

W A K A

W A K A

F O R A F R I C A

ELIF CALISKAN

---

Slowly, I opened my eyes. Before me, a half-tire buried under the sand clung to a wooden board—a half-tire that had kept me from a half-life. I was alive. I should be alive. I think I am.

I had spent my life in Tanta, a town an hour north of Cairo. Boys would learn to swim in the irrigation canals while girls, burdened by heavy, layered clothing, watched from a distance. We would join them later on land, playing simple games like chasing a tire down busy roads. Our hands would turn black from the grime, driving our mothers mad when we wiped them on our pants. Chaos and danger were familiar companions in these small towns with large populations. But here, in the open waters of the Mediterranean, our ship was at the mercy of forces I could neither understand nor control. Boys and girls, mothers and fathers, were packed together like sardines, staring out at the waves. I felt helpless amid the 700 men, women, and children aboard the *Adriana*, an old fishing trawler meant to carry no more than 100 souls, now repurposed by human smugglers to transport seven times



Photo Credit: The New York Times

that number. My parents had sold Layla, our aging water buffalo, and spent all our savings to pay the smugglers who had driven us to Libya, where we would board the *Adriana* now sailing us to Greece, towards what we hoped would be our new future as immigrants.

I clung to the edge of the rusty vessel. My face felt like sandpaper, with the cold spray of the sea on my face. The journey would take three days at most, with enough food and water for two. They needed every inch of space for their human cargo. On the first day, as we boarded the ship, the guards herded me and my parents into an industrial fish fridge below deck, its walls heavy with the stench of decay. My dad quickly slipped a handful of cash into a guard's palm. For an extra payment, the guard allowed us to move to the top deck—a decision that would save my life, though not my parents'.

As the hours bled into days, desperation took hold. By the fourth day, we had consumed the last crumbs of food and the final drops of water. A few, driven by thirst, formed a human chain, each person lying on the floor, clutching the legs of the one ahead, stretching down to drink from the unforgiving sea. Others wanted to warn them in all languages of the boat: Arabic, Urdu, Persian, and, was it Pashto? At the end of the day, the boat's engines failed. The smuggler with a gun on his belt told us that we were drifting towards Greece, no worries, no worries and that his men would, inshallah, find us as soon as we reached “the island.” We had to believe. Belief maintains hope, inshallah.

On the sixth day, a baby died. His mother, desperate, fed him her own saliva, trying in vain to quench his thirst. When his tiny body lay lifeless on the cold metal deck, the men could no longer be restrained. They attacked the smuggler and his four men, the bad, who had refused to call for help from the authorities. Seizing control of the vessel's radio, they attempted to reach anyone nearby. During this chaos, I was lost in another world, tuning my small transistor radio; its green dial was my only link to hope. Amid the scratchy sounds on the radio, I stumbled upon my favorite song, Shakira's *Waka Waka*. As the familiar rhythm filled the air, my mother shot me a shaming look.

Just after sunset, a plane appeared in the crimson sky. For a brief moment, a collective sigh of relief rippled through the deck. I would later learn that the European Union Border Agency had been alerted by the Italian authorities who had intercepted our desperate cries on the radio. The plane circled above, and hope flickered on every face. Arms waved frantically toward the sky, a desperate plea for salvation. Below deck, those trapped started pounding on the ceiling with anything they could find, begging us to open the hatches. We did, making the boat even more unstable. I hadn't seen the smugglers in a while; the good must have thrown the bad into the sea. As we performed a strange, desperate dance, waving our hands to catch the plane's attention, they took our photographs. And then, they left.

The seventh day, the last day of our short lives, was the longest. The sunset once more, this time dragging down all our hopes with it. It felt as though our vessel had drifted into the void of space, the world watching silently as we teetered on the edge of destruction. Chaos soon followed as the madness of the night took hold. A thunderous wave struck, and we all collapsed, curling into fetal positions, covering our heads as if that could protect us from the inevitable. It was dark, and within

that darkness, all I could see was our unfolding destruction. As we drifted powerless, my gaze wandered until it found a comforting surface to rest on: the floral-patterned dress of the woman ahead of me. My eyes traced the red and green flowers on the dress's black canvas as they swelled with the wind, lifting the fabric gently before settling back down. In Tanta, my mother would direct me to catch the edge of our flower-patterned tablecloth as she lifted it and laid it flat on our small dinner table. I loved tracing the flowers with their long stems as they spiraled through the tablecloth, connecting the edges of our table. I continued searching for textures around the boat that would let me escape into memories of home. My fingertips checked the small dial of my transistor radio in my pocket. It comforted me. Then, a huge wave hit us from the side, scattering us across the deck like marbles on a marble floor. People screamed, trying to hold on to one another. In that moment, I lost my father's hand. People were shouting in different languages, their words incoherent but their meaning clear: Heeeeeeeelp! Every muscle in my body was stiff, my fingers numb from gripping so tightly. Suddenly, a massive wave slammed into the side of the boat, tilting it precariously. The world tilted with it, and for a moment, it seemed like the boat might right itself. But then, with a sickening creak, the ship rolled over with all its men, women, and children. The deck beneath my feet slipped away, and I was plunged into the air, the cold wind whipping past me as I began to fall.

When my chest hit the cold surface of the sea, I was dragged into darkness, and the world around me became a chaotic swirl of bubbles and bodies. I kicked frantically, trying to reach the surface, my lungs burning as I fought for air while the ship went down. Miraculously, my hand struck something solid. I clung to it in desperation: a car tire nailed to the side of the boat, still attached to a wooden board. The entire assembly had broken off from the ship. The tire's curve helped me lock my arm through it. My fingers took refuge in its familiar wavy dentures. After a few minutes, I saw a man struggling to swim toward my precarious floating device. He was slow and on the brink of losing consciousness. As he reached out, his fingers gripped the edge of the wood that now supported us all: me, the tire, and him. But his weight began dragging us down. With trembling hands and without thinking, I slowly brushed his cold fingers away, one by one. He drifted off, and his body slowly sank. I was going to survive, inshallah, as I lost a piece of my humanity.

Some time had passed. I had lost consciousness. My feet grazed the ground while the upper part of my body remained above the water, almost dry. With my eyes still closed, I listened to the whispering wind. Through my eyelids, a soft pink hue filtered in, mingling with distant, faint voices. My hand, now freed from the tire, rested on warm, dry sand. Slowly, I opened my eyes.