

## The Turkish Student

By Heba Haleem

Beyan wrapped her arms around her big, stretched belly and took a deep breath. Her living quarters in the Syrian refugee camp in Turkey were small and cramped, and she felt like she couldn't breathe. At least not like she used to every time she was in labor in Syria. There was no midwife to guide her to the edge of the bed in her room and tell her to breathe and squeeze a baby out of herself like squeezing the seed out of a date. No — here she sat on a hard-plastic chair gripping her husband's hand till his knuckles turned white. But he kept his hand there for her, stroking her hair as she squirmed left and right with a deep, guttural ache in her lower belly. The van arrived and she climbed in, her husband's hand on the small of her back. She peered out the window looking at a vast sandy landscape interspersed every once in a while with red flags that proudly proclaimed a crisp, white crescent and a star right next to it.

Beyan knew from visiting a doctor that her baby wasn't in the right position for a natural birth. The head was up top and the small legs dangled below, shuffling around like the mint leaves in her tea. The doctor had said that when it would be time for the baby to come, she would have to ask for a c-section right away. Beyan had waited in line for hours at a Turkish hospital just to see this doctor, but she was glad she went. She tried once before to see this doctor, but she wasn't so lucky. After waiting in line for several hours, she was told there was no Arabic translator available and that she had to leave. Tears dripped down her soft pale cheeks and she hugged the roundness of her belly as she walked back to the camp. Her experience had left her feeling bitter about healthcare for refugees in Turkey. She had heard similar stories from other Syrian refugees — waiting but to no avail, or services being available but too expensive to afford. The Turkish Kurds had advocated for her and her Kurdish Syrian family to seek refuge in Turkey as soon as the war in Syria started, but it seemed the healthcare system in this country wasn't ready for her just yet.

But she was still a Kurd, and she would continue to be strong. Especially now. She had no money and had no idea how much a C-section would cost. All she had in her heart was the firm resolve to get the procedure done and have her baby healthily delivered, despite the uncertainty of her circumstances. She stepped out of the van as the daunting shadow of the hospital enveloped her, sending a chill down the length of her curved spine. She went directly to the front desk, trying to communicate to the receptionist in broken Turkish that she needed a C-section right away. "That'll be 5000 Turkish liras," she had said, the words spilling out of her mouth as if Beyan was simply buying a five-cent piece of gum. "I have no money, please. I am refugee," Beyan begged her, pleading with every ounce of the strength she still carried within her shaking body. "No money, no C-section, sorry," the receptionist said, not even making eye contact with the swollen, pained woman in front of her.

Beyan slowly walked back to the waiting room and told her husband the news, wetness dripping from her big brown eyes. Seeing his wife helpless, Beyan's spouse bent his head down and put a palm against his forehead in angst. Both of them were quiet. They felt helpless and defeated. The baby within Beyan tugged and whimpered to enter a world that would not let it come out. Beyan began to moan and cry as the contractions increased, falling to the ground on her knees. She put her forehead to the tiles on the cold hospital floor as if she was making *sujood* for prayer. Her moans grew louder and louder, and people began to pay attention to the pregnant women on the floor. Her long grey dress was wet and bunched up around her knees.

All of a sudden, a young man in a white coat approached her. Without saying a word, he lifted her up from her elbow and gently guided her to a room. There were two other young doctors—to Beyan, they all looked like student doctors. They pulled the curtains and laid her down on the surgical table, and began to prepare an array of shiny metal instruments. *It's happening*, Beyan thought, as she closed her eyes in gratitude to *Allah*, God. Before she knew it, the young doctors had stitched her up and handed her a beautiful girl, red and raw with eyes half closed and tiny clenched fists. Then Beyan got up from the table, bundled the baby in her arms, and walked out of the hospital with her husband. She smiled. *Those students helped me for free. God bless their souls.*

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