comfortable. Then Mr. Chimp entered the shop. I am sure you know him?” Majka nodded in affirmation, listening carefully to the tablet but looking straight at Inyoni.

The electronic voice continued, “Mr. Chimp, only noticed me when I approached the counter to drop off the flyer. Then he shouted at me. From what I managed to understand, he said that no one wants me or anyone like me here and that we should all go back to our countries.” At this point Majka was fighting back tears.

“I couldn’t say anything, I was frozen. I couldn’t even move! Thankfully the butcher spoke up for me and told Mr. Chimp he was being rude. I didn’t know what to say. I was extremely saddened by Mr. Chimp but impressed by the butcher who stood up for me. I simply thanked him and left. I wasn’t even able to

finish grocery shopping afterwards. I didn't buy everything that you asked me to, I am really sorry!"

Majka said kindly "Oh honey, it's ok!" while stroking her cheek but the text wasn't over. "There is one more thing," she continued "Lying on my bed reflecting, I felt very sad over the behavior of Mr. Chimp. But I also realized something else. I realized that there are many other people, not only one or two, but many who have welcomed me here. These people seem to understand, even if they do not know my whole story. Today I felt both rejected and protected at the same time. In a weird way, I feel like I'm home!"

Majka let the tears flow now and smiled as she wrapped Inyoni in a full hug. She too was a mix of emotions, angry, sad, and now happy. She almost forgot she had something very important she was needed to share.

"Wait," she exclaimed, pulling a long white envelope from her back pocket. "This just came in the mail for you today."

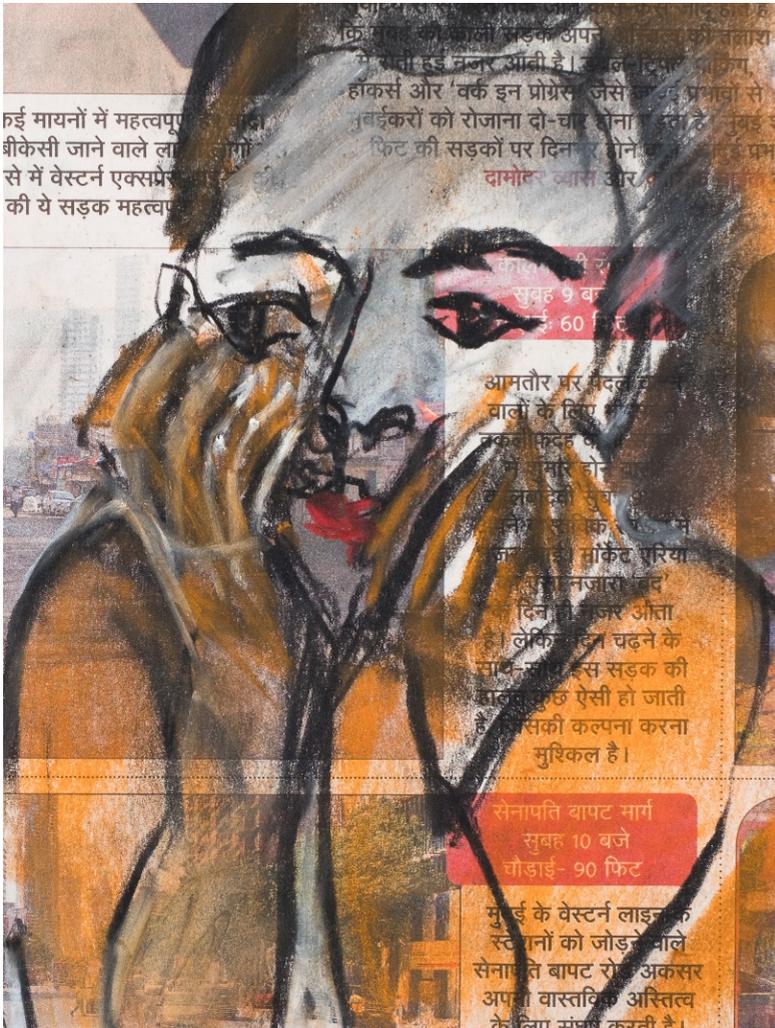
Inyoni froze for a moment seeing the distinctive Speranza government label on the letter. This is the decision she had been waiting on for months. Now it was there, and she wasn't sure she had the strength to read it.

"I know, you are nervous," said Majka, "But go on. Open it!"

With that encouragement, Inyoni gently ripped off the tip of the envelope and pulled out the paper. She took a deep breath and carefully scanned the first line in Esperanto: "We are pleased to inform you that your refugee status has been accepted. You are free to stay in Speranza and benefit from all legal entitlements listed here after..." She did not even need to read the following lines. It was official, "I got a positive answer!" she said to Majka.

Majka grabbed the letter and read it over to be sure there was no mistake. In her joy she wrapped Inyoni in an even tiger hug.

Both women were laughing together and smiling for joy. Majka squeezing even tighter whispered into Inyoni's ear, "I am so proud of you. You are home!"



Chapter 7. Making home

This was an exciting time for me because all of the asylum seekers I had been observing started receiving their letters. It seemed the administration up in the City of Lights was finally getting something done. Though I could not understand the connection between the approvals and rejections. It seemed that some people were welcomed with open arms while others were rejected without convincing explanation. I have said enough about my displeasure in the way you humans require special processes just to allow someone to live on land that wasn't even yours to begin with, but have I explained how much more frustrating it is when you arbitrarily apply your own rules differently for different people? All I am saying is that I am pretty sure I can see all of the papers coming through and I have not been able to understand the reasoning for the rejection. If there is one, someone is going to have to explain it to me. I certainly do not know how you made your decision in relation to Kove and his family. This is probably linked to the switch in Speranza's asylum decisions. In fact, the proportion of asylum positive decisions passed from 70-80% in the 1980's to nearly the exact opposite in the last years: 70% of rejection and 30% of protection granted. However, I am asking myself and doubting that this reflects the level of conflictuality in the world...



Kove succeeded in finding himself work. He had managed to come on staff with a landscape architect who was ready to hire anyone who didn't mind working in the dirt. Kove loved that he was working outside, though it got quite cold in the winter time, but he appreciated even more that he was doing something to support his family. Especially his little Tekombo'e. Kerayvoty had

also continued faithfully working for the sushi restaurant and had even been promoted to shift manager. Her new position made her eligible for a small raise but as she was still being paid under the counter she was not making nearly as much as she should have been. Kove was not either, he knew that the native residents working alongside him were getting paid two times his wages, but he didn't have the legal status to make any complaints.

The family was satisfied though because they had made a space for themselves in this small valley. They were still living in the apartment offered through L'ASSO, but it was enough for them, and they were prepared to continue working in their current jobs until their refugee status came through and they could look for more permanent work.



It was a typical day at the landscaping company and Kove was sitting under the sun chatting with his coworkers during their lunch break.

“What do you think about the immigration rules in this country?” one of his fellow landscapers asked the group, trying to spark an interesting conversation. “I mean, I’ve lived here a long time and it seems things are always changing around who they let in and who they don’t. And now it seems they are letting in more people than ever!”

“I definitely agree,” said his other work mate, “the valley seems to be full of people who aren’t from around here, half the time I’m not even sure where they came from. I am ok with people being here... I mean as long as they come legally, wouldn’t you think so Kove?” He asked directly, but Kove made sure to give himself a moment by taking a big bite of his sandwich.

“I mean you and your family have gone through all the work to get your proper status here,” his friend continued, “wouldn’t you hate to see others cheapen the process by skipping all those steps and just coming through illegally?”

“I don’t think anyone wants to travel undocumented and stay without legal status,” Kove said, keeping to himself that his family had yet to receive their final paperwork. “People try to come in the ‘right way’, they ask for visa, but the process is just too difficult or too long. Some people wait years for their papers to be reviewed, the impossibility of it all... it makes it hard to even try.”

“I think they should have to work a bit,” added the first colleague not recognizing the sensitivity of the subject, “I mean if the process wasn’t difficult then anyone would be coming and we would be left with more chaos than a place can handle. We’ve got to keep the process clear but rigid. That’s my opinion anyways.” he said. Then the conversation just naturally ended.

They started talking a little more about the new construction rules coming through the valley and the latest sports teams moving into the final four of the World Cup, but Kove stayed silent, finishing his lunch lost in thought. “When will we know the results of those interviews?” he questioned himself.



After an afternoon of worry Kove hurried up the stairs of his apartment, excited to settle into an evening with his daughter and wife. Tekombo’e opened the door, “Daddy, how was work?” She asked, happy to see him. “Oh it was fine as always,” he replied, “What I really want to know was how was school? Are you still enjoying your Esperanto class?”

“Yeah, I like it!” She answered, “Did you know, today we had a substitute teacher and she didn’t even notice that Esperanto wasn’t my native language!”

“Of course she didn’t,” Kove said proudly, as he walked with her into the living room, “because you are my smart little girl! Soon you will be writing poetry in Esperanto that even your mother and I cannot understand. Maybe you will become a famous author and...” He was cut short when he looked up to see Kerayvoty sitting on the sofa, holding back tears from her eyes. There was an open letter on the coffee table, with the immediately recognizable Speranza Government stamp in the center of the envelope.

“I’m sorry,” Kerayvoty said, “I wanted to wait for you to get home but...” she tried to choke back the tears but finally gave in and let them fall.

Kove immediately sat down next to his wife and wrapped one arm around her, with his free hand he picked up the letter to be sure she had correctly understood its contents.

“We regret to inform you that your refugee status has been denied. You are no longer allowed to stay in Speranza and are expected to leave the country within seven days or the following legal action will be taken...”

He could not read the rest. Not right now. He had hoped she had misread the letter - she is still a beginner in reading Esperanto - but even a beginner could understand the rejection.

“Does this mean I have to leave my school?” Asked Tekombo’e not fully understanding the weight of the situation.

“No!” Kove replied immediately. “We are not going anywhere my darling.” Kerayvoty looked up at her husband, surprised but hopeful.

“Sometimes we have to make difficult decisions in life,” he continued, “this is one of those times.” He thought hard for a moment, “We will stay here,” he declared definitively, “We will stay here until the government comes and drives us out.” ... And just like that, Kove and his family become, what you call, “illegal immigrants” .



Conclusion

I have seen many humans passing through my valley in my time, but these stories, they stood out to me. I do not know if you can see what I see. I do not know if you can feel for each other the way I feel for each of you. Somehow even though I am a mountain, I believe I might be more sensitive than you allow yourselves to be. I think this sensitivity is what you people call “empathy”. I have heard this word described as the ability to see through someone else’s point of view. I think you can tell from these stories that not all of you are too good at this, but maybe you should try it sometime. I think empathy is a skill that gets better with time.

Meanwhile, as you continue living inside these abstract lines you drew for yourselves, it might be a good idea to review the ways in which you allow people to pass them. It seems that there will always be people moving across borders for one reason or another. It seems that as the world continues to change so people continue to move. I hope in light of these stories you might be encouraged by the positive and discouraged from the negative behaviours shown towards people on the move. Just because they are changing places, it does not make them any less human. I can see you all and I can promise you that you are all human.

I hope you also see that the movement of people is something that you cannot control. Perhaps it is something that you should not even try to control. Because no matter what kinds of borders, authorities, applications, or procedures you put in place to discourage immigration, it will happen anyways.



