

In partnership with



BritishRedCross

# OVER UNDER SIDEWAYS DOWN

Ebrahim's story by Karrie Fransman



Refugee  
Week





## **Ebrahim didn't choose to be a refugee.**

When he was 15, he found himself alone, thousands of miles from home and uncertain of whether he would survive.

But he did survive. Ebrahim and I talked for hours about his experience – the acute sadness, the fear of the future and the determination to take every opportunity to make a life in this country.

During my research for the comic, I had read much about the resilience of people fleeing conflict and persecution. Imagine fighting for your life in a warzone, losing everything you love and having the ability not only to cope with that but also with the feelings of loneliness and desolation that swell when you are forced to start again. That takes a certain type of strength and to me, Ebrahim embodies that.

It is impossible to fully capture the horror of a journey like Ebrahim's or the overwhelming pain of leaving behind your family, your friends, your home and your identity. But I hope *Over Under Sideways Down* reflects Ebrahim's character and gives a glimpse of the challenges and triumphs of arriving in the UK as an asylum seeker and making a home in this country – a country that should be proud of providing protection to people who need it.

**Ebrahim didn't choose to be a refugee. Nobody does.**



Ebrahim is a teenage refugee.  
He did not choose to leave Iran,  
He did not choose to bid farewell  
to his mother for the last time  
and he certainly did not choose  
to take the long journey to be  
granted asylum in the UK.


*This is his story*



On the day Ebrahim was  
exiled from his home he had  
no idea where he was heading  
or the long and dangerous  
road ahead of him.

But he did know what he was  
fleeing.





Ebrahim, a  
Kurdish Iranian  
from Piranshahr,  
doesn't have  
much to show  
for his  
childhood  
in Iran.

Just memories  
of a lonely life  
ostracised from  
the community  
due to his  
dad's political  
activity,

a single  
string  
of tasbeeh  
beads,

and a scar  
on his foot.



He touches his leg  
and says he was shot.  
Aged just 6 years old.

Ebrahim has blanked  
the incident from  
his memory.



It was the same shower of bullets  
that killed his father for his  
political beliefs.



His mother eventually remarried and they moved to Ghazvin. Ebrahim's step-father agreed to fund his education if he worked for him- picking fruit in the summer, working at his mechanic store and distributing political flyers.



Even  
as a  
teenager

Ebrahim  
knew the  
value of  
schooling and  
worked hard  
for a better  
future.

But on the day he  
went to collect  
his exam results  
his life changed  
forever.





He received a call from his step-father demanding that he return home immediately.

His step-father had heard that Ebrahim was in danger due to handing out the political flyers.

And he feared for his own safety if Ebrahim was arrested and interrogated.



His step-father wanted the problem, and Ebrahim, gone.







*'I refused to leave*



*but my mum said*



*I had to go'.*

Forced into exile at just 15,  
Ebrahim left his house there and  
then, with nothing but a bag of  
clothes and the precious tasbeeh  
beads his mother had given him.



He stepped out the door  
and into an unknown and  
hostile world.



He was sent to Piranshahr for 2 days, and then passed to agents who took him across the mountains into Turkey.



They walked in groups of 20 all night in silence.



The agents would beat anyone who was too slow

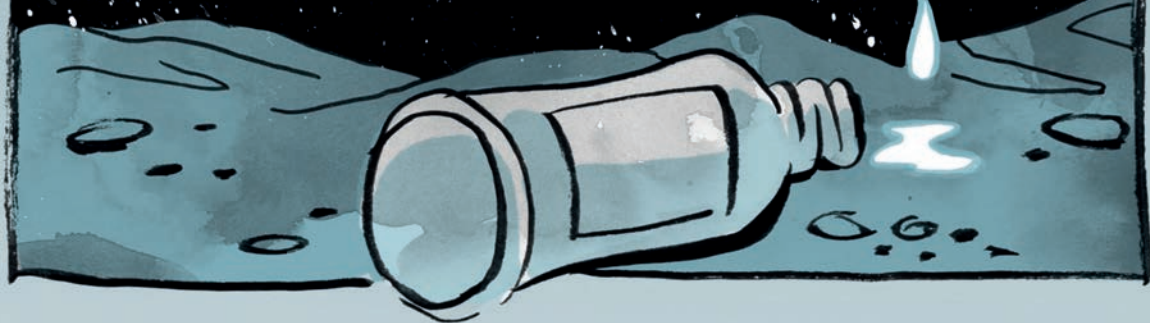


and rape the women in front of their children.



'They were like animals... I wanted to go back. I had no options. I was crying all the time'

After a day the group ran out of water.  
Ebrahim's mouth was too dry to swallow food.



After what seemed like an eternity they discovered a  
dirty trough and Ebrahim fell to his knees to drink.



In Turkey the agents took away  
everyone's ID cards, watches and  
mobile phones so they could not be identified.



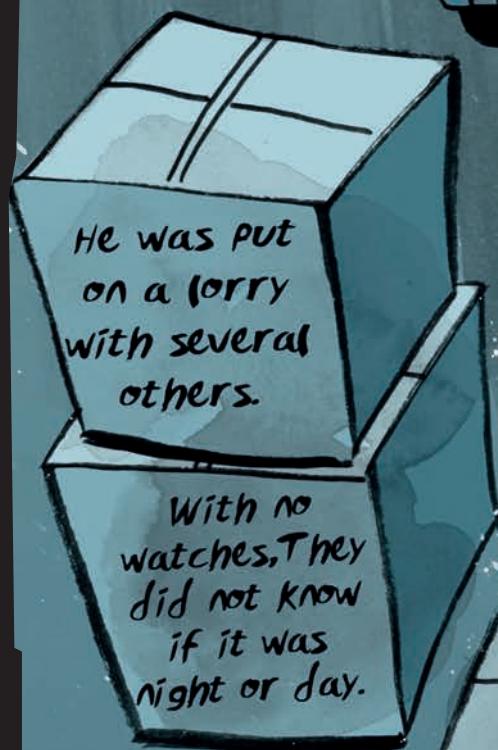


*Little did Ebrahim realise*



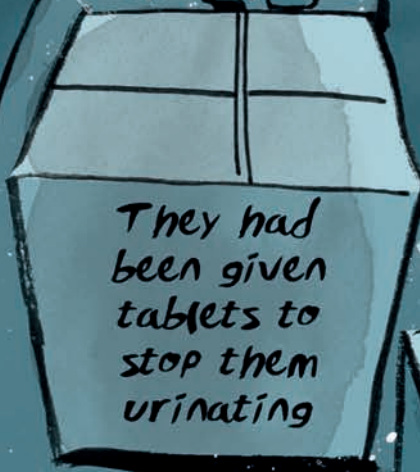
*that as his ID vanished, so did proof of his identity.*





He was put  
on a lorry  
with several  
others.

With no  
watches, They  
did not know  
if it was  
night or day.



They had  
been given  
tablets to  
stop them  
urinating




and were  
under strict  
orders not  
to talk.







A man in a dark suit stands in a city park. He is looking up with a surprised expression, indicated by three short lines above his head. He is flanked by two large, leafy trees. In the background, several tall, modern buildings with many windows rise against a light sky. A simple metal fence separates the man from the buildings.

With nothing  
but the clothes  
on his back  
Ebrahim was  
now alone in a  
cold and alien  
world.



He saw cars  
driving on the  
left-hand side  
and realised it  
must be the UK.



He had always  
imagined the UK  
as clean and  
mechanical:  
'like how you see  
it on the TV and  
in the movies'



'Like everything  
works by  
machine. You  
want water and  
press a button  
and it appears'





*Desperately he ran from person to person until a man pointed him in the direction of the police station.*



*He had to wait a gruelling half an hour until the police station opened its doors.*

*And when they did he was ecstatic. Finally, he thought, he had found safety and his journey was over.*



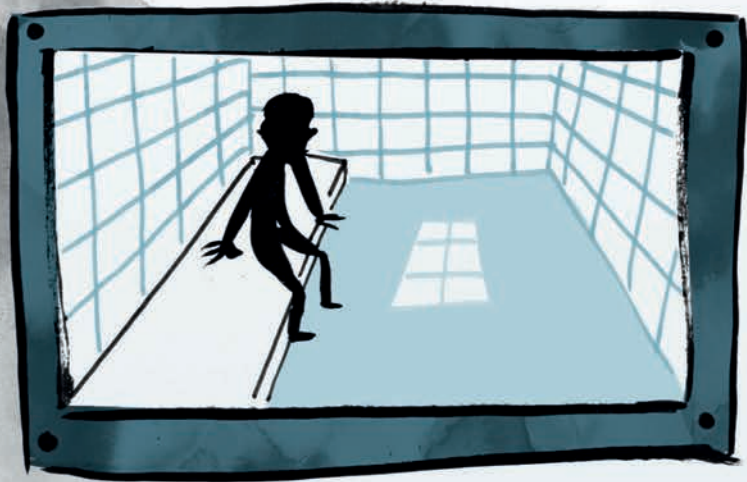
*But in fact his journey had only just begun*

*'That was only one part  
of the journey-  
the hardest part  
was here'*

*Once inside the police  
station the police  
removed his belt  
and tried to take  
away his precious  
tasbeeh beads.*







*It was hours until anyone came.*

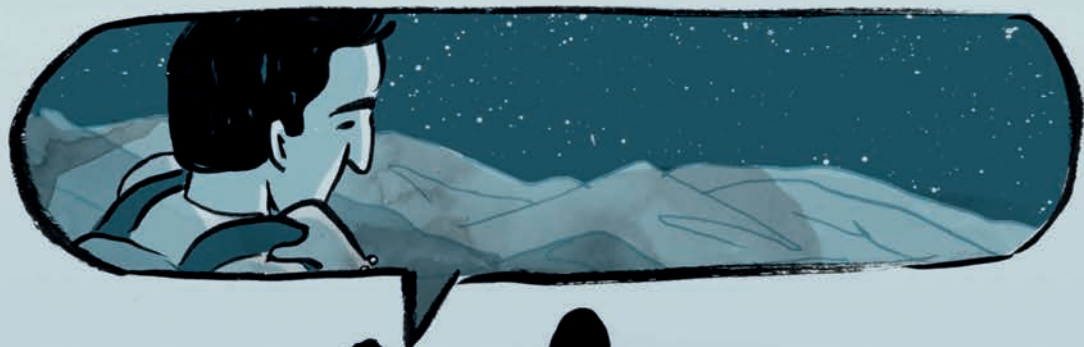


*Scared and confused he asked why he had been put in a cell because he hadn't done anything wrong.*



*They asked him if he wanted to claim asylum but he did not understand what they meant.*

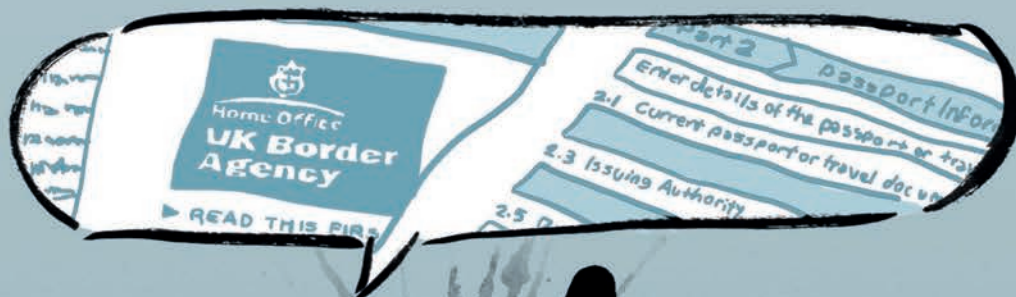
Then the interviews started



Interviews that would colour the next 4 years of his life in the UK.



Forcing the vivid colours and raw emotions of his Odyssey into facts, bureaucratic tick-boxes,



and evidence in courts of law.





Ebrahim was sent to a hostel for adults in Croydon where the interviews continued.

'I had no idea what was happening. I couldn't sleep until the morning. I was crying'.



The agents had taken Ebrahim's ID from him. Without this evidence, the task of proving his whole identity to the British authorities began.

AGE

NATIONALITY



'They ask you for evidence. But you can't provide evidence and you don't have a strong case'.

'They didn't believe I was 15... you don't count until they believe what you're saying'.

But having survived such a harrowing experience, there was little child left in Ebrahim.



'I was 15.

They accepted me as 17.

I turned 18

and they accepted me as 16!



'I had too many ages'.

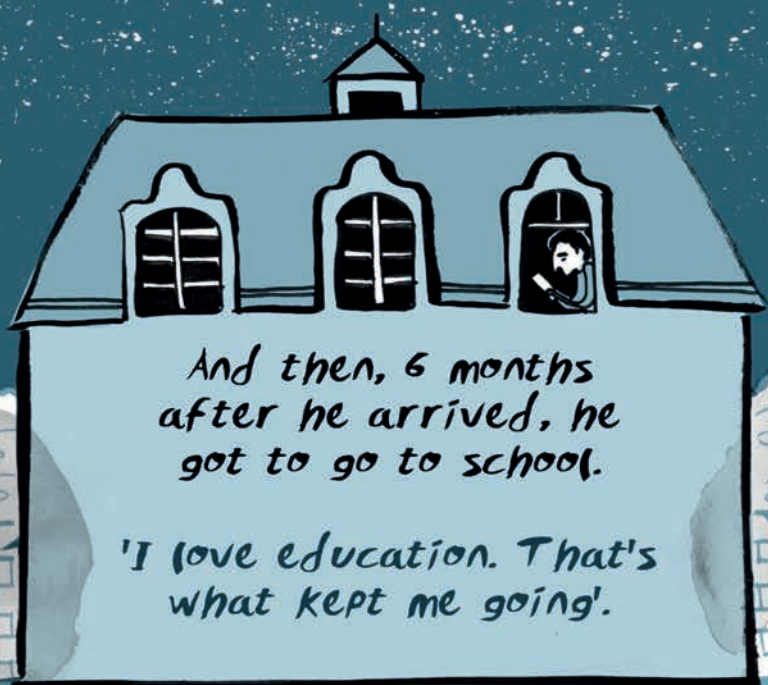




Ebrahim had to face the humiliation of being examined, naked, by a doctor, before the authorities finally accepted he was 15.



He was moved into shared accommodation, with a flatmate and was relieved to be safe. 'It was a very nice house. I couldn't believe I was living in that house!'



*But he missed his mother terribly.*



*He was put in touch with the Red Cross  
family tracing service by his solicitor*



*'They were so friendly and nice'.*



*But he didn't have any pictures of his mother and they used to move house frequently to avoid danger, so they could not help him trace her.*



*He found it strange to see other teenagers complaining about their parents.*



The next  
four years  
passed by

in a blur of  
bureaucracy,  
interviews and  
form-filling

as he and his  
solicitor battled

for him to  
be granted

leave to remain.



The threat of being returned to a hostile land  
hung over him constantly.



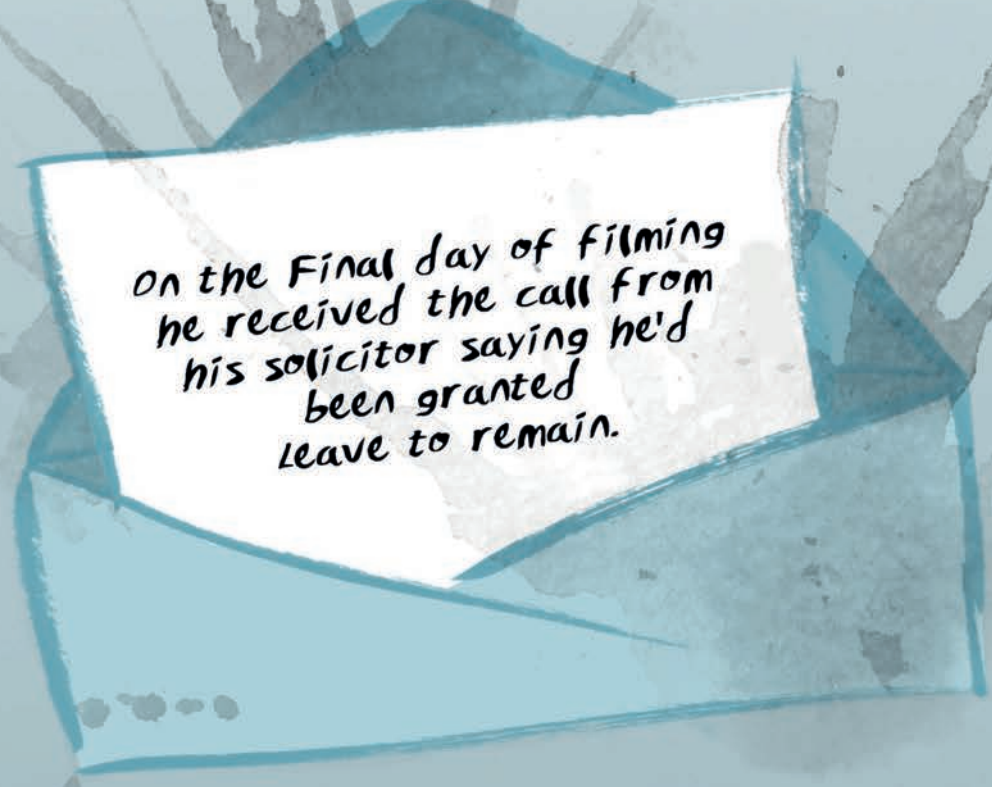
Ebrahim was aware of so many young people going through the same difficult asylum process in the UK. He decided to volunteer for the Red Cross befriending projects, and as a translator with the Red Cross and the Refugee Council.



It gave him the chance to make friends and share memories of home with Kurdish Iranians.



Then, In 2012 he was chosen to act in a film called 'Leave to Remain' by Bafta winner Bruce Goodison, based on the real stories of teenagers seeking asylum in the UK.



On the Final day of filming  
he received the call from  
his solicitor saying he'd  
been granted  
leave to remain.

The cast threw a party to celebrate the news.



Being granted leave to remain has meant so much to him.





'No one's going to force you to go back or take away all you have achieved so far'

Ebrahim is studying International Business at Hammersmith college and is due to start at Brunel University later this year.

London is the land of opportunities if you want to study and in terms of education... I know how to use these opportunities because I know where I came from. I didn't get these opportunities'





Ebrahim is a young man who has survived an epic journey away from his loved ones over mountains and across foreign lands, and has battled a sea of bureaucracy to finally come to a place where he is safe.



"I wouldn't leave my country if I didn't have to. I didn't come here to have fun."

No matter how harrowing his story, Ebrahim knows he was just one of many children all over the world fleeing danger, war and persecution to find a place of safety in the UK.



There are over **10 million** refugees  
in the world, and more than  
**38 million** people displaced by conflict.

**No one** chooses to be a refugee.

Many child refugees have witnessed  
the **murder** or **abduction**  
of one or both of their parents.

Last year, **almost half** of the world's  
refugees were children.

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The British Red Cross helps **10,000**  
refugees and asylum seekers every  
year in **48** locations across the UK.

In 2013 we reunited **509** people  
separated from their loved ones by war,  
conflict and persecution.

At the British Red Cross  
we offer our support to those  
who are seeking sanctuary.

At the British Red Cross we  
**refuse to ignore people in crisis.**

Refugee  
Week



**Where we are:**

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**redcross.org.uk**

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