

A black and white photograph featuring two faces. On the left, a woman with dark hair and light-colored eyes looks directly at the camera with a neutral expression. On the right, a man with a beard and dark hair is shown in profile, looking downwards. A sharp diagonal line runs from the top right to the bottom left, bisecting the image and separating the two faces. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of their faces.

LEILA AND ABEL  
A MODERN  
ODYSSEY

MANON REHULKA PARKER

## A modern odyssey

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*To all immigrants fighting for their lives and rights.*



## **FOREWORD**

Leila and Abel are fictional characters, however, their experiences as set out in this book, are based on the lives of a number of immigrants who entrusted me with their stories.

I am 18 years old and I live in Switzerland. I have a privileged life and I will probably never experience what these young immigrants have seen or felt. As I was writing this book, I was acutely aware of this and it makes telling Leila and Abel's stories all the more difficult. Their extraordinary lives are so far removed from my own.

I ask both the reader and the courageous immigrants who told me their stories, to forgive the limits of my experiences and of my imagination. What is important to me, is that these stories are told and that the reader is made aware of what these young people have been through.

More than 100 million people have been forced to flee war, conflicts or persecution around the world. Immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees are just like anyone else, with needs ranging from education, housing to employment. They need to be protected. They need a fair chance.

I hope that by telling the stories of Leila and Abel, I can promote awareness of what is going on in the world and in some way, help these young people attain basic rights that are taken for granted in countries like my own.

## ODYSSEY OF LEILA AND ABEL



**Leila**, whose name means “night”, is a 15-year old girl. She was born in Afghanistan. This is her odyssey.

**Abel**, whose name means “a breath of air”, is a 14-year old boy. He grew up in Eritrea. This is his odyssey.

# odyssey

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**(1)***(noun) a Greek epic poem (attributed to Homer) describing the journey of Odysseus after the fall of Troy;*

**(2)***(noun) a long wandering and eventful journey.*

## **CHAPTER 1 (Abel)**

I never noticed how much I hate silence: this unpeaceful, sinister feeling that leaves me restless. The floor is colder than usual. There is hardly anywhere to lie down. Overhead electric lights stay on all night. A small grill in the wall, nearly a foot wide, is the only source of natural light. I can see the moon through the small gap. The night sky is so clear, I can almost see every crater. Tonight, the moon is glowing white-gold, looms large and is surrounded by an ethereal glow. Millions of stars sparkle behind it, a few large ones but mostly little white specks. It is curiously beautiful but I can't enjoy it. I can't sleep. One of my cell mates was beaten with a gun last night, he lost consciousness. No-one called for an ambulance. He is still breathing but he isn't able to talk. I don't know what will happen to him. I am terrified.

It has been four weeks now that I have been in prison, together with two hundred fellow inmates. We haven't done anything wrong.

I left my home, in Eritrea, nearly two months ago, but it feels like an eternity has passed. I miss my sister. She has dark, long, wavy hair and an intense and deep gaze. Mother used to say that her eyes are like freshly turned earth after rain. I miss her calming smile and our late night talks until we both fell asleep. Every time we heard our mother's footsteps behind our bedroom door, we would rush to turn off the lights and jump under the covers without making a sound. We wouldn't dare to look at each other in the eye, we would burst out laughing otherwise. She is the most kind-hearted and intelligent person I know. She loves

reading books and stargazing on the roof. She loved telling me all about the different planets and how the universe was created. She always used to say, "Stars don't disappear Abel, they keep blazing even when the night is over." Even though we're twins and we look identical, our aunties and uncles say that we are the complete opposite of each other when it comes to our personalities. Adya is the clever one. She is calm, disciplined, hard working. My family describes me as the day-dreamer, stubborn and obstinate. Adya wanted to become a schoolteacher someday. As for me, every time I imagined my future in Eritrea, life carrying on forever as it always had, I felt something clawing at my throat. Once, I mentioned leaving to Adya. She didn't want to talk about it. She said, "We can't leave Mother," and she chastened, so I fell silent.

The death of our father left a void in our family that cannot be replaced. In time, you learn to live with it. That's all you can do. But the sense of loss never leaves you. I miss him terribly and long for his presence, but more than anything else, I'm angry, angry that he left me to bear the responsibility of our family. I remember the pain in our mother's eyes. She had loved him ever since the day they had met after my mother crashed into him with her bike. I heard this story so many times. Our parents were lucky, they weren't pressured into marrying against their wishes, unlike most couples. In Eritrea, women generally do not have the right to choose their husband, they are selected for them by an elder family member. Luckily, grandfather and grandmother chose to act differently. They wanted Mother to be happy. That day, when Father died, she was holding back her tears for us, trying to protect us. My sister



and my two brothers were in her arms when the news reached us that our father had been killed in an accident. That night, I had been mad at my father for not letting me work with him. He refused because it was too dangerous.

My father worked in transportation by carriage. He taught me how to direct the carriage and how to take care of the donkeys. It was exhausting as you had to pull hard on the reins attached to the donkeys to direct them and for that, you needed a lot of strength. My father was a strong-willed and smart man. He told me that I was too young to work in such an environment and that I would fall behind at school. My parents had always planned that education would be a very important part of my life, but I was stubborn and kept working in Auntie's garage instead of going to school. That night, I was insisting to go and work with him. I remember him saying, "Abel, I am truly disappointed in you. I thought you were more grown up. You need to be more mature, Abel, if you want to achieve things in life." That is the last thing he ever told me.

I see the tears rolling down my mother's soft pink cheeks, my little brothers shocked, pale as ghosts. Now, sitting here silently, I remember. My baby sister was too young to understand what had just happened. My twin sister, Adya, was curled up against me. I couldn't see her face, but I could feel her tears against my T-Shirt. She needed me to comfort her, as did my mother and my other siblings, but I couldn't as I felt rage inside me. How could he ever let this happen? How could he do this to Mother? We needed him! I needed him!

I don't know for how long I'm going to stay here. The smell and the cold are getting unbearable. I know Mother is doing her best to get some money and get me out of here. I'm tired. I'm hungry. I have lost a lot of weight. My bones have become more visible in my spine and ribs. Every step I take feels heavier than the one before. I talk to myself, "Mother, please help me. Uncles, please pray for me. I'm just dreaming of a better future. I'm sorry I didn't do better at school. I hate it. I can't bear going to school every morning. I'm not like Adya. I can't read books all night and study for good grades."

My biggest problem is that I am terrified of failure and the more that fear grows, the more certain the failure becomes. I keep telling myself, "Adya will make my family proud. She is the most intelligent person I know." I hope Mother can forgive me for working in Auntie's garage when I should have been in school. I hope Father can forgive me for not being honest with him. While in the middle of my thoughts, I suddenly feel my eyelids grow heavy and close. I see darkness. Silence.

## CHAPTER 2 (Leila)

“Leila, you’re late again! Get your nose out of that book and come and help me prepare the dinner!” my mother shouts. I respond, unhelpfully, “Einstein said time is relative, so maybe I’m not late? Maybe you’re early?” I can see my mother rolling her eyes in despair. Since our father has passed away, my mother has wanted to teach me how to cook so that I could help more at home as well as in preparation for my role as a wife and mother. She wants me to be like he, but for me, the thought of staying home every day, makes me feel nauseous. My mother has two roles: take care of her children and keep the house tidy. “We, women, don’t have a choice,” she says, and, to a large extent, she’s right. Famine is raging in Afghanistan. I have no way out. The only way I can help my family avoid starvation is to marry well. I should consider myself lucky that I, at least, have the chance to go to school, the only place that feels like home to me.

My home, in Afghanistan, isn’t a place of comfort or security. My father looked like a respectable, upright and honorable man from the outside. But, for those who really knew him, he was nothing but cruel. He would beat my mother on a whim. She did everything to be the perfect housewife: she cooked the most delicious Kabuli Pulao, she cleaned, did the laundry, she woke up early to prepare the household every morning and she was constantly at my father’s beck and call.

She paid a great price for this. She lost her beautiful skin colour and a profound sadness developed in her eyes, a sign of resignation. You could almost touch the scars in her soul. She could never do enough for him, and she knew it. No matter how hard she tried, there would always be something to make him angry. Mother had given up everything, all her dreams and hopes. She was resigned to this life. I saw her try and hide her bruises with her veil. I remember her saying, "Fate is pre-written. God has a plan for you, Leila. Believe in God and he will keep your ways straight."

I remember the first time I saw what Father had done to Mother. I had come back from school with a big smile on my face, it was the day I had received my first grade : a straight A. I was so proud and I remember wanting to shout it from the rooftops.

When I came through the kitchen door, I heard the most heartbreaking sound, the sound of someone whimpering like a beaten dog. It took me a while to understand what was going on. I took a small step towards Mother's bedroom door, which was half open. What I saw that day crushed me. Dark red blood was dripping down her soft cheek, her throat was covered in bruises, her legs and arms were shaking. I could feel the tears welling up inside me, ready to overflow. And there, next to Mother, stood my father. His face showed no emotion, he seemed uncaring and unresponsive. It was frightening. His mouth was shut, he was grinding his teeth and, in his hand, he

held his black leather belt. Mother was standing against the wall, in the corner of the room, with no place to escape. She was begging him to stop, telling him that the kids would see her bruises. Father did not flinch at her words. I felt useless. I felt like my life was crashing down around me and I was powerless to stop it.

“Leila! Do you listen to what I am telling you? You seem lost in your thoughts today. Can you pass me the onions please?” Mother says.

I am back in the kitchen, doing the things I find most unpleasant in this world. I remind myself why I am obeying, I do it for my brothers and sister, for their future and to be a good daughter to my mother. The kitchen smells delicious. I have been craving Mother’s special Aushak. They melt in your mouth like the candies my siblings and I used to steal from our neighbours.

“By the way Leila, I have talked with your uncles and we have come to a decision. We think it is time for you to marry.” Mother speaks calmly, carefully choosing her words. “Your uncles have found a man with a very good reputation and a lot of money. He is a coal supplier and manufacturer, a very successful man. With him, you will be able to have a higher standard of living than we can offer you. With this marriage, we can save the honour of our family and protect you and...” I cut her off. I cannot believe what my mother is saying. “Protect me?” I yell. “I know why you are forcing me into this marriage with a

stranger. It is not for me, it is for the well-being of those coming after me, Mother, including Elham and Damsa.”

My mother’s face turns red, her eyes widen as I speak. She stops cutting the onions and I can see her hands stiffen, “Leila, I thought you knew...” Of course I knew, but I cannot control my emotions. “Tell me one thing, Mother, will I be able to continue going to school? Will I be free? Or will I end up like you with Father?”

The room fills with silence. Mother doesn’t say a word. I hurt her feelings deeply. I can see her trying to hold back the tears. Nonetheless, I am too aggrieved to care. I turn around so she can’t see me cry and I walk upstairs to my room.

It is school that keeps me going every day. But now, the clock is ticking. Every minute that goes by brings me closer to my future husband, to the moment I will lose my freedom.

### **CHAPTER 3 (Abel)**

There is a strange simplicity that comes with being surrounded by men with automatic rifles. As much as you want to run or fight or scream, you can do nothing, except exactly what they tell you to do. You have no choice, you can only obey.

I am walking down a dark hallway, through a back door and out into the early morning with a number of other boys my age. I can consider myself very lucky, I'm not a man yet, otherwise, I would have to work on the construction site. It is a dangerous place. You can get injured and even die. The prison's ground is uneven so the risk of tripping, slipping or falling during construction work is always there. There are materials lying around everywhere. Asbestos and other noxious chemicals are used. Everything is carried with our own bare hands. Everyday, I hear stories of men being crushed by bricks or falling from a height. Just hearing these stories makes my whole body shiver.

It is morning like every other. The air is completely still. The smell of sweat is as always, unbearable. Somehow, the sun has worked its way through steel and concrete and onto the floor. My eyes drift to the corner of the room where dozens of plastic bottles are stacked, filled with dirty water. Every day, the pile gets bigger. I look at an old man who is lying on a mat. He looks sad, he sees

me and smiles. It is one of these rare moments of warmth, that get me going these days.

After breakfast, it is time to go to work. I do all the menial jobs during the day, like picking up trash, sweeping the cells and the one I find the most unpleasant of all, cleaning the toilets and showers. When I first arrived here, I felt restless because every day felt the same. Now, I just don't feel anything anymore. I feel numb. But today is different. It feels like something has changed.

On my way to the kitchen, one of the guards takes me by the arm. I feel scared, but I don't want to show it. One thing I have learned from being in prison, is not to show any emotion. So, without saying a word, I let the big muscular man lead me to my fate. His eyes are fixed, devoided of emotion. His hair is dull, falling over his face in heaps. He doesn't even look at me. He is looking ahead, at the door at the end of the corridor.

I am really scared now. I start sweating and my head is burning. Some cell mates stare at me. What have I done wrong? In my mind, I quickly go back over what happened the day before. Was it because I had accepted a piece of bread from an older man? Did I forget to clean one of the cells? The guard doesn't let me finish my thoughts, he plants me, straight as an arrow, in front of the door. I want to look behind me to see if any of my cell mates understand what is going on, but I'm too terrified to move. I try to keep my mind from going to dark places,



but it does it anyway. Maybe this will be the last day I live. Maybe they will drive me to some field somewhere, where I will be forced to kneel and I will feel the muzzle of one of those rifles on the back of my head.

“Sit!” the big man says, while pointing to a metal chair. It is the first time I hear the man’s voice. It is deeper than I expected. I feel a shiver down my spine. I hear the door close behind me. I’m alone in a room with a desk and one chair on each side. I can see a pile of envelopes and papers, but I can’t read them. I can’t read. School teachers have tried to teach me back in Eritrea but I was always looking at the fields outside the room, daydreaming about being with my father on his carriage. When the teacher noticed, he tried to bring me back to the lesson, “Abel, read page 42 from line 13, will you?” Often, my book wasn’t even open and the teacher took out his ruler, asked me to put my hands on the table and hit them as hard as he could. I didn’t cry. No matter how badly it hurt, I did not want to give him the satisfaction.

I hear the wooden door creaking. I hold my breath. An old man, in his fifties, with a chubby face and a rather plump belly enters and sits down in front of me. He looks tired. His eyes are half open and I notice dark circles under his eyes. “Your name is Abel Hussain Bukhari, correct?” he asks with a monotone voice, as if he had asked that same question over and over again. “Yes, sir” I respond, as calmly as possible. “We have received bail from your family today. You will be released. We will give

you back your clothes and we will bring you to Khartoum, in Sudan. Be good. If you show any bad behaviour, you will be brought back here immediately. Understood?"

I cannot believe what is happening. Am I going to leave this place alive? Trying not to show any emotion, I respond, "Yes, sir" and I wait for him to signal to me that I can get up and follow the guard who is waiting for me behind the now open door.

I go back through the dark hallway, then out. The guard forces me into the back of a pickup truck. We set off. I am lying on my back, caged in by two benches above me, on which the armed guards sit. It smells of gasoline. I can feel the vibration of the engine through my body. I can see patches of the sky between the benches. It is strangely beautiful.

They drop me off in the corner of an alley. The guards' eyes meet mine, and I see a look disapproving, seemingly questioning the wisdom of letting me free, certain that, in no time at all, I will be back in prison.

I exchange calls with my mother, expressing my love and gratitude. Then, I manage to get in touch with Iman, my childhood friend. I haven't seen him in years. He ran away from home and ended up here, in Sudan, because he was forced to go to the SAWA Detention Center of Eritrea. He comes and picks me up. His face has changed. It is more elongated. He has grown tall as well. His

muscles are more defined. It feels strange seeing my childhood friend after so many years and so far from home.

## CHAPTER 4 (Leila)

I remember that day: the sun began to set as the wind blew softly against my face. The shade cast by the tree was the only thing that cooled me. My sister and brother were walking side by side next to me. We were on our way back from school. It was a long and exhausting walk. I could see tall, foreboding mountains and the dry desert in front of them. The jagged mountain peaks were treacherous and covered in snow. If you looked closely, you could see the rivers flowing through the mountain gorges. In the valleys, I could see some villagers growing their crops and tending to their animals. My legs were aching. Elham, my brother, didn't want to walk anymore. His little legs couldn't keep up, so I took him on my back and we continued our long walk. My sister, Damsa, was complaining, she had a stomach ache. She probably hadn't eaten enough for lunch. "We'll be home soon," I told her, hoping that it would be enough to give her the strength to continue walking.

As we arrived in our village, it seemed quieter than usual. You could even hear the sound of birds chirping. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for a second. It felt magical, peace and quiet, but something seemed abnormal. We crossed a narrow street with tall buildings that led to the main square. There were old rusty bikes on the muddy floor, clothes were hanging from the windows to dry. Although no rays of sunshine penetrated the street, I knew it by heart. Usually, there was an old lady watching people pass by, with her big hazel eyes, always a smile on her face. I could not tell how old she was.

Today she wasn't there. As I was wondering about why this might be, three men appeared at the end of the street, about 5 meters away from me. They had their backs to me, facing the Main Square. They were dressed all in brown, their red shawl was covering their faces. They were walking at a fast pace, like stalking wolves hunting down their prey.

Out of fear, I took Damsa and Elham and threw them behind a pile of bamboo. The men had rifles in their hands. My pulse was racing, my heart pounding. I felt light-headed and dizzy. "Pull yourself together!" I told myself. I started to struggle breathing, nearly choking.

"Leila what's happening?" my sister asked, "Why are we hiding?" That's when I heard the sound of gunshots. Behind the bamboo sticks I watched as a bullet passed through a man's head. The man fell down to the ground. Blood spilt on the floor.

My brother was curled up against my chest. My arms were covering his ears while my hand covered my sister's eyes. "Don't look," I told myself, but I couldn't resist. The gunshots wouldn't stop.

I am in my bed. I wake up in my oversized T-Shirt, full of sweat, my back still sore and my eyes wide open. Mother says that it will take some time for me to forget that day. Damsa and Elham are still too young to be traumatized by what has happened. It has been a year since the day the Taliban attacked our village. I am reliving that day over and over again.

I need some fresh air to clear my head and to remind myself of who I am, and who I want to be. I get out of my bed, put my slippers on and start moving blindly towards the door, trying not to make the wooden floor creak. I quickly look back and see Damsa and Elham sleeping peacefully in their beds, their little hands wrapped possessively around their blanket, their eyelids shut with their beautiful long eyelashes and their mouths slightly open with their pretty pink lips. I long for their innocence. There was a time when a cuddle from Mother would solve all my worries and sorrow.

As I am sneaking into the garden, I hear a small noise coming from Grandmama's bedroom. Shouldn't she be sleeping at this time of the night? Grandmama has been sick for the last couple of years. She isn't able to move much and her health is deteriorating. Her breathing is more laboured and talking is hard for her. I feel sorry for her. I wish I could take some of her pain away. We can't afford treatments or to go to the doctor. We can hardly afford to feed the whole family. As I take a quick peak in Grandmama's bedroom I see her sitting on her old antique armchair, with a big book in her hands.

"Grandmama, shouldn't you be asleep? Do you need my help to go to bed?" I ask her. "I could ask you the same question, young lady. Come and sit on the bed so I can take a closer look at you," she replies. I haven't heard her talk that much in a long time. I obediently sit on the squeaky metal bed, with my hands on my knees, and look at Grandmama. Her face looks tired, but her green-brown eyes say something different. Her eyes are so alive.

“Something seems to be bothering you, Leila,” she says. Her expression changes. All of a sudden, she seems sad. “Just nightmares,” I respond abruptly, trying to hide how I really feel. “There is no need to play pretend darling. I know what’s going on. Do you want to hear a story?” I nod, not knowing what is to come.

Grandmama takes a big breath and says, “When I was a little girl, I was just like you. I was a very serious, calm young lady. I was clever and people often compared me to a calculator or a dictionary. I loved reading books, but my parents didn’t want me to. My father said it was not something girls should do. So, he burned all the books I had.” My eyes drift to the book Grandmama is holding. There is a black young girl on the cover with clouds behind her and a red paint dash across her face. I can read the words BELOVED, by TONI MORRISON. The girl’s eyes seem full of fear and lost hope. It makes me sad.

Grandmama continues, “One night, when my siblings and parents were sleeping, I packed my bag and prepared myself to leave the house. But I was too scared. I was frightened of what would happen if I left. So I didn’t. Leila, I could have achieved so many things in life. If you don’t take some risk to create the life you want, you will spend the rest of your life regretting it. Leila, no matter how scared you are, take the risk. Your name was given to you for a reason, you know. Shine. I believe in you.”

## CHAPTER 5 (Abel)

I live with Iman. His apartment is very small, with two beds in the middle of the room and little space for anything else. There are clothes strewn all over the floor and it smells of gas. I had never seen a city like Khartoum before. The city has huge buildings and long bridges over the river called the “White Nile.” I don’t know what it is about the city at night but after a hard day’s work, there’s nothing I find more calming than looking at the city lights. Sometimes, I grab a blanket and climb onto the roof just to admire it all.

Since I was a small child, my dream was always to become an engineer, but then, I came to realise how the world worked and I had to accept that this dream of mine would never come true. Now, I am an apprentice mechanic, working with tuk-tuks. Iman taught me the parts and systems used in tuk-tuks and how to properly maintain and fix them. The tuk-tuk company didn’t want to hire me at first, because I am too small, I look weak. Iman managed to convince them to give me a chance. The work environment is a little daunting. Men are always very focused and serious. They remind me a little bit of Adya.

When I worked at Auntie’s garage, I used to put the money I earned in Father’s coat. But every time he found the money, hoping to make him proud of me and happy, he would punish me. To him, I couldn’t have a future in Eritrea without good grades at school. “They will send you straight to SAWA, boy. You stand no chance in that military camp,” he used to tell me. But I kept going to the garage to repair vehicles. I would then scrub my hands and face hard to



remove any trace of the oils and lubricants I had been working with. At the exact time when the other children finished school, I would come home and then go out to work with Father.

Now, I'm worried about money. As an apprentice, I'm not earning much. How am I supposed to pay the rent, the food and, most importantly, repay Iman? I'm so reliant on him and he has his own financial issues. Iman is in almost the same situation as me. We work 10-12 hours a day. Our work is repetitive and monotonous. It's difficult to see a way out of our situation. We have always been the closest of friends. Iman and I used to play football together when I wasn't working with my father. We would gather some boys, plant sticks on the ground to mark the goals and play barefoot on the dirty field behind Iman's house. Now, these memories make the guilt I feel all the worse. It keeps me awake at night that. I need to find a way to take some weight off his shoulders.

## CHAPTER 6 (Leila)

My mind keeps transporting me to yesterday, to what Grandmama told me, “Your name was given to you for a reason, you know.” I can’t get it out of my head. What did she mean by this?

By the age of eight, I was consistently top of my class. I was the girl who helped other pupils. My favourite subjects were English and Geography. My dream has always been to study. I imagined myself sitting against the trunk of a tree, on a bright green lawn, reading books. I once saw a book with a huge white building that looked like a palace, on its cover. The title was “King’s College London”. I could picture myself there perfectly, learning things about the world, the economy and literature.

“Children, today we will be talking about a continent named Europe. Does anyone know the name of any country in Europe?” the teacher asks. I know the name of most of the countries and feel proud. The teacher continues talking about Europe, including its history and its people. We learn how to locate the countries on a map. When she talks about notable tourist attractions, my attention is drawn to the Acropolis in Athens. It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Perched on the top of a hill, it looks so powerful, as if it could protect all of humanity. The geography lesson is fascinating, but it makes me sad to realise that I will never see these things with my own eyes.

At breakfast this morning, Mother told me that we were having dinner with my uncles and with my future husband.

She was already fussing about what we were going to wear and what she needed to prepare for dinner. Mother asked us to be on our best behavior, but I know that the request was directed to me solely.

I wonder what he looks like. Mother said that he owns a company that supplies coal, so I suppose he can't be that young. I hope he is kind. Every girl's dream is to find a man who protects her like a daughter, loves her like a wife and respects her like a mother. I long for my fairytale prince. At the same time, I am scared. Every dream I have, everything I have been aiming for my whole life, could be ripped away from me and torn down. My future is entirely dependent on him.

It's 6 pm. I have dressed carefully, as Mother wanted. I am elegant and pretty, but I don't feel at ease. My dress is red with gold threading and little sparkles at the front. While I'm putting on my hijab, I look in the mirror. My golden necklace is shining. It is the necklace my grandmama wore when she was my age and met her husband. I am scared. Actually, I am terrified. If I could run away, I would. Then, I hear a knock on the door. I take a deep breath. "They're counting on you, Leila," I tell myself.

The man is short and overweight. Under his chin, you can see his flesh protruding. His eyes are dark brown and his eyebrows perfectly shaped. His hair has been combed to the back and fixed with gel. His red tie is tucked in his suit. There is no flaw. I enter the dining room and I can see his eyes crinkled at the edges and the corner of his lips turned upwards. My heart starts racing. I'm trying to hide my

emotions. I have never been looked at like this, in my entire life.

The man, Mateen, is complimenting my mother's food and our hospitality. He has perfect manners. I can see Mother's face light up, her cheeks blushing and Grandmama's proud smile. Mateen and Grandpapa have a long discussion about the reason for him to marry, how his company is doing and about the economy in Afghanistan. I sit still. I don't dare say a word.

"So, Leila, what is your favorite thing to do?" he asks me. For the first time this evening, I look up. Our eyes meet and I feel intimidated. I look over to Mother who nods her head and smiles gently, signaling that I can respond. "I love reading books," I answer. Mateen looks at me in a strange way. He then takes another bite of the Mantu in his plate and turns to Grandpapa to discuss the Taliban and the Soviets being driven out. He doesn't speak to me for the rest of the dinner. What have I done?

It's over, finally. I feel nauseous. I stand up and start helping Mother clean the table and the kitchen. I can see Grandpapa and Mateen making their way to the patio. "What do you think, Leila?" my mother asks, with the most soothing voice she can adopt. "He seems nice," I answer, not wanting to say more. I finish drying the plates and putting them back on the shelves. "You should go outside with Grandpapa and Mateen," she goes on to say. Mama's voice is dry now. Without saying a word, I put the last plate on the shelf and make my way outside. I can feel my pulse racing.

When I arrive on the patio, I see Mateen sitting upright in the chair, a cup of tea in his hand. Grandpapa is nowhere to be seen. Where did he go? All I see is an empty chair next to the one Mateen is sitting on. "Can I get you anything?" I ask him politely. My hands are trembling, so I turn them into fists. "No thank you. Sit down. We need to talk." I didn't expect him to talk to me with such a cold voice. There is a silence between us. Minutes feel like hours. It is deeply uncomfortable.

"I am going to marry you. You will be my wife. For my sake and the sake of your family, you will not go to school anymore. School has no purpose for you. You will cook, clean and care for our children. I will provide our family with food, money and a roof over our head. I will respect you as long as you do your job, so I can do mine. Do you understand?" I can feel a big lump form in my throat, my heart is racing faster than before. I'm trying to fight against the tears that are welling up in my eyes. I cannot start crying in front of my future husband. I can't let my family down. I take a small breath to calm me down. "I understand," that's all I say.

He leaves me and I go up to my bedroom and cry. I let everything go. This can't be true. This can't be the end of my life. It's too soon. I'm still so young.

An old proverb comes back to my mind: "Who leaves the old road for the new one, knows what to lose, but not what to find." I ask myself, "What do I have to lose, I'm going to die inside if I stay here." Suddenly, I think back and

## A modern odyssey

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remember Grandmama's story of when she was a little girl. I understand its meaning now. I need to go. I need to escape this place.

## CHAPTER 7 (Abel)

I can't sleep. I'm tossing and turning. I can see Iman sleeping peacefully next to me. My head is burning, I have a headache and I'm shaking. I feel like somebody is hitting my body with a sledge hammer.

"Iman. Wake up. I don't feel well," I whisper. Iman puts his hand on my head and realizes how hot it is. I can see from the expression on his face that it is bad. "We need to get you to the hospital, Abel," he says. We both know what this means if I need treatment. We are both already struggling to survive. "No, don't worry about it, it will go away," I say.

Days are passing and the symptoms are getting worse. I don't have much appetite, but I try to drink as much water as I can. I insist on working in the garage with the others. No matter how sick I feel, I need to work to get some money.

Working feels like hell. Every move I make, hurts. Suddenly, my vision blurs. "Iman, I don't feel good." I see darkness and little white sparks. I hear Iman shouting my name.

As I wake up, I see a room with light blue walls, packed with white beds. Next to me, there's a bag with fluids hanging from a metal stick. "Where am I?" I ask. "It's okay Abel, you're safe here." I turn around to see Iman sitting on a chair. "You fainted in the garage and we rushed you to hospital. Your blood pressure was very low and you were breathing rapidly. The doctor gave you antibiotics. He said that you have a low blood cell count, your liver shows signs

of damage and your kidney isn't functioning normally. But you're okay now. We just need to wait for the test results."

The only thing I can think of, is how I am going to afford this. I can't be sick. This can't be happening. I need to work. I have a tuk-tuk I need to repair for a client by tomorrow. I try to stand up and hear the voice of a woman, "Where do you think you're going, young man?" An old lady is walking towards me, wearing a white coat. She's probably a nurse. "Lay back down right now. You are in absolutely no condition to walk."

"I feel better," I lie. I have the feeling I am going to die. My lungs are hurting. I can't breathe. "What's going on?" Iman asks. Two or three people rush in the room with a big machine. I can feel somebody lifting my head up and putting a plastic tube over my nose and mouth.

Malaria. *Plasmodium falciparum*. I have heard the name before, and I know it is transmitted through mosquito bites, but no more. The nurse tries to explain to me the particulars of malaria, but it washes over me. I can't tell my mother about this. She would worry to death.

"You will need medication to recover, Abel," the nurse explains. "Every morning you must come here, we will give you medication that will make you healthy again. Can you do that?" I nod, but I still don't know how I'm going to pay for this. "You should get some rest now," Iman tells me. So, I close my eyes and pray to God that this nightmare will soon end.



## CHAPTER 8 (Leila)

My eyes are welling up. At night, the village is very dark, with just oil lamps twinkling in the houses on the hills. I kiss my sleeping brother and sister on the forehead. I look at our bedroom one last time. I can't believe this is it. I have been planning this moment for weeks. My mother is lying in her bed, sleeping calmly. I kiss her on the cheek and whisper, "I'm sorry Mother, but I have to go. I need to save myself." I look into my grandparents' bedroom. Grandmama is sleeping too. I tell her, "I'm doing it. I'm leaving." I don't look back.

The car is slowing down. There are five other people with me. We don't know each other. All we know, is that we need to leave this country. Doubts creep in and I can't stop them. We've been driving for a whole day now. Mother has probably realised that I have gone. I hope she doesn't blame herself. I left a letter on the kitchen table explaining why I decided to leave. I wrote that I love her very much, but that I cannot marry that man; to do so would kill a large part of who I am. I was born to be more than just a 15-year-old Afghan bride. I promised her that one day we will see each other again and that I will make her proud.

The car stops. It is night, the stars are shining bright and the moon is lighting up the sky. The driver indicates that it is time to move. We get out of the car and follow another man who has just arrived. We aren't allowed to make a sound. We walk for 3 hours. It gives me time to think, think about whether I made the right decision or if it is a terrible mistake.

Suddenly, the leader of the group stops abruptly in front of me. I nearly bump into him. "Be careful woman! Do you want us to get caught?" he whispers angrily. I can feel the gaze of the other Afghans land on me. My cheeks turn red. I need to be more careful. All I have with me, is a plastic bag with a change of clothes, a toothbrush, toothpaste, my money, some papers and a pen. I also have a piece of paper with my family's number written on it, so that I can call them when I arrive and the book Grandmama was reading. I took it to give me hope.

We arrive at the border. On the other side, there is Iran. I'm excited, but also terrified. I don't know what is awaiting me on the other side. I have never been so far from home before. The lakes are dry because of the heat so we can cross them barefoot. All of a sudden, I hear gunshots. I freeze. Men are shooting directly at us. I can't see them. I jump into a bush. A woman and two children get injured. A little boy, around 6 years old, is shot in the hand. I'm petrified.

After waiting for what seems like an eternity, I see one of the men who was in the car with me. He walks towards the border, holding his arm, probably hit by a bullet. "Hey! wait for me," I whisper. I take my bag and walk towards him. His arm is bleeding. I take one of the T-Shirts from my bag and tie it around his arm to try to stop the bleeding. He thanks me with a nod. I don't care if I don't know this man, I prefer to be by his side than being alone right now.

We continue walking until we arrive at a wall. The man goes first. He tries to climb up with one hand. He eventually makes it to the top and raises his head. All is clear. He sits on the wall, looks around to see if anybody is there. Then, he bends over, reaches down with his good arm to help me up. We jump down on the other side of the wall. Men are waiting for us.

I'm in Iran.

They take us to an old mountain hut. Inside, hundreds of men, women and children are sitting or lying on the floor. I can see a mother feeding her baby, children sitting by their father, trying to make themselves comfortable. Some women are as thin as rakes, shaking and trembling. Some men wear bandages on their legs and arms. I'm shocked. I try and find a corner where I can sit.

They give me soup to warm me up. I start talking with a woman next to me who is patting her daughter's back to get her to sleep. I cherish the human contact. We talk for hours about where she comes from, what she is doing here, why she left her home. Later, I write everything down to remember that I'm not the only one. There is hope.

## CHAPTER 9 (Abel)

1994. I was 7 years old and I had just started working with Father. We had a lot of work to do on that day. The carriage was new and I loved driving it around. Father said that after school, we would drive the carriage back home with the donkeys, so that we could feed them and prepare them for the long journey the following day. School finished too late unfortunately and Father decided to only take the donkeys back home with us. I was very disappointed. I wanted to drive the carriage. I had been looking forward to it all day. Father tried to explain to me that it was dangerous to drive it after sundown, but I wouldn't listen and kept complaining. I was more stubborn than the donkeys! Father eventually agreed to let me take the carriage and drive it to Auntie's garage.

It was the first time I would do it by myself. I was so proud. The garage was at the edge of the city. When the city lights started to fade, I realised that I was not on the right path. I continued until I arrived at a village that was about two kilometers away from Asmara, the main city of Eritrea. The donkeys started to be frightened of the dark and stopped often. I was frightened too. I didn't realise it but Father had been following me the whole time. When I arrived at Auntie's garage, Father was there, waiting for me. He told me to leave the carriage and take the three donkeys home. We had to move fast, as donkeys get scared at night and can easily bolt. I realized my stubbornness had put Father and I in a dangerous situation. We started jogging towards the house, Father in front with his bike to make sure the donkeys didn't escape.

All of a sudden, I felt a sharp, stabbing pain in my ankle. I screamed and Father ran to my side. I had been bitten by a snake. If the snake was poisonous, I would die within 15 minutes. We were about two kilometers away from the city, so we couldn't get to a hospital in time. Luckily, the snake wasn't poisonous, but I couldn't walk. My poor father had to carry me on his shoulders, push his bike and shepherd the three donkeys up the long hill to our village.

When I think back at this day, I think about how proud I am of my father and how grateful I am for what he did for me, what he taught me and how, no matter what, he was always there for me. He was a great father.

Now, I'm lying in a bed in a hospital. My father isn't here. He can't guide me. I wish he were here, telling me off for not listening to him. I feel desperately alone and I miss him terribly.

## CHAPTER 10 (Leila)

It has been 15 days since I first arrived in the mountain hut, the place where the smugglers keep us secretly. Every couple of days, we see new people arrive. It's shocking how many of us there are, penned in like battery hens. We've tried twice to escape to Greece, both times we walked for about two days before being caught by the police. They beat us and sent us back here.

I'm starting to get used to the smell and the lack of privacy. I talk to a lot of people. I found some pieces of paper and every time I hear a new story, I write it down and put it in Grandmama's book for safe-keeping. The stories are dreadful: children getting shot in the arms of their parents, women being abused by men, police beatings.

I met Salim, he is 19-year-old and from Northeast Syria. He explains to me that his family lost their house and that despite the presidential election, they have no freedom. He has been stuck here, in Turkey, for more than 3 months. He has tried to escape and, like me, got caught. He has been beaten by policemen with a metal stick. They hit him so hard that they fractured his tibia. Even when he screamed in pain, they wouldn't stop. I ask him if he has seen a doctor, he tells me that he would never be able to find or afford one. I have written over 40 of these stories down. Every single story is both fascinating and tragic.

One of the smugglers calls out my name. It is time to try and escape one more time. I take what little of my belongings remain and follow my group. I have not eaten a lot in the

past few days. My jaw and cheekbones are prominent on my face and my ribs are visible. They feed us unwashed salad. There is nothing else to eat. We start walking down the mountain in the middle of the night. Every minute feels like an hour. Eventually, I hear the sea. Then, I can smell it. I feel a breeze through the layers of my coat. We stop. We wait for the right time to move.

I hear the signal. We all run towards the beach like a herd of animals and climb over the edge of a small wooden boat. I am concerned that the small inflatable dinghy won't support the weight of so many people. Suddenly, I hear the sound of dogs barking and men shouting. The police have seen us! There are still a few people climbing onto the boat. One woman and her child fall down in the sand. "Hurry!" the smuggler shouts. I can see the shadows of the men running down the beach. The woman hands me her baby. I grab him. The poor thing is freezing. He cannot be much older than 6 months. The smugglers pull the woman onto the boat while another starts the engine. The police is approaching, but just in time, we move away from the shore.

I'm still holding the baby while the woman catches her breath. I can see tears in her eyes. "Thank you," the woman says as she takes back her child. I nod. I try not to look back. All I want, is to look forward. We will make it this time. I can feel it.

The engine stops. We are about 20 meters away from the Greek coast. Silently, we let ourselves drift to shore. As we arrive, the smugglers help us get down, one by one. We

## A modern odyssey

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walk up the beach. I pray to God that the police isn't there. I pray to God that no one will be injured. I pray to God that we will make it, alive.



## **CHAPTER 11 (Abel)**

It has been one and a half year now since I first arrived in Sudan. I have grown into a young man. I have a beard now. I have become stronger and taller, I can lift heavy equipment now, like the others. I work hard. I managed to repay Iman with the money my mother sent to me. My boss tells me that if I continue to work hard, I could become a professional mechanic.

Iman left. He had saved enough money to go to Egypt. I haven't heard from him since then and I am worried about him.

I would like to go to Europe. I asked around how to get there and got introduced to a migrant smuggler. He asked me to work for him, so I stopped my job as a mechanic. Now, I am driving his clients around, I pick up packages for him, I do his grocery shopping. He said he would give me the money to get to Libya. Everything I do, feels wrong, illegal. I never know what I'm transporting or who I'm driving around. I'm constantly scared the police will question me. One wrong move, one suspicious look and I could be killed.

Now, this man tells me that he will not pay me. I have been working days and nights for him for three months. I can't believe he is doing this to me. I trusted him.

How will I get to Libya now? I have been saving money for almost two years. I sit on my bed and take the envelope under my bed. Inside, I see the money I have counted a hundred times. It's not enough.

But then, I notice something. I notice a lump in the side pocket of my bag that I've never seen before. I take my bag and open the pocket, there is nothing in it. I empty the bag full of clothes and photos of Adya, my dad and my mom. I miss them so much. I see a small tear in the inside of the bag. Why have I never seen this before? I put my hand in it, I feel something. A piece of paper? No, an envelope. This is strange. I take the envelope out. It contains money and a letter.

*"Dear Son,*

*If you're reading this, I am dead. I have been receiving death threats. The government is after me and I want to protect you. I am scared for our family. I can't tell you what is happening, I don't want you to worry. In this envelope, you will find some money. Keep it and use it wisely. You're bearing the responsibility of our family now, Abel. They are all counting on you. I don't feel that I've prepared you for the reality of the world. I was never able to make you understand what you mean to me. You were named after your great grandfather, Abel. He and I share the same values: courage, kindness and forgiveness. You do too.*

*Take care of your mother, your sister and brother and Adya. I know you will do the right thing. Never underestimate yourself. Let God guides you. God is good.*

*I love you, boy.*

*Papa"*

I'm speechless. I knew that Father supported the Opposition, but I never knew he was so actively involved. So, Father's death wasn't an accident, it was an act of the Government. All the years of anger I have felt towards my father suddenly disappear. I feel at peace. I also feel determined to honour my father's memory. I'm going to make it to Europe, find a job and support my family. With the money Father gave me, I will be able to continue my journey. And with Father's letter, I will be able to overcome any obstacle that comes my way, because I know that he believed in me.

## CHAPTER 12 (Leila)

We have been standing in a line, under the blazing sun, for hours, waiting to register with the local authorities. My mind is going crazy. Everybody in the detention center is exhausted. We all want to see life outside of the camp. The food they bring to us once a day, is often mouldy and insect-infested. It's like food for animals. I sleep for most of the day. There is nothing to do.

Before I arrived, I had pictured Greece as a beautiful country, with heavenly sand beaches, turquoise water, stunning sunsets, islands with white houses and ancient sites. All I see now, is a high razor wire fence. I see tents everywhere that keep collapsing. I see abandoned stone buildings with leaking roofs. I see children, men and women suffering from loneliness, from hopelessness and betrayal. I am trapped inside a room with hundreds of other children, detained like prisoners, like criminals.

I have read *BELOVED*, by TONI MORRISON four times since I arrived. While Sethe, the book's protagonist, is giving me hope and reminds me that the past should not be an obstacle to the present, I am starting to despair.

I feel like a ghost here; no one can see me. Even in my sleep, I dream that I am in prison. There is no escape. I ran away from home to find freedom and instead, I find myself here, imprisoned. I see no future at all.

Tonight, I am having trouble sleeping. I'm thinking of my brother and sister. I imagine Mother looking at my picture

on the wall, above the sofa, in the living room and my grandparents waiting for me to bring them tea and reading them a story.

A girl, younger than me, named Kalila, suddenly comes running into the room, her eyes full of tears. After a brief silence, she says. But then “I... I’ve been raped.” My throat closes up. I don’t know what to say. She is so young. I invite her to come with me, in my bed, while trying not to wake up the others. She joins me and whispers to me: “The... The man pulled me in his tent, I...I was on my way over here and he...he pulled me in.” “Take a deep breath,” I tell her with the calmest voice I can muster. I can’t even imagine what she has been through. Some of the other girls slowly wake up. “Let it all out, you’re safe here. You are with us,” I say. Now the girls are coming closer, some are stroking her trembling back or twirling her hair or wiping her tears away.

Kalila continues, “He pulled me by my hand and closed up the tent, keeping one hand on my mouth. I couldn’t say anything. I tried shouting, but no one heard me.” It reminds me of the times my father beat up my mother. Now, Kalila is in my arms, shaking uncontrollably and crying. At least I can be here for her, something I couldn’t do for my mother.

## CHAPTER 13 (Abel)

I look at the horizon. There is nothing ahead. I don't want to be here. I have lost the notion of time. The sun is high in the sky, it is probably late morning. The sea is not blue like on the postcards from school. It is grey and it merges into the grey sky. Everything is just grey.

There are five hundred of us on a flimsy boat. The boat looks like it will sink any minute. We've been at sea for 4 days, with no food and barely any water. I sleep in the hull with four other boys, we share one single bed. It smells of fuel and rotten eggs. I wish I could be on the deck instead. I don't have a choice. There isn't enough space for all of us up there. I try to close my eyes.

We arrive in Libya: a prison, a place of violence and abuse. Guards are beating us up, day and night. We have no food and no water. For women, it is worse, they are raped and abused. I translate what the guards say as I can speak Arabic. I translate the most horrible things to young children who have been taken away from their families, or to women who are frightened to death.

Suddenly, I smell something like burnt wood. It wakes me up. What is going on? I see the others waking up too. I see smoke coming into the hull. We all run towards the exit, up towards the deck, trying not to suffocate. And then, come the flames. We see a bucket of water and try to put the fire out with it, but the flames spread fast. My heart is racing. It's so hot, I can barely breathe. Everyone is stuck in the narrow corridor that leads to the deck. Everyone is

panicking. I ask them to stop screaming, but no-one can hear me. In the corner of our room, I see water slowly covering up the floor. The air is unbreathable. I take my T-Shirt to cover my mouth. One by one, I see people falling on the floor suffocating.

As the boat begins to sink below the surface, I'm trapped below deck, unable to escape. When the water gushes in, I feel someone clinging onto me, pulling me towards the bottom of the flooded cabin. I hear people screaming, and see the water crashing all around me. With all my strength, I try to grab a metal bar right in front of me. I hold on tight. The man clinging onto me slowly lets go and disappears into the water. I am now almost completely submerged. I take my last breath and swim through a mass of bodies, both dead and alive. I can see the flames through the water. I don't have much air left in my lungs. I swim until I see the blurry view of the ladder. I pull myself with my arms. I have barely any strength left. Cold or fear, I can't tell the difference. I tell myself, "Keep going, keep going, don't give up. You can do it." I am running out of oxygen. Everything is turning black. I want all this to stop.

All of a sudden, I feel the grip of arms around mine. Someone pulls me up. Air. I gasp for breath. I slowly look up and see the sky. I hear screams and people crying, but only in the background, muffled as I drift in and out of consciousness. Our boat is surrounded by dead bodies. I am unable to move anymore.

In the distance, I hear someone shout, "They're coming!" The Italian coastguard is coming.

## CHAPTER 14 (Leila)

It is night. The sky is as dark as ink. I understand her now! I understand Grandmama. I understand why I was given my name!

“Kalila, wake up, we’re leaving,” I whisper in her ear. Despite everything that happened to her, her will remains unbent. She is so brave. “What?” she responds, half awake, half asleep. “Wake up quick, take your stuff, we’re leaving. Don’t make any noise, we can’t wake up the others.” My heart is racing and the adrenaline is flowing through my veins. Kalila asks, “Did we finally get the registration papers?” “No, we’re escaping. Trust me,” I respond. She doesn’t seem convinced and stops getting dressed. I try to convince her, “Kalila, ask yourself, what do you have to lose?” She thinks for a second, looks at me and then, she finishes getting dressed and packing her bag. I am ready. I go to the balcony. I hear steps in the corridor. Oh God, they have heard us. “Come quickly!” I say, “Go over the railing, I’ll hold you.” She throws her bag above the railing and we hear it land. It seems a little higher than I thought. The steps get closer. Kalila climbs over the railing. I hold her hands. “You trust me?” I ask. She nods. She slowly lets go of the railing. I support her until she is just above the ground and let her go. Suddenly, I hear the bedroom door open. I turn around.

The woman in charge of unaccompanied girls in the camp stands straight in front of me. She is a horrible person, cruel and uncaring. “What in the world do you think you are doing?” she asks. I don’t respond. I throw my bag from the



balcony and climb over the railing. The woman grabs my hand, but I throw myself down. I land on the dirty, filthy ground. A sharp, stabbing pain shoots up my ankle. I let out a little shriek. "Are you okay?" Kalila asks concerned. "I'm okay. Come on, we need to go before they catch us," I answer. I limp. We need to move quick.

For the whole time I was in the detention center, the one thing that kept me sane was my daily walk. It gave me time to think and clear my head. One day, I walked a bit further than usual. I found a bush that went through the wired fence and I realised that there was a hole under it. Every day I took my hair pin and widened it a little more. Eventually, it got big enough for a child to crawl through.

"We're nearly there," I tell Kalila. At that moment, I see bright white lights pointing towards us from the top of the building. The guards are after us. "Faster!" I yell. Kalila's little legs can't keep up. I take her hand and pull her. The torch lights keep going from one side to the other. "I can't keep up" Kalila tells me, "Continue without me." I don't let her go. We're now past the tents, out into the open. I see the bush in the distance. "Come on Kalila, we're nearly there."

As we reach the bush, I push Kalila into it and ask her to crawl. I look back and see two guards approaching with their flashlights. The noise of the alarm gets louder and people start getting out of their tents to see what is going on. "Quick, Kalila!" I tell her. I jump in the bush and crawl through the hole. We both pause and look backwards. The

two guards have turned around and are walking in the opposite direction.

We did it! We actually did it! I feel a smile form on my face. I can't believe it. It's the first time I have smiled in months. There are no word for the euphoria I fell inside of me. It is pure excitement. Kalila and I run away into the night.

## CHAPTER 15 (Abel)

“Abandoned on the streets” that’s what is written on the front page of a newspaper I see hanging on the edge of a bin, with a picture of two dark-skinned migrants leaning against the wall of a little supermarket. It could be me. For weeks now, I’ve been sleeping in cardboard boxes, outside, in the cold. There’s nowhere else to go. I am walking across Italy, looking for a home and finding none. I am not safe. People steal from me, even though I have so little.

An old lady approaches me. I expect abuse, verbal or physical, like always. “Please, just leave me, I will go away,” I say, in my best possible English I can offer. She smiles. In her hand, I can see some money. She points to a building at the end of the street. “Go to the train station. Do not stay in Italy. There is no future for you here. I have heard on the news that Switzerland is welcoming migrants. Go to Zurich. Your life will be better there.” Before I can say anything, she turns and leaves.

Zurich, I have never heard of that place, I don’t know anything about it. For the first time in weeks, I have an objective, it gives me hope. I walk towards the station.

## **CHAPTER 16 (Leila)**

It's the sound of a whistle that wakes me up. I slowly open my eyes and look out of the window. There are so many people, busy people running to catch their trains, children playing on the platform, coupled hugging, some to say goodbye but not letting go, some to say hello as if they had not seen each other for weeks. A feeling of joy goes through my body. It seems so busy, but so calm and peaceful at the same time.

I have travelled so far. From the detention center in Greece, I went across North Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Austria. As I passed each border, I pictured the map of Europe on the blackboard of my school. Here I am, after months of hostility and fear, I look around me and see people, small people, black-skinned people, white-skinned people, girls, boys, women, men, grandparents. It is so cosmopolitan.

I quickly put on my coat, take my bag and step out of the train. I take a deep breath, smile and stride confidently into the city of Zurich.

It has now been six months since I first arrived in Zurich. I feel at peace. I sit on a bench, by the lake. It is so calm. I am here with a boy I met in my new school. It's a school with people like me, who have fled their countries. They teach us German so we can find an apprenticeship. The teachers are kind, patient and helpful.

Looking at the lake, we talk about our respective stories, our good fortune, our misfortune and our nightmares. We are different in many ways: our country of birth, our skin colour, our mother tongue, our childhood, but we share one thing in common, we have both fled from home hoping for a better future, we have both travelled thousands of miles, on an epic journey. An odyssey.

I turn around and catch him staring at me. “Can you believe we made it?” he asks. I lean on his shoulder. I wish I could stop time. “No, Abel, I really can’t,” I smile. Silence. I never noticed how much I love silence.

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**QUOTES FROM THE INTERVIEWEES**

*“Be kind, grateful and believe in God” – M*

*“If you want to feel, how it is to live a good life, you need to experience the bad life first”  
– E*

*“Never give up. Never lose hope. I experienced the worst things. I know what it feels like and sometimes I also told myself I would give up, that it is the end. But I never lost hope. Don’t just give up. Think about the future. Never look back. Just in front. Then everything will be okay” – E*

*“When I first arrived, I was scared and tired. I didn’t have anybody” – M*

*“The first thing I thought when I got out of the train, with all my baggage in the evening, as I was looking around, I just thought wow. I want to stay here. It’s a beautiful atmosphere” – A*

*“We’re human beings. I fought way too much in my life. Sometimes you just need to let go. Live your life” – Z*

