

The texts in this book are based on original writings by Mark Etchells, Nada Gambier and Thomas Kasebacher that have been re-written and edited by Nada Gambier in collaboration with Mark Etchells. Between March 2015 and March 2018 the authors travelled nearly 50.000 kilometres to reach Greece, Finland, Georgia, France, Belgium and Croatia. This book is a trace of their journey and the encounters they made on the way. The stories they collected uncovers a vision of Europe today through the eyes of teachers, taxi drivers, politicians, policemen, political activists, journalists, a farmer and more. Some names have been modified in order to protect the individuals' privacy. All photographs are from the journey and taken by the authors and copyrighted to Nada & Co.

THE VOICE OF A CITY

ATHENS

& AEGINA ISLAND

February/March 2018

Giannis

I am sitting in *Little Tree Books & Coffee* on a small wooden stool that wobbles under me every time I move. *Little Tree* opened a couple of years ago when a group of parents, some unemployed and some not, but all fed up by the gloom of the economic crisis, decided to join forces to open a collective neighbourhood hang-out. The first of its kind in Athens. It is a popular and cosy place, a little like a public living room.

Opposite me sits Giannis, a 49-year-old retired secret service policeman.

For more than twenty-five years Giannis practically did not sleep, taking over any role his undercover assignments dictated and lived, more or less constantly, on the run, as someone else than himself.

I always kept a phone, my gun and a suitcase packed for two days next to my bed, just in case.

Due to the secrecy of his work many things will forever remain in Giannis' private library of a brain, untold and unshared with the outside world.

For years only four people knew where I really lived. My girlfriend, my boss and two friends.

Unlike in other countries undercover agents in Greece are obliged to testify in court when a criminal is up for sentencing.

We have no protection in that sense. I have stood in front of a judge, revealing my true identity and position, after months and months of infiltration as someone else. I still get summoned sometimes, when old cases are brought to life, when a gangster or murderer is tried after many years of being hunted down. Of course, this is dangerous because, more often than not, the district of criminals extends beyond the one person being tried, especially in cases involving the mob. Even from inside prison I've had criminals ordering a hit on my life.

For many years, I lived in a dead-end street so that I could see on my way home if there were any intruders or unwanted visitors waiting for me. I've lived my life always looking over my shoulder and sleeping with one eye open.

Giannis tells me of a time when two guys on a motorcycle waited for him on his return home. A table top recreation is played out in front of me with tea pots and telephones becoming hunter and hunted.

Luckily, I saw them just as I was about to enter. They were hiding in the shadow, waiting for me. When I saw them they started shooting but I managed to catch one of them. This is how I finally found out that the hit had been orchestrated from inside the prison. They had managed to hunt me down by paying someone in the phone company a large sum of money to reveal where my phone signal was stationed in night time. Back then, it was in the end of the 90s, a phone had to be stationary for three hours to reveal its location. Not like now when it is very easy to track someone down at any time.

*I have had a great diversity of undercover assignments.
The longest one lasted twenty-six months.
I've tracked down serial killers, drug cartels, prostitution rings, arms dealers...
One time I had to take on the role of a priest and listen to people's confessionals.
This is how I eventually tracked down a killer on one of the Greek islands.*

I have been shot three times.

Giannis' stories are like crime fiction... but real.
When I ask him how he managed to deal with the schizophrenia of always taking on fake identities and the dangers of his work he smiles but does not answer. Alcohol abuse and mental health issues are common place with all who have lived a life on the edge for so long. It is by no accident that we meet in a café selling tea, and a long way from Giannis' neighbourhood.

All those years I felt like I was in a carnival. Every day a different mask, a different mind-set. It's like I've been acting solidly in different roles all my life. When I retired, I was scared. I didn't know which mask to put on or how I should be. It had been so long that I was somebody else every day, it's more than tiring.

Officially there are psychologists and therapists who offer people in my profession counselling but it is only superficial. Everyone must find their own way of dealing with it. There is a reason why we are entitled to retire after twenty years on the job. Some assignments, such as infiltrating terrorist cells, count as double time. Three years in a cell counts as six.

A traffic cop at the Acropolis will not be retiring at 49, though some might say that's a dangerous job too.

We were always working in shifts. The morning shift was called Uncertain Future because you never knew when it would end nor if you'd come out of it alive.

I recently buried a colleague of mine who got shot by his son by mistake. His son found his gun and played with it and boom... When you live the kind of life I have there is no safety anywhere... it is better to be by yourself and not get attached to anything or anyone.

Giannis has clearly seen and done a lot of things and met and dealt with, in the harshest sense of the word, some very unpleasant people.

Since his retirement, a year ago, Giannis has learnt to enjoy all the things he never could before.

I never understood people taking siestas in the middle of the day, I thought they were stupid. But now I sleep every day for an hour in the afternoon and it is wonderful!

Giannis smiles and his eyes shine.

I enjoy taking care of my house, my son and myself now. I've taken up cooking and football again and my dream is to live by the sea. I don't like fishing but to be able to walk along the water, to smell it, to feel it...

All those years it was hard to maintain any kind of family life or close relationships. It was more than hard, it was impossible in fact, but now... I am glad I can finally protect the people around me... and myself.

Giannis' son suffers from Asperger syndrome.

My son has a head for chemistry, always top of the class. He just really understands the way things molecularly join each other. He doesn't learn it by rote, he actually sees how these things work and combine. He's the same with smartphones. Give him a new phone and within 15 minutes he will have learnt everything there is to know about it. Football too. Chelsea are playing Barcelona tonight and in the car on the way here we were talking about the match. He told me all their encounters over the last ten years, the result, who scored and the timing of each goal. I think he wants to be a psychiatrist, he could do that, but not a psychologist, he has no empathy, but he knows what and where the black and white problems are.

The iPhone moves past the jasmine tea following the direction of traffic into a cul-de-sac. A cul-de-sac chosen by SUBJECT A very carefully. Only one way in and one way out. As the iPhone stops by the water glass, a light by the door of SUBJECT A's house partially illuminates the darkness. The iPhone starts to move backwards, goodbyes are said and SUBJECT A moves towards the entrance door in the dead of night. A fleeting glimmer of light reflects from something in the darkness and falls upon SUBJECT A.

A wave and a shout and the iPhone halts its retreat. SUBJECT A moves behind it quickly. You can never be too careful. The first gunshot passes by the jasmine tea harmlessly. The second hits the iPhone and continues its trajectory hitting SUBJECT A in the leg.

Two helmeted gunmen make off at speed on a teaspoon, past the iPhone, and past the jasmine tea back out of the cul-de-sac by road. A zig zag and a loop of roads. SUBJECT A runs up the pedestrian passage and down the other side of the house, cutting off the fleeing moped (no longer a teaspoon as we are way off the table now). A flying kick and tackle brings down the bike and the assailants in a cloud of dust and a revving engine. The moped driver manages to escape, but the shooter is caught and held by SUBJECT A and driver B.

SUBJECT A has just escaped yet another attack on his life.

A career in the FORCE OF CONTROL FAST CONFRONTATION UNIT is no laughing matter.

Exarcheia

Street side coffee bars with tables, chairs, sunglasses, cigarettes, music.

When warnings went out to travellers in 2008 not to come to Exarcheia because it was too dangerous hotel bookings went up. People flocked here. Like war zone tourism... in Athens.

You can forget playing tour of duty 3. Give your computer a rest and come here and do it for real, a girl tells me when I inquire about the neighbourhood and its bad reputation. Visitors walk through here and say it's cool and hip and happening. What is happening? Can't they see beyond the exoticism? Can't they see this is just shit? That it's come to this?

I sat here the other week, on a Friday night, with a friend, and I could feel something was going on. The street was full of people sitting at tables, you know, just drinking coffee and chatting and enjoying. Suddenly some idiots came from a side street, set fire to a dustbin -that's what they do now, bins and cars- but everyone just remained in their seats, barely noticing it. My friend went into the bar and asked for a bucket of water to put the fire out, but the barman told him to leave it. Everybody is used to this here now. The Friday and Saturday night routine, street war routine.

A weekly urban war that keeps both anarchists and police busy but that doesn't really change anything, a status quo of what Athens is today. Something seething under the surface, never quite asleep. Something boiling, ready to explode.

Exarcheia is like two movies overlaid on top of one another. *Café scene 3 and street violence/tour of duty episode 6* both running at the same time. Each actor unaware of the other. Masked men and Molotovs walking past chatting couples drinking coffee. A street vendor side steps a burning bin with an arm full of sunglasses and torches from China. A waitress weaves between three men carrying a petrol can and DIY Molotov cocktail kits. A siren sounds out on the border of Exarcheia state.

Pretend customers and pretend pedestrians talk into microphones and phones, calling base to tell them that the realities have merged again and somebody needs to press alt/delete and restart before the glitch merges permanently.

A cat watches something small and alive leave the burning bin.

The plastic bin lid now dripping molten onto the cracked pavement. The wind taking the black smoke back to the Molotov gang who now seem aware that they are in the wrong scene. Another siren from a long way away.

A masked man speaking to another in German. A touring group, an International Brigade of sorts. Back in the office on Monday morning. A write up of this in some old style photocopied anarchist magazine read by eleven people in a squat in Berlin.

Last week they went paint balling in the Ruhr valley where they re-enacted the siege of Stalingrad. They are not sure what to call this weekend yet.

A man selling oranges from a stall on a corner takes off the plastic sheet covering his wares. The smoke now firmly heading the other way. The Molotov men wander off down the street towards the sirens. A waiter throws a bucket of water into the bin. There is a bad smell now.

The cat chews on something, a rodent fat on souvlaki and overcome with smoke or a coronary. A couple get off a moped with no exhaust, cast a sun-glassed eye at the bin and order two coffees.

Riot police strain at the leash on a corner, CS rounds, gas masks, shields, radios and guns drawn. The camera pans back to another everyday scene being played out behind them, a gallery opening. Well-dressed people spilling onto the street with glasses of wine in their hands. Red lipstick illuminous and floating out of the sea of a black dress and black hair and cigarette smoke that may or may not be CS gas. A couple chatting and thumbing through the events program, laughing and smiling and looking at each other while surrounded by khaki and black clad men all staring intently at something unseen in Exarcheia.

Realities tangle, clips merge and a glass of wine is spilled after a back-stepping issue over a cracked pavement and collision with a riot shield. It is hard to steady the frame, to stitch these together.

I see a man lifting one of the steel utility covers in the ground and reaching for two cartons of cigarettes buried underground. An old woman waves her 50 euro note impatiently just as a car stops and the old driver signals that he needs two cartons too. An arm goes down the hole again and re-appears with more cigarette boxes. A scene straight out of *The Wire*. Baltimore in Athens. Nobody pays any particular attention to this transaction. I wonder how much more can be found underground. In my mind the black-market trade has whole tunnels going under the city, connecting businesses and customers in different parts of town.

The Wire, right here in Athens.



MY FIRST TIME
ATPO

to be a travel

Le Belle Admiration
100%

NYC

Dearest S,

I find myself in Athens now. I know you lose track of where I am sometimes with work, but then again, you're not alone, so do I. I already had to do the train ticket and plane ticket shuffle to try and match the dates and locations with each of them on the floor. You get extra points with this game if you manage to have complete sets with no spares at the end of an hour...worst case scenario is an airline ticket with no associated rail tickets, or any recollection of ever knowing about the flight. Nil points.

I have been here before, many years ago, when for many people Greece was just a tourist location, a paradise of sun, good food and beautiful nature. For me it was the home of Zoi, as you know, my good friend from school. But it also became the place where people desperately wanted me to be more voluptuous, more like a real woman in their eyes. Remember I told you back then how people would serve me double portions of food in hope that my breasts would grow bigger and my hips would get larger. I also remember a beggar who got so confused at my appearance that instead of asking me for money he looked at me perplexed and asked me whether I was a boy or a girl, and then just walked away shaking his head in disbelief at my response that I indeed was a girl.

Now, I am here to discover Athens again, through the filter of new knowledge acquired and a perception of Greece as a country that has for quite some years now been struggling through an economic and social crisis.

I have been told, or rather warned, that arrangements made with people here are always flexible. Someone might agree to a meeting one day, only to change his or her mind the next. In Greece, the social as well as the working meetings happen on the go. Some people have asked me to fix our appointment when it is time for the appointment. This means that planning ahead is practically impossible, as you can imagine.

There's a different light here, a light only available in southern Europe with those extra miles stepped closer to the equator. The buildings are different too... covered in solar panels and endless aerials and satellite dishes tuning in to everything that was ever transmitted, hindered only by washed sheets, carpets and ballooning nightwear suspended from balconies on lines with pegs as numerous as crocodiles' teeth, halting their flight away by springs and pink and blue jaws alone.

And the streets here, oh boy...Mazes of roads and passageways decked out in everything and anything from asphalt to concrete to slabs and cobbles. Pavements can end suddenly in a jagged abyss or a precipice.

Make believe oranges grow on trees on the street and skinny cats lie sleeping in every doorway.

First thing I did yesterday was to have a walk in the infamous Exarcheia neighbourhood. I read about it online, in the Athens survival Guide, before arriving and wanted to see it with my own eyes. In December 2008 police shot and killed a 15-year-old boy there, which set off an orgy of violence, looting and

burning that was captured by television cameras and beamed around the world for all to see. These days the police don't enter Exarcheia except in extreme situations. Instead, they are stationed strategically on the corners surrounding the area, not to keep people out, but to keep large groups of anarchists or troublemakers in. Before going there, I was told I should be prepared to run in case trouble starts. I had my sneakers on, always ready to run, as you know, but all went peacefully as I walked around surrounded by graffiti, small shops selling music and books, cafés and restaurants. It is mostly quiet on the little streets there but a turn of a corner and suddenly I found myself in the heart of a market. People shouting the prices of oranges, lemons, fish and herbs. A market like anywhere in the world, with a diversity of people strolling through the stalls.

I saw several banners, some torn with outdated messages, others newly hung. Since I don't read Greek I had to guess what the messages contain and my own ignorance made me uncomfortable. I tried to read on people's faces what the mood of the day was, but it remained a bit unclear to me.

After my walk there I returned to Neos Kosmos, the *New World* area where I am staying. It is an area that was once filled with Greek immigrants fleeing Turkey in the 20s. Now it is a rather quiet residential area. From my balcony, that faces an inner courtyard of green, I can see a massive palm tree. It looks like an out of proportion creature, a combination of a Muppet Show and Monsters Inc. invention, dangerously swaying in the wind a little bit too tall and thin for its own good. I hope it doesn't fall on our building.

Athens is a big city, a crowded one. More than 3 million inhabitants not to mention all the people here who are invisible, no trace of them in any official papers. People who live behind doors without names on them.

I'll keep in touch!
Lots of love,

Nada



Giorgos

I've barely sat down in his taxi and Giorgos is off already *when Great Alexander stopped tired and weary by a river and he took time and undressed and bathed and washed some great adventures off himself in the clear blue waters, but when he came out of the water somebody had stolen his clothes and maybe even his horse, I can't remember so well. Anyway, this was in Macedonia and a Slav stole his clothes, but no Slavs were there back then so how can it be Macedonia now, they weren't there to steal Great Alexander's clothes? It is a complicated issue. They're eyeing up the greater Macedonia, including OUR Macedonia. It's a political thing, not just about the name. They can call themselves what they want.*

It's a complicated issue. Great Alexander with no clothes on by a river. I got this part, totally. Giorgos has prepared a guided tour for me. Athens seen through the window of a yellow taxi.

A road in the city that makes weak willed men start to smoke, or at least give up giving up. Cars and mopeds weave and beep and sort of stop at STOP signs, and sort of stop at pedestrian crossings. Those who break this law make a fiddling gesture with their fingers at the very nearly deceased pedestrian to say *give a moment, just wait a little*, almost an apology and a wordless explanation.

Roads get tree lined and carless and quieter and a solitary speed sign exclaims 40 KM AN HOUR ONLY ZONE. The first of such things I've seen here. The sign is however broken and exclaims its desires in a dull dusty fashion rather than in bright lights, the life it was once promised, many years ago. The land of international schools and embassies. A graffiti-less network of cul-de-sacs and boulevards. A scattering of CCTV cameras and uniformed men sat in gatehouses with beads running through their fingers.

A shrine here or a tomb somewhere found when they quarried red stone for a new build, a hiding place for a 17-year-old who hid from the Turks when they chased her back in 17XX or somewhere around there. *She communicated to a church 300 metres away you see.* And that's something special.

*It is difficult to find these places when you aren't born here.
The lies this thing tells me! Now we have to go back...*

Giorgos' satnav is not doing what he wants it to do. A screen of spaghetti and converging arrows on the dashboard guides us to another place in Giorgos' notebook of TRUE FACTS held tightly on his lap, blue biro in unreadable scrawl. *The man who made this pen and a razor blade has a house here too. He is a very nice man. A friend worked on another of his houses by the sea. A very friendly man. An International man, but yes, he is Greek. I hope he is still alive.*

I hope Mr. Bic is alive and well too.

This place on the left is a museum for the people who came from Constantinople. The overgrown garden, wired fence and what look like boarded up windows help remove this place from my must visit list. A solitary graffiti tag on a pillar reads THE GANG.

Giorgos' tale is a tale of a mother and father coming from the countryside to start again in Athens back in the 60s. A father who went from the land and agriculture to the oil refineries, then to a taxi business. A mother who is back in the countryside now caring for her father who is 101 years old, cared for permanently by the two surviving daughters. *They are the only reason he is still alive. Without them he could not survive.*

I don't fear for Greece. Not at all. These things are like circles, someday it will join up again. I do worry about a nuclear war. There are very dangerous people out there. It's easy to start. Untrained and idle people do things and they do not know the consequences of their actions. Turkey is falling out with everybody, first the Americans and the Russians, of course always us the Greeks and now also the Israelis. I'm not saying Israelis are bad, but look, every two years they start a war in Gaza to test new weapons and show off... Look, we have this, and we can do that... Every two years. Maybe the West needs Israel to do this, I don't know...

After his father's death Giorgos found books hidden away, carefully handwritten tomes that nobody in the family had ever seen. Page after page of recipes in some, page after page of Greek sayings in others. A secret and hidden obsession.

One day when I have time I will make a play or write poetry about these things, but for now I have no time. My girlfriend, who is expecting our first child, makes sure of this. There is always something to do. I work six days a week and take only Saturday for family time. My brother drives the cab then. As my girlfriend gets bigger and bigger, she does less and less, so I have less time for these things. The baby boy or girl will be strong and healthy. I can feel it. We made the baby in collaboration with the doctors, after three years of trying ourselves. This was done privately of course.

A bleep or two of electronics from the dashboard mean an online booking just came through. Giorgos explains that the customer now compares his status with other drivers', confirming later, after they have checked up on them, which driver they want to be picked up by.

One day I think we will be like robots and everybody you see on the street you will automatically know, by some computer means, what status they have. You will see a computer's appraisal of people on a screen. You will know everything about a person just by looking at them and connecting to a database. These times are not too far ahead. We will willingly become these robots. Giorgos points at people through the window. He has five points, she has three and so on. A scoreboard. Instant appraisal. No arguing, no lying.

A TripAdvisor system for all of humanity worries me a little, especially after the secret pop up restaurant in London became *THE best place to eat in* after it received X amount of positive reviews in a given time period. All this despite the fact that the restaurant never even existed in the real world. It was just a ruse by a mischievous man and his friends to make a mockery of TripAdvisor and our trust in reviews on the internet.

In 1960 they built this here and over there... aaah the statue... we missed it, but here the war museum, and the concert hall there, where the acoustics are the best in Greece, which reminds me, I have not been in there for ten years...

Backstreet and underpass. Zig zag chicane and carpark. Hill top and buena vista at lovers' leap. Traffic lights and stop signs, go signs and police whistles. Dead ends and turnarounds. Histories joining and weaving and coming back in full circle to stories of brothers and girlfriends and Turks and Israelis and Great Alexander, and back to the countryside to a father's house with a century-old-plus-one grandfather and a tangle of old vines and olive trees that once fed the family from the beginning. Buildings that are tumbled down and a few cats that lay sleeping. A tower block in the distance. A meter running itself to a stop outside the Parliament building with the pigeons and guards and a sea of Japanese and megapixels of Athens in files and sticks and selfies.

Today I toured an Athens with Giorgos.

Thanos

I half run to *Petite Fleur*, a fancy café in the heart of Athens, that serves hot chocolate in small glasses to customers sitting on red velvet sofas. I run through the traffic and the tourists and the guards posted by the parliament. I run because I am late for my appointment with Thanos but, when I get there the café is empty and there is no Thanos in site. I have yet to acclimatise to the Greeks' sense of timing and the stylish *must be a little late means I'm on time routine*.

I know very little about Thanos. I know he is a drag queen and an activist... but there is more. He is 29 years old, lives with his parents and volunteers in Red Umbrella, an association that supports sex-workers in all possible ways.

I don't like to categorise people by gender or persuasion. A sex worker is a sex worker and we recognise them as just that, whether they are women, men or trans it is of no matter, we are there to offer support. There are free condoms available, we have health checks for STD`s, we have an in-house lawyer and a needle exchange...

Thanos also has degrees in political science, business marketing and human rights law. He has lived in Norway, Poland, Holland and Germany but now he is back in Athens again and determined to dedicate his life to changing perceptions and challenging the old patriarchal systems and beliefs in this country.

Poland was difficult for me. I mean the LGBT scene there is hardly advanced. People seemed to carry crosses through the streets all the time. I mean ALL the time! Gdansk wasn't too bad, but the rest of it, it was like being in a big village stuck in time. Sometimes things aren't better here though... You wouldn't believe to what extent Greek society still functions according to old values. People don't even realise it but we are far from any change towards more liberal and open minded living here. Most people just reproduce the values they have been inculcated and don't realise how damaging and oppressive they are.

I felt I should be here during the crisis. In fact, I see it as my duty to be here and to be active, to try and change things for the better for the LGBT community. I know that if I was really committed I should probably go and work somewhere like Uganda, but Athens needs me too...

You are here for a month? You should move to Athens. We need more people like you, people who know how things are elsewhere and could be here. We need all the help we can get to change things in this country.

Thanos is a fifth-generation Athenian, which is a rarity in this town. Many people originate from villages scattered around Greece and settle down here where there is more work, whether declared or black, than in the countryside.

The city is forever filling up with people from the countryside who bring with them conservative values so making positive change in attitudes to sexual diversity remains difficult.

Thanos and his drag queen persona are quite the celebrities here. TV interviews and an ever-busy Facebook account each occupy a lot of his time.

I get invited almost every day to this and that chat show, for this or that interview but sometimes I say no. There's still a lot of ridiculing people who are different, especially people who dare to challenge the usual gender roles and attitudes and I must be careful sometimes that I don't find myself in a program that makes fun of people like me, often in a very manipulative and under the surface kind of way. By saying no I make it clear to them that they must change attitudes if they want to have a serious discussion, which is what they say they do.

Sex-work is an important issue because we live in the 21st century and we still don't have the right over our own bodies! It's disgraceful! Of course, there are many issues within sex-work that also raise other questions. It is very apparent how present abuse and daily manipulation is within our societies still. In Red Umbrella I meet people who are sex-workers out of their free will but I also meet victims of human trafficking. The important thing to realise is that in both cases the current laws here support neither one nor the other of these groups. Society basically penalises them instead of supporting them and this is not ok!

There's a lot of things going on in Athens now that needs our attention. I'm not just talking about myself or the people I defend. I also mean the regular citizens of this place. People need to wake up!

Take for instance the ongoing manipulation of the real estate market and how that affects everyone here. The state lets whole neighbourhoods fall apart so that property prices fall to nothing. These are then bought by investors, often anonymous Turkish investors, behind the scenes. They buy huge parts of the city for nothing. Then they pimp up the areas again, renovating and so on, and then the houses are put up for rent via Airbnb for exorbitant prices. Athenians don't find affordable accommodation anymore. The city is slowly being transformed into one giant Airbnb market for temporary visitors with more income than what we have. Paradoxically, Athens is still, at the moment at least, one of the only capital cities in Europe where rent is cheaper in the heart of the city than in the outskirts. But as I say, things are changing...

I don't see an improvement for the locals anytime soon. Look at pensions. With the crisis many people lost large percentages of what they had spent a lifetime saving. From one day to another my mother lost more than 50% of her pension. Just like that, the government took it away. So, she has had to go back to work and there is no end in sight. This is typical here and the case for many older people.

We talk about ways for a government to save money, ways to install a new economic system in a country that for long has been surviving on under the table pay offs.

I agree that taxes are a way forward but I don't agree the cut in pensions. It's insane to take away people's life savings and make them poor overnight. It's inhuman and unjustified. Don't forget that many people of my generation also have to rely on their parents and family to survive because salaries are so low. My sister works as a shop assistant full-time and earns 350 euros a month! How on earth are we supposed to stop working in black in these circumstances!?

A few years ago, it was really sad here. Only depressed people everywhere. Now things are better. Not because the hope of a solution is back but because people have got used to the shit conditions they live in and have to deal with.

Before I leave we agree to meet again but it is hard to find a location for our next appointment. Thanos follows a strict boycott of places that still allow smoking inside. Even though it's been illegal since 2010, it is still ignored by most places all over Athens.

I don't have a nightlife because of this. There is hardly anywhere I can go and not be lost in a cloud of other people's cigarette smoke. I hate it!

Freda

I'm sorry my home is so big, sit wherever you want! Freda says with a smile, as I enter her small one bedroom apartment in the centre of Athens where she lives with her 8-year-old son.

We had to move from our previous place. The crime in the area was getting worse and it didn't feel like a safe place neither for me nor for my son to live. I won't put my name on the door here either though. I'm afraid of what will happen if everyone knows I live here... it's better to be invisible for now.

Freda came to Athens as a 24-year-old architect in 2004. Now she is 39 and works six days a week as a cleaning lady and caretaker. She speaks Greek fluently and struggles to make ends meet.

I arrived on a student visa from the Philippines with the idea to see what was out there but I ended up staying on, my visa lapsing and that is how my journey as an illegal began. I never intended to stay here, not in any of my dreams, but here I am. If I could, I would leave. I don't care about myself but I want my son to have a good life.

There is a lot of racism here. My son doesn't know how to deal with it sometimes. When he comes sad home from school because his classmates have told him he is not from here it is very hard. They say, "your mother is brown and a foreigner and you are not Greek!" "But mum, I am from here, I was born here, this is my home" he says to me, not knowing how to defend himself. Indeed, he was born here but he does not have Greek nationality. His father is Romanian and I am Filipino and some of the kids are very tough with this.

His father is not around anymore. He went back to Romania but at least he recognised Antonio as his son before he left. Better that than Antonio just being the son of an immigrant from the Philippines in a constant battle to remain in Greece as a legal with a work permit.

Things are a bit easier since I learnt to speak Greek. Before it was terrible, I felt so helpless. At first I took lessons that were provided for people like me but it was all about kitchen words...pot, spoon, stove, sink, dirty dishes...It was like we were being trained for a life in a kitchen. Luckily, I found other lessons and now I get by well I think. Antonio still helps me with some words. He tests me, over and over again, till I get the pronunciation right. A small mistake and a word can mean something totally different to what you intend to say. I've told him that he must learn so that he can teach me!

When we talk in the front room Freda's son peaks in through the doorway but is quickly commanded to go back to his room and play. I tell her he can join us but Freda says no. *I've told him he cannot mix with elders, only if we call him. He must know his place.*

Freda's days are organised to the minute.

In the morning we wake up and have breakfast together. Then he goes to school and I go to work. At 1pm he comes home from school and calls me. That is the very first thing he must do. I need to know that he is alright and safely home. I get scared