



Invisible Hands

EUROPE THROUGH
UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS' EYES

Wave, tidal wave, mass, stream, current, avalanche, torrent, landslide, flood, tsunami... Insulate, separate, divide, manage, restrain, drown, rinse, stream, spill, chain, shackle, channel, dam, block, storm, plunge, capture, regulate, combat, clog, suppress, drain...

These words have usually been used with natural phenomena and catastrophes. Now they are used in the news to tell about immigrants and refugees. I came across these words time and again when trying to understand the subject of my graphic novel *Invisible hands*.

There was an exact moment when the idea for the book was born. In 2001 I was in Paris, near the old opera house and the fancy fashion stores. A North-African man in a worn suit jacket was throwing sticky figures, childrens toys, into a big shop window. The sticky figures tumbled down the window and he would throw them again. The man was then shooed away by the shop keepers. Expressionless, he moved on to the next window and started throwing again.

The character kept bothering me. I began imagining: how did he get to this point in his life. Where had he come to Paris from and why, what hopes did he have when the jacket was still new. Did he have a family back in the old country, was he in contact with his loved ones or was he ashamed to be in touch with them anymore, since apparently he could not send any money home. I had many ques



tions and no answers.

At the time, I knew nothing of the lives of the undocumented immigrants. In Finland, in the beginning of the millennium, the whole question of them was non-existent. Only after four years I found an anthropological thesis that dealt with the very same questions I had – the motives and hopes of these people. What made them to leave it all and commit to a life endangering journey to Europe. I contacted the writer Marko Juntunen who soon agreed to be my guide and interpreter in Morocco and Spain.

We travelled to Morocco in 2005, mainly in a small coastal city of Larache. Marko had lived there for three years interviewing people who were willing to speak to me openly as well. As an example of their trust, and admittedly for being the only one with a camera, I was asked to be the official photographer of a five year old boy's circumcision ritual.

Rashid, the main character in my story was to have a lot of that boy's dad's features and life experience. Rashid is a poor man with low self esteem and a tendency of being jealous. He wants to be a good man in the eyes of God and his family, especially his father whom he highly respects. He shares the typical Moroccan immigrant's dreams of better life for himself and his family, and also has a strong need to show that he has what it takes to be a man.

For Rashid, as for many immigrants, the journey to Europe is also a kind of rite of manhood. In Morocco there is a poetical concept of immigration: *Harraga*

– burning one's way through to the other side. In Larache, everybody had a friend or family member, who had tried to smuggle themselves to Europe. Some succeed, while most people get deported back or die during the journey.

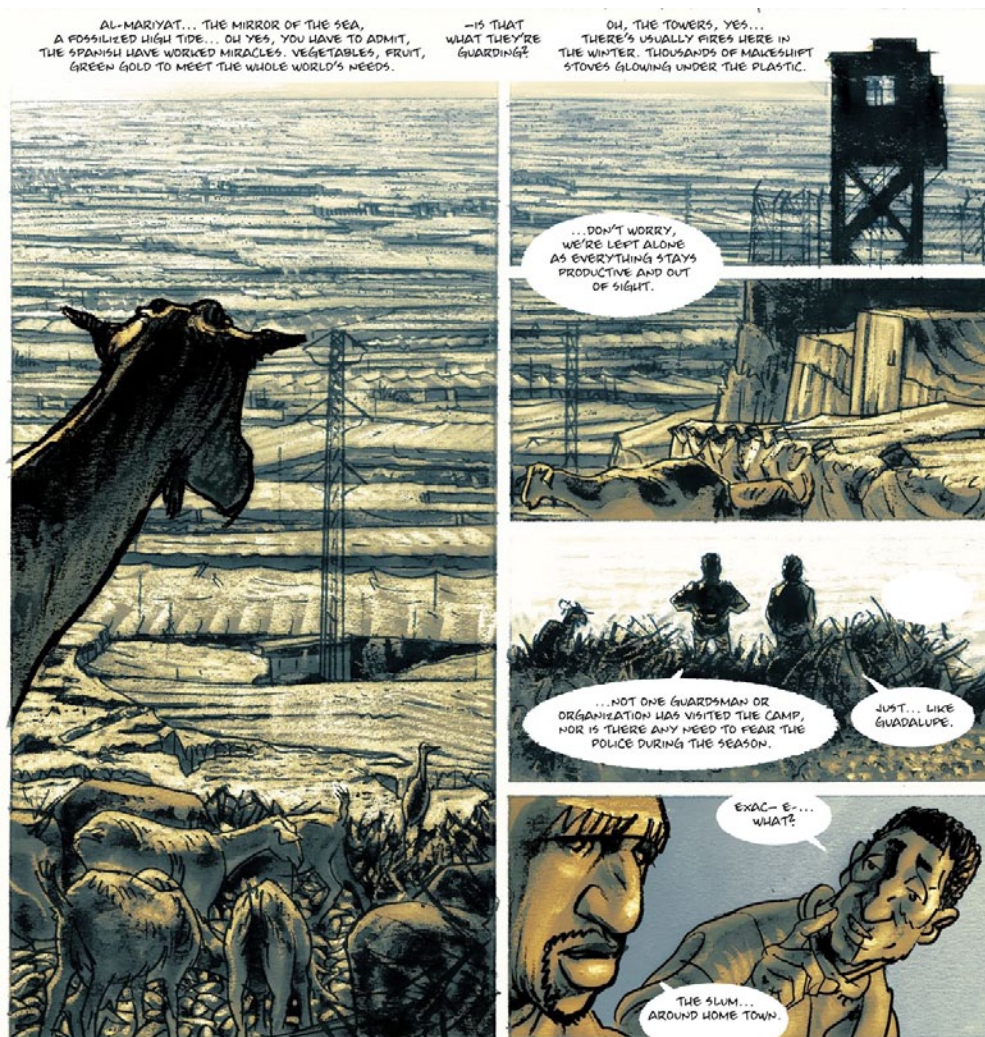


In Morocco we did expect to see poverty and misery. The real shock came to us later in Almeria, in Spain. Over 16 000 greenhouses the size of football fields, area that could be seen from the moon with bare eyes. It was estimated that over 40 000 undocumented immigrants from Morocco alone worked there in the greenhouse industry. They had no permits and no rights whatsoever. They were very scared of speaking to us, since every contact with an European was a potential threat of being deported.

With Marko's fluent Arabic we eventually earned their confidence. They took us to see how they lived in the makeshift houses built of the junk left from the greenhouses. They showed us how they had to boil water from the stinking open air irrigation pools for their drinking and washing. They described how they got their food from the open dumps, where the excess products are thrown. We gave them instant cameras, so we could have pictures from inside the heavily guarded greenhouses.

The Red Cross and few immigrants' own NGO:s were the only ones trying to help and educate workers of the rights they should have. Just before we arrived to Almeria, one workers's association's activist was murdered, and the official story was that it was a drug related killing by a rival North African.

The officials, politicians, media and the employers held together and maintained the image of a legal business activity. Guardia Civil, the organisation responsible for border patrolling, fled undocumented immigrants from, for example, Canary Islands and shoveled them under greenhouse area's immense



plastic cover. These immigrants were and are the bedrock of industry that EU is supporting with billions.

The NGO agitator character in my book says: the inquisition invented the doctrine of heresy. Labelling immigrants “illegal” is just as convenient. It creates a bottomless labour supply that can be used for anything, at any price.

Young man named Mohamed had been in Almería for years without being able to send any money home. He said he was promised a job as a gardener in Europe. He was brought in the greenhouse area in the night and given a place to sleep in a windowless fertiliser storage. In the morning, when he saw the plastic roofed area expanding to the horizon, he collapsed to his knees and wept. He said he had left the third world, just to end up in the fourth. And he was still paying the debt to human traffickers with his salary, 20 euros for 10 hours in a 60 degrees heat.

In Almería every ethnic group were prejudiced and simply racist about one another. There was no communication between groups, and all kinds of rumours about some other group lowering wages or accepting ever worsening working conditions inhibited any kind of co-operation between the groups. That of course suited the employers in the divide and conquer manner.



Next year we came back to see what had happened to the people we met. We found no one, just sad stories. A 300 sub-saharan people's community that had been built inside an old greenhouse ruin had been burned and bulldozed one night and the inhabitants had moved somewhere else or lived for example in a dried up sewer. The local nuns helping the immigrants said that the demolishing had happened just before a big sports event and a large amount of foreign journalists arriving nearby.

Before the invention that the plants did not actually need soil, just growing bags, Almeria was one of the poorest areas in Europe. Millions of people moved from there to other parts of Europe in a search for a better life. Today Almeria is probably Europe's biggest human rights and environmental catastrophe, while still being heavily subsidised by the EU.

The greenhouse industry has already used the area's own ground water, and the toxic waste of plastic, pesticides and chemical fertilising has contaminated the earth beneath Almeria's province. This is the place where most fruits and vegetables come from to our dinner tables, especially in the winter.



For being an agnostic, one of the hardest part in understanding and empathizing with my characters was the great influence of religion. I was deeply moved by how they tried to hang on their values and dignity under these circumstances, in the makeshift plastic praying rooms they built from the same waste material as their huts.

In western media muslims are often presented as a monolithic crowd with identical way of living and thinking. I wanted to show the reality, where very different religious and practical views collide. I wanted the readers to understand that they cannot pigeonhole immigrants or muslims.

One of my favourite scenes in the book is when the islamist radicals come to the camp and try to recruit workers to the holy war. It shows the enormous differences and contradictions between the extreme and common muslim's paradigm of life.

Almeria was only the stepping stone for hundreds of thousands to Europe. Barcelona or some other mythical Northern city was the final destination, the paradise. In that paradise my protagonist Rashid's journey and disillusionment came to the conclusion – in the hidden shadow society of illegal merchandise, drugs, prostitution and the dog eat dog mentality the undocumented immigrants had to face.

Catalan psychiatrists have described the common symptoms that most undocumented immigrants suffered from and call it Chronic and Multiple Stress Syndrome in immigrants (or Ulysses syndrome), relating to the risky and hard journey that the immigrants pursue. Depression and anxiety, somatoform and dissociative symptoms are common amongst people who fear deportation and have to hide from the society for years, perhaps for life. They suffer from nightmares, nausea, headaches, hallucinations, panic attacks, sexual problems, phobias, difficulty in trusting others.



The events I depicted have sadly proven to be timeless. Rashid's story is situated somewhere near the year 2000, but the amount of people drowned in the Mediterranean and the people in Europe suffering from the total lack of human rights have just multiplied despite of the vast sums EU channels to keep people away from its' borders, or because of it. As an example, when Spain introduced the visa obligation to Moroccans in 1991, the human trafficking in Gibraltar began. Before Europe shut its' doors, the seasonal workers came and went back to their families legally and safe.

In the story I also tell in many ways, how the EU:s own trade policies increase the immigrants' distress and need to leave their homelands. Rashid's father rented a sugar cane field, but the local farmers cannot compete with Europe, as it dumps excess sugar in Africa. Former jellaba-factories stitch western logos to fake t-shirts. Whole villages ruin their health by melting and recycling e-waste materials from Europe. The human trafficker was a fisherman, but had to change his line of business after European and Asian fishing companies bought the fishing rights throughout the Moroccan coastline.



I knew from the start that *Invisible hands* was not going to be a document or a political pamphlet. I'm not a keen reader of openly political stories myself. I don't want to know the writer's agenda. I wanted to create believable, touching drama based on reality. I wanted to grasp abstract subjects, such as the fragility of identity and self esteem. What happens to a person's mind on this kind of a journey. What happens to a person, who is not entitled to be oneself, not even allowed to exist in Europe. Adjusting to a foreign society is of course impossible, if the society does not want one to adjust. So I combined fact and fiction. It has been said that drama is history from which the dull parts have been taken away.

What do the undocumented immigrants learn from Europe and Europeans? The hardship and hopelessness, inequality between human beings? In my story the Europeans are shown as greedy, selfish and terrible racists taking advantage of the people with no choice. The sad fact is that those are the kind of people undocumented immigrants mostly meet in Europe. Mohamed from Almeria said to us, that Marko and I were the first Europeans during all his years there who were interested in how he actually feels.

I especially wanted the European audience to read my story from the point of view of an immigrant – to see with his eyes. I wanted them to empathise with him and hopefully understand him a bit. Understanding at an emotional level is the most important thing fiction can teach.

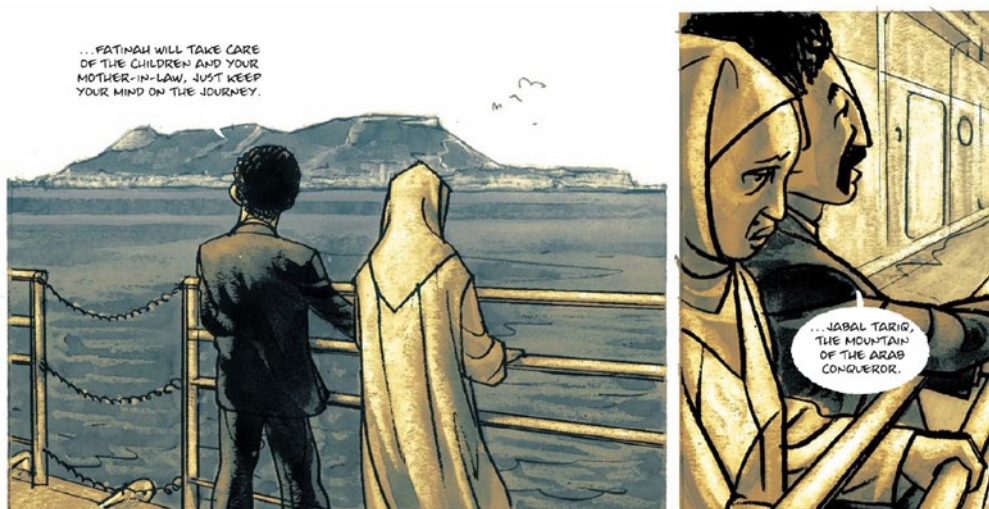
Though I wanted to create fictitious drama, I still felt I had the responsibility to share the vast injustice I had witnessed in some other way. We had the chance

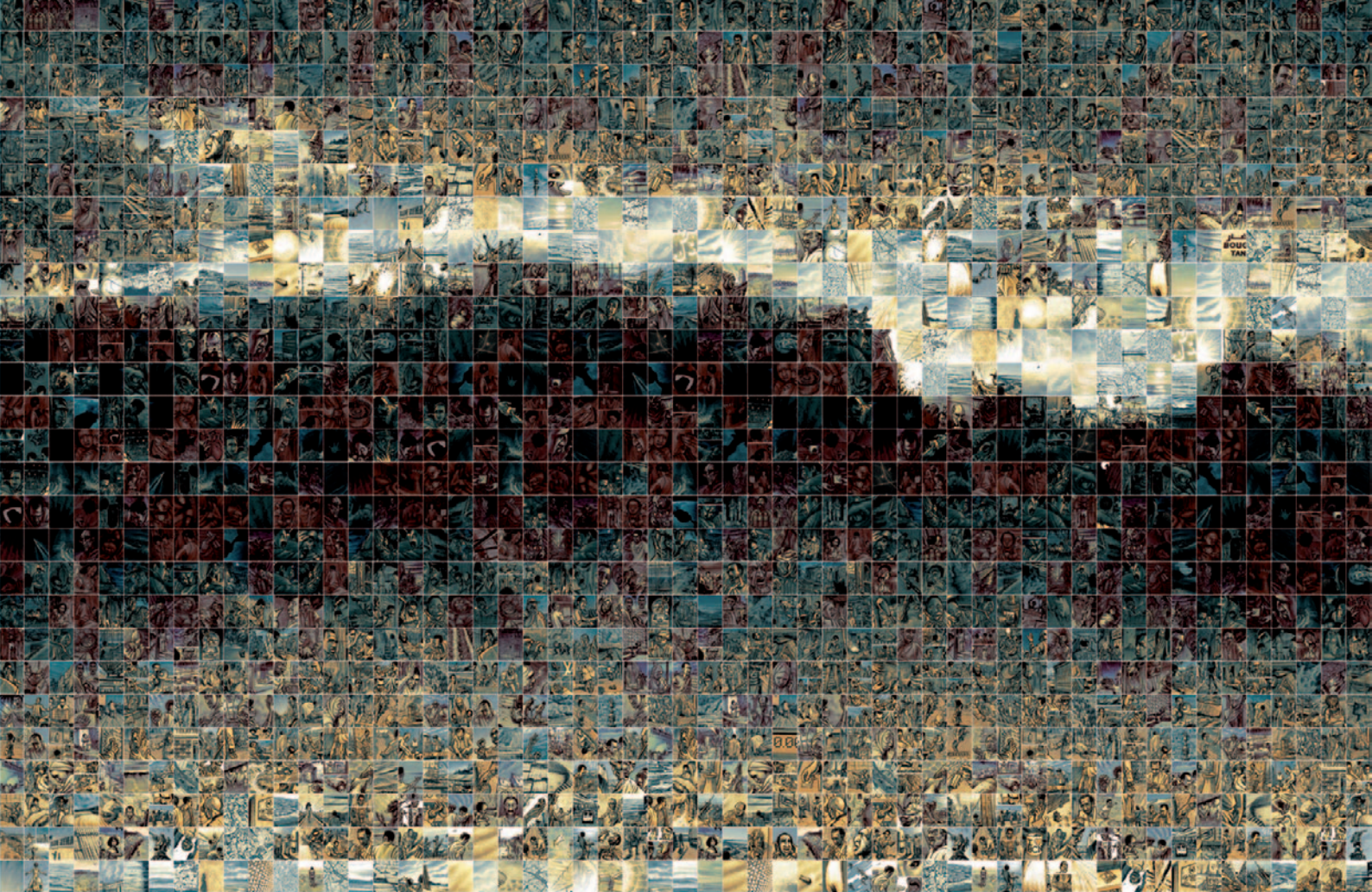
to write two feature articles about the situation in Almeria for the largest newspaper in Finland. In 2005 this was big and shocking news. Many politicians, in homeland and from the European parliament approached me and promised that resolving this situation is their paramount goal. But to my knowledge, nothing has happened in the past decade. The big chain buyers are still satisfied with the cheap prices and occasional study trips to the set greenhouses, where all employees are healthy and have permits, and all the working conditions and substances used are in accordance with the international laws.

As an artist, I thought I don't have to have the answers. I don't have to solve these problems. It is enough for me to raise them in the most effective, thought-provoking way I can. In Finnish language there is an ugly word "living standard refugee". It is used by people who have the opinion that war or oppression are the only valid reasons for migration. As if poverty, hunger and hopelessness were too soft excuses.

I noticed I was constantly asking myself: who am I to decide who is entitled to seek for a better life for oneself and for one's family. What makes me as a Northern European to have that right, when the majority of human-kind doesn't. I haven't found an answer, but I hope through these kind of stories more and more people are asking it themselves.

During the years of making this story I thought a lot about the connection between myself and Rashid. Me and Marko didn't return from Morocco in the cargo of human traffickers, but in the sunny and calm daytime with a nice ferry. In the title page of my book there's a slogan from the Moroccan ferry company: *Two shores, one dream*. In the 60's and the 70's the very same ferry that now connects Spain and Morocco was connecting Helsinki and Stockholm, carrying the name of Viking 5 and tens of thousands of unemployed Finnish workers looking for a better life in Sweden.





The Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki asked me to produce something based on my graphic novel *Invisible hands*. I didn't want to just put original pages of the book on display as museum walls are not the best interface for reading. I got back to the way of seeing vast amount of people as a force of nature and formed a mosaic image of all almost 500 pictures from my book. From afar the four meter wide artwork looks like a giant wave. As one gets closer, one can see, that the big image consists of tiny pictures of people and their destinies.

Underneath the artwork one can read the list of words used in western media to tell about immigrants and refugees: *wave, tidal wave, mass, stream, current, avalanche, torrent, landslide, flood, tsunami...*

Ville Tietäväinen

Keynote speech, 19th April 2016, Zollverein Essen, Germany
Education, Participation, Integration – Erasmus+ and Refugees

The illustrations are from the graphic novel *Invisible Hands* (Näkymättömät kädet, WSOY / Unsichtbare Hände, avant-verlag / Les mains invisibles, Casterman / Osynliga händer, Epix)
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