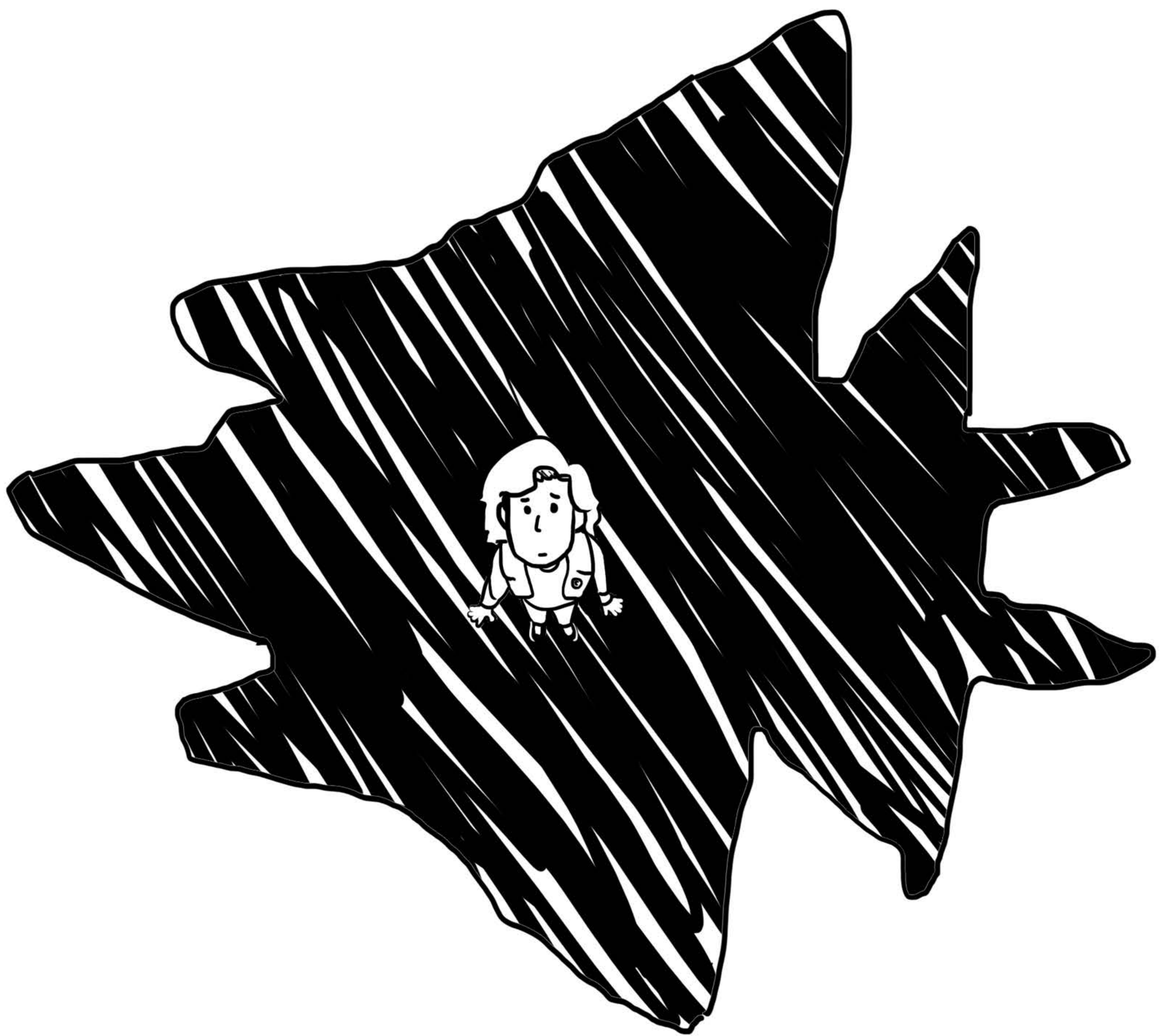


# SIGNALS



*a short story about deciding*

*written and illustrated by*

***K.L. Graywill***



*There are some cities in the world with  
special traffic “rules” for pedestrians.*



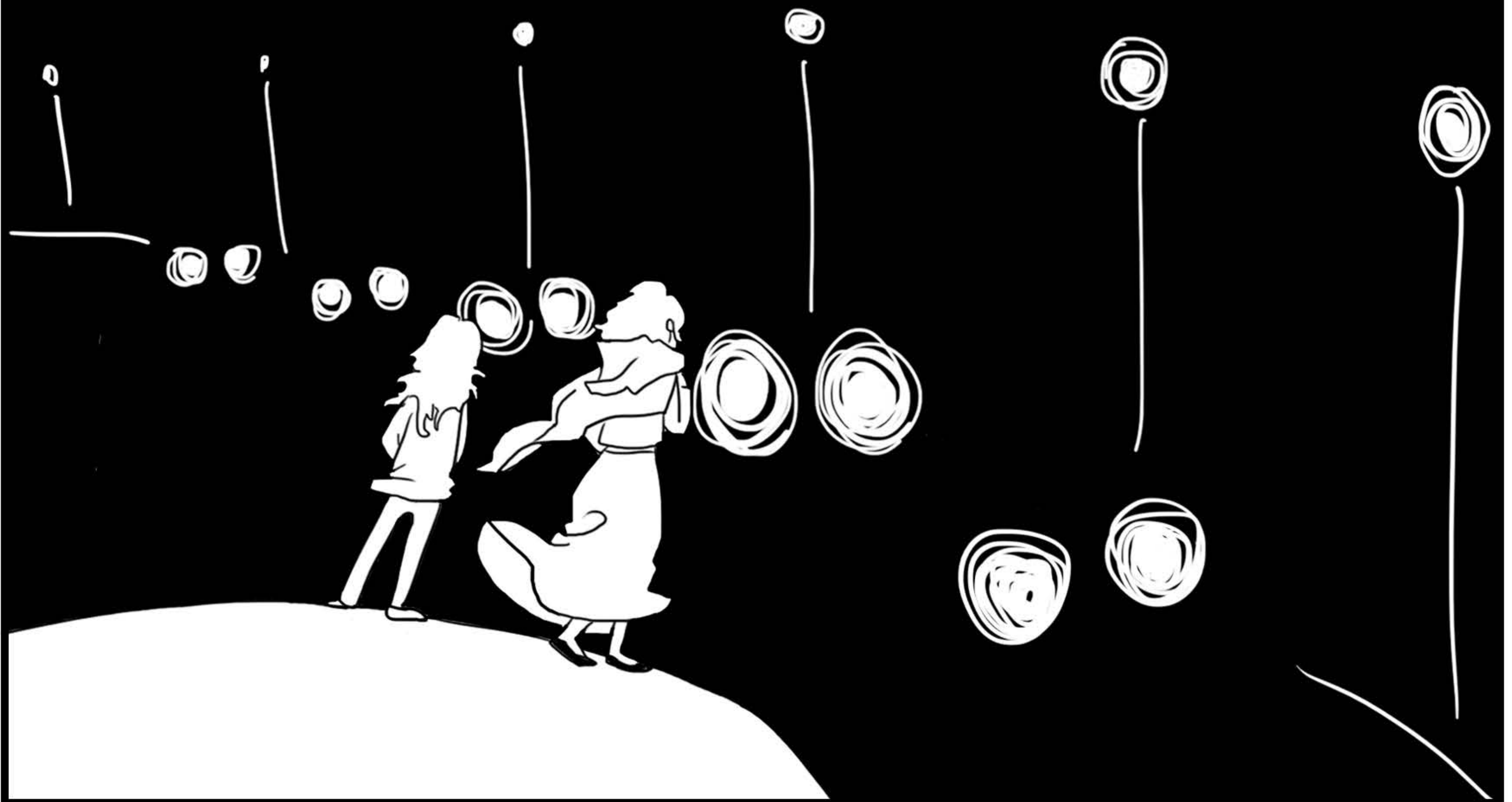
*Amman is one of those cities.*





*It is nighttime and we're standing on the edge of a curb.*

*Though quiet during the heat of Ramadan days, the Amman nights are lively.  
I'm watching for gaps in the traffic as trails of car headlights fly past us,*



*blowing the dust and warm air up beneath us and grazing past  
our loose clothing, barely catching my scarf.*





I had learned years earlier that some streets wait for no one,  
except those who step onto them with confidence, deciding it is  
their turn to pass.

But I had grown accustomed to the order of sleepy American  
towns, where we wait patiently for lights to turn.

Now, I unlearn this.

I choose when I will inject myself into this  
never ending stream of movement.



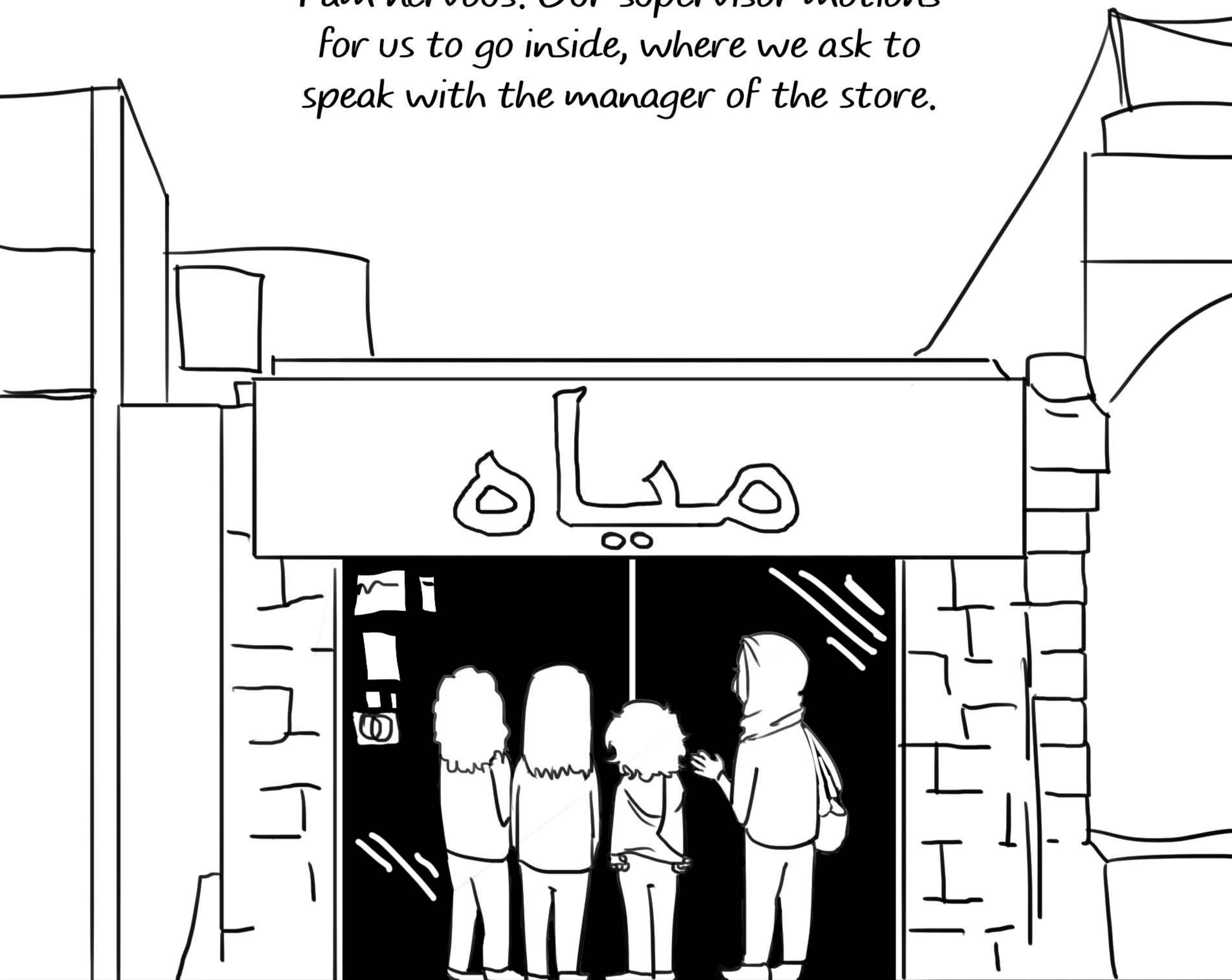




*It's midday and we're standing outside  
a water shop.*

*Things are slow, groggy in the midday  
heat. The kind of dry heat that burns  
when the wind blows.*

*I am nervous. Our supervisor motions  
for us to go inside, where we ask to  
speak with the manager of the store.*



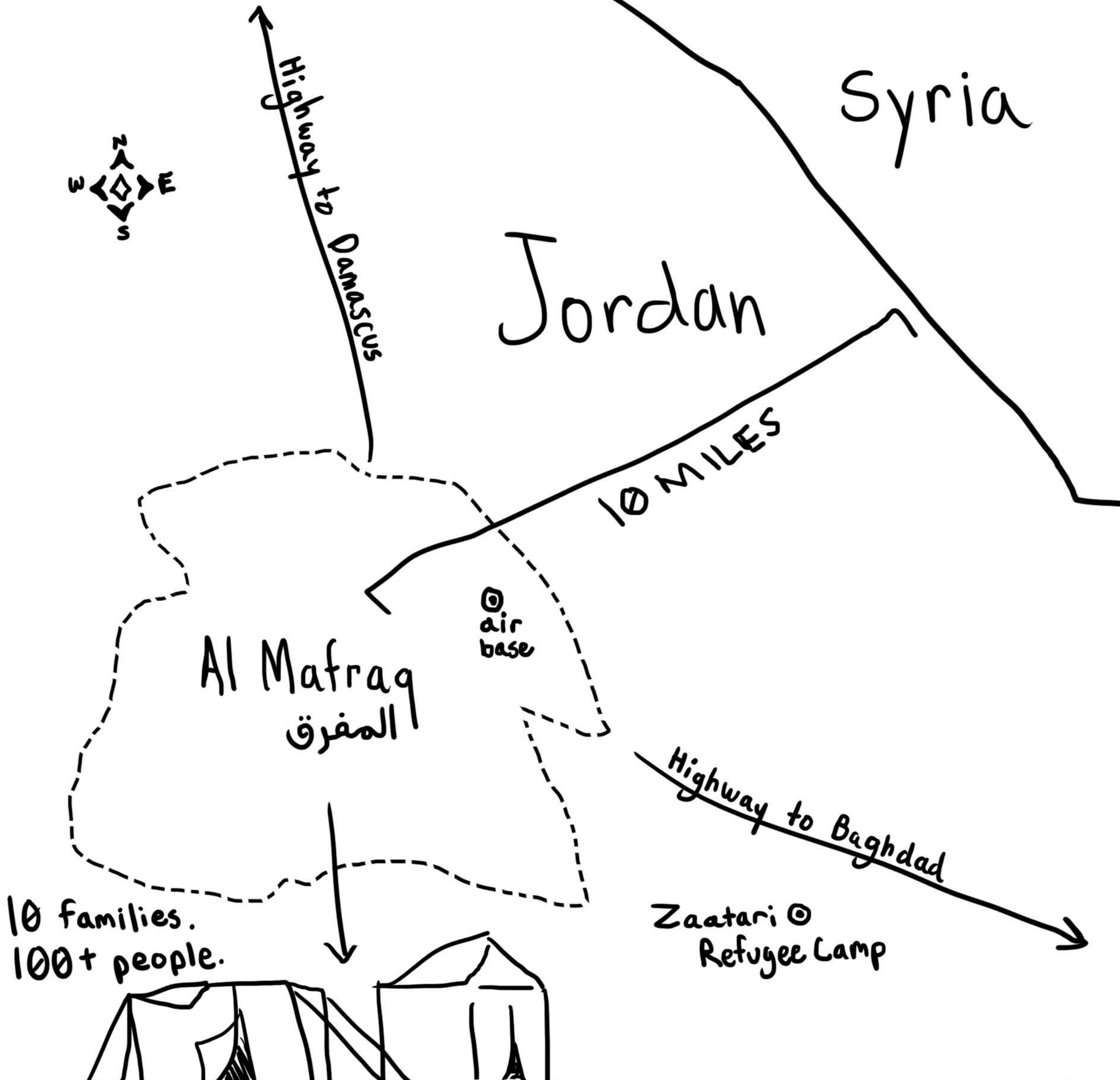




I am hesitant to speak, my Arabic isn't very good, I think maybe someone else should take the lead instead of me. But I begin our pitch.







I explain we're American students living in Amman for a few months, and we are working to help a community of displaced Syrian refugees. They are working to live on a farm in Mafraq, a city near the border. My peer picks up from here. We are asking for water. We are gathering donations of clothes, food, and other supplies - water coolers, air conditioners, other things they told us they need - to improve their living conditions and help them regain some comfort after their struggles.





“... Al humdulilah!”  
“Thanks be to God!” he says.



He donates a liter.

*He tells us, "Of course,"*



*"God must have sent you."*



We spend the rest of the rest of the day going door-to-door to water shops to ask for one liter of water. Overcoming my hesitancy to start was the always hardest part, each time I was nervous.

But almost every single shop donates.

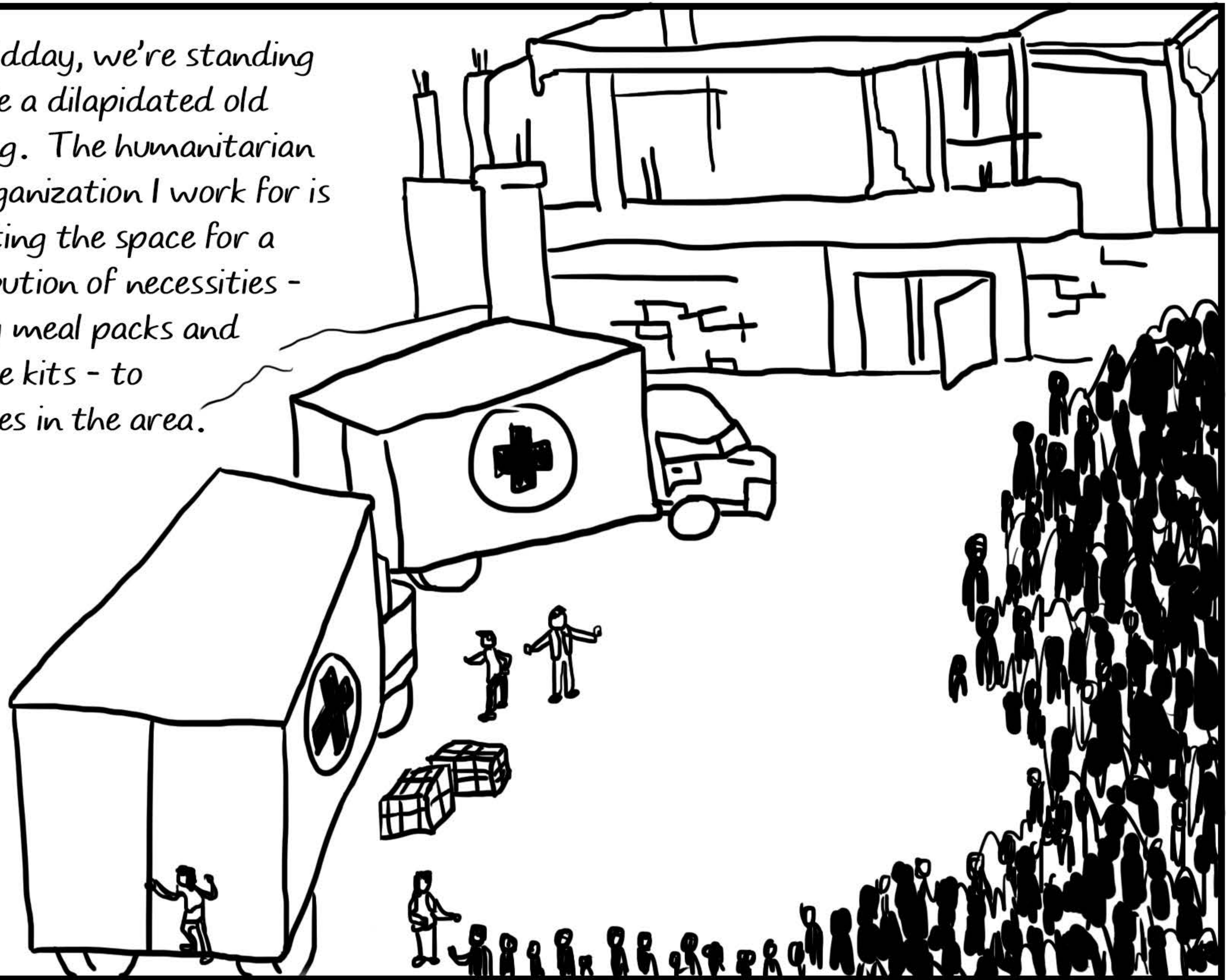
Some send us away with more jugs than we can carry.

They don't all fit in the car.





It's midday, we're standing outside a dilapidated old building. The humanitarian aid organization I work for is co-opting the space for a distribution of necessities - mainly meal packs and hygiene kits - to refugees in the area.



The day is long and hectic, there are many people and limited resources. Not everyone has the correct asylum seeker documentation with them, others need more supplies than we give.

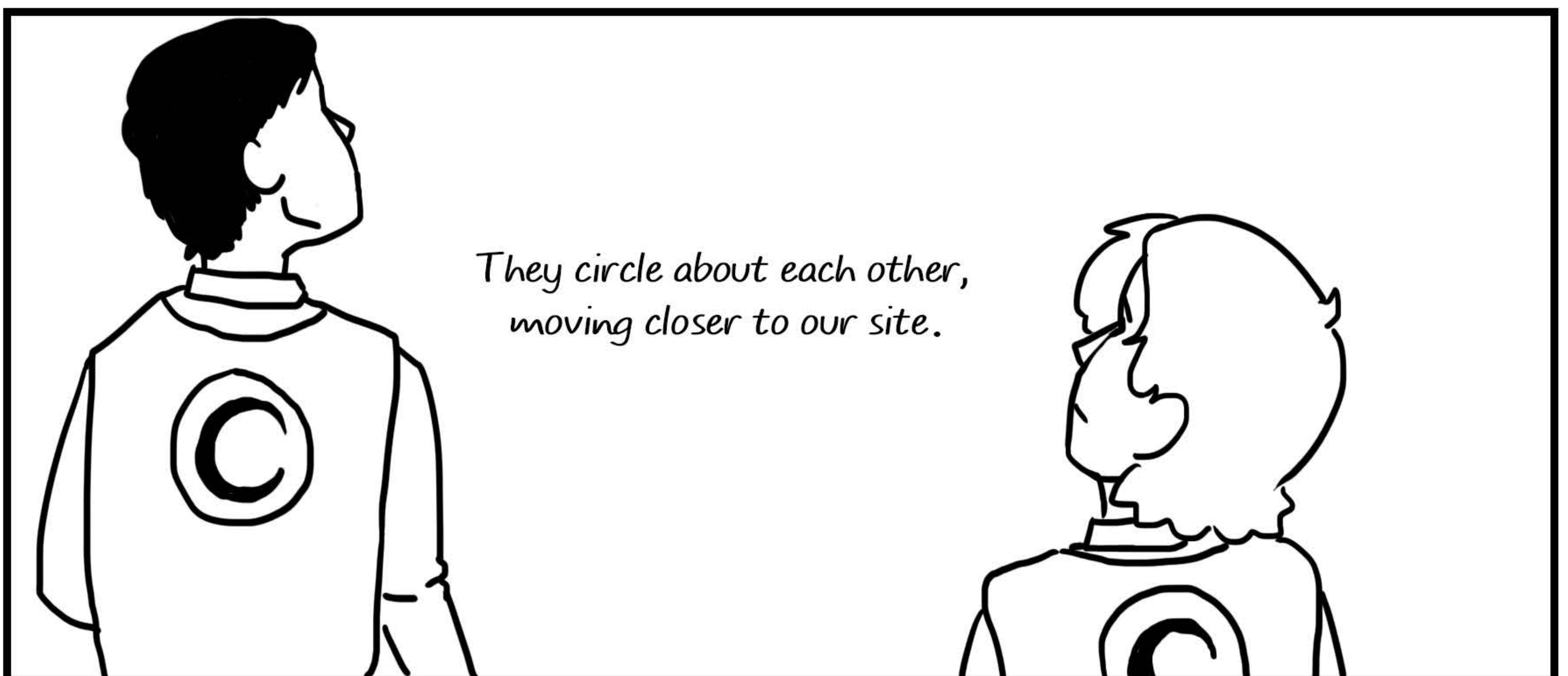
But work is done.







*In the sky two military jets appear.*



*They circle about each other,  
moving closer to our site.*





*It flies over me,  
grazing the top of the building.*

*It's the loudest sound I've ever heard.*



As the jets fly off, the volunteers try to quell the panic inside and outside by explaining they jets were Jordanian, and were not hostile. (We still don't really know what happened or who they were.)

For many of the refugees we worked with, the last time they experienced something like this, it was followed by a bomb dropping.





*I always come back to this image of a mother trying to comfort her child when those jets flew over us.*



*And I wonder, what was the tipping point for them?  
What happened that made them know the time  
had come to leave home? How long did they stay?*



*I also come back to this memory from when we delivered all the water and supplies to the farm near the border.*



*Sitting down and having Iftar with the community, celebrating Eid with new outfits for the children, we all felt reasonably confident that we'd done at least one helpful thing.*





Inshaallah,  
(God willing)

Next  
year  
we will  
eat  
together  
in Syria.



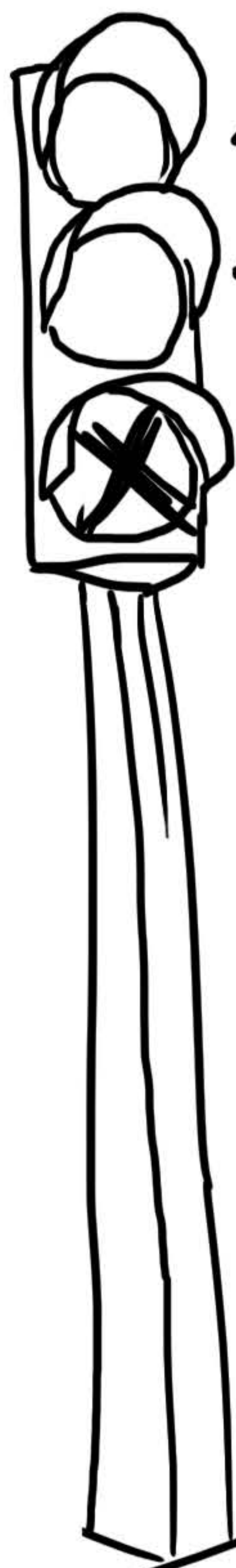
We knew that wouldn't  
happen any time soon.



I felt the happiness drain from me  
a little bit, sobered by reality.

How long would they stay here?  
How long would they exist in this limbo?





- ← leave behind everything immediately
- ← stay if you don't have means to leave
- ← wait it out?

Would they remain attached to the curb? Would there ever be something to signal them whether or not it is safe to move forward, or to remain?

a government that will kill you  
countries that don't want you  
Starting over from nothing  
escape route that might kill you

language barriers  
dependence on foreign aid  
giving up your education  
giving up your job  
no "bonafide" ties  
finding a home  
physical trauma

PLEASE PROCEED  
WITH CAUTION

work to live  
no citizenship  
knowing nobody  
Islamophobia  
racism  
mental trauma





I think sometimes our  
circumstances make our  
decisions for us.

Sometimes they are  
unrelenting; they force us to  
move, to speak, when we are  
not sure if the time is right.

Especially for those whose  
have not lost the right of  
choice, we must use that  
privilege to choose: to take  
action, to just go now, even if  
it is inconvenient.



*Sometimes the timing is never right,  
and things are always hard, and with  
no certainty we must choose to leave,  
to stay, to love, now, or not at all.*





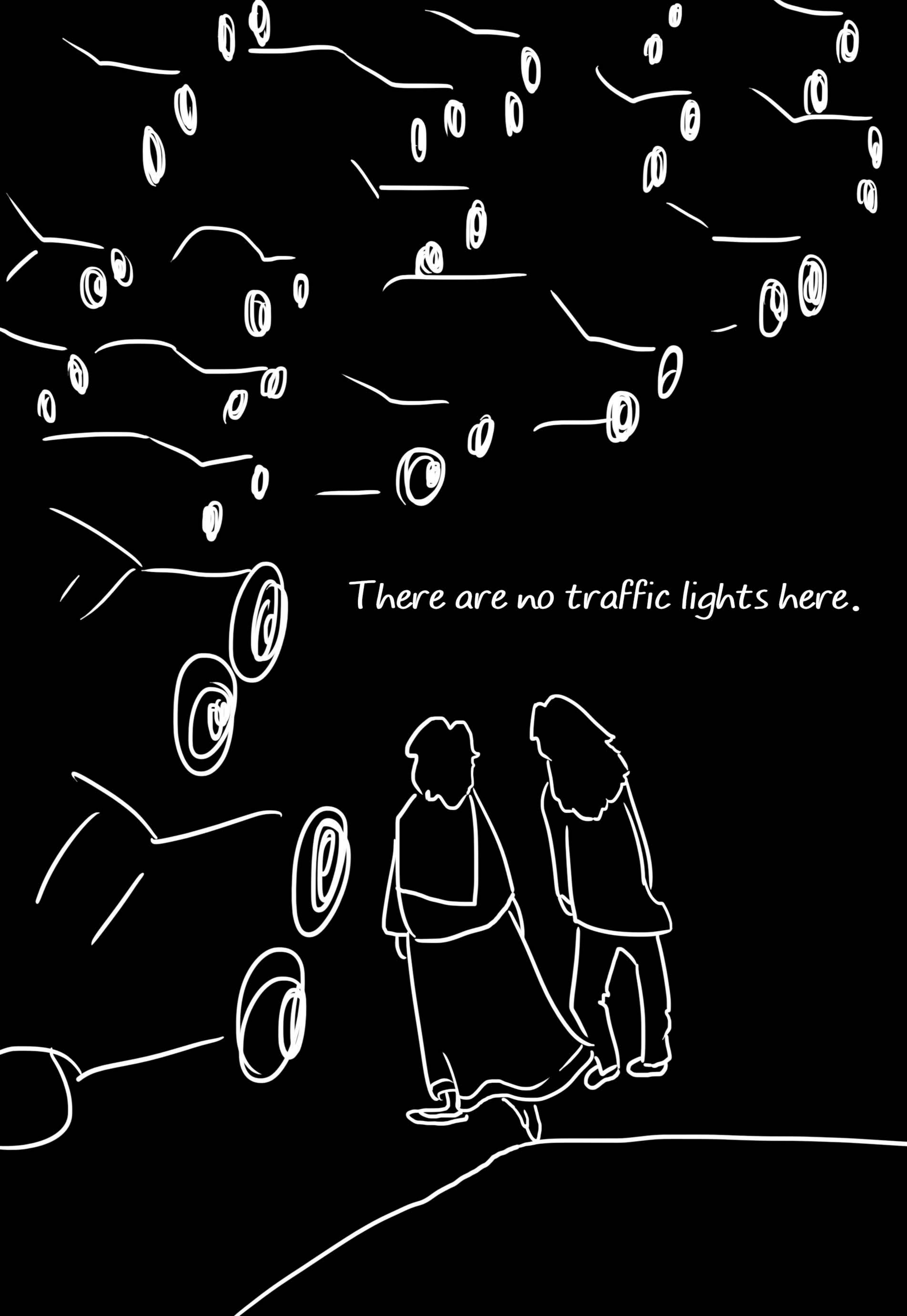
*In the blend of lights and dust in the evening, there is no sign of traffic letting up, and so I motion to my friend to step into the street and cross with me.*



*There is never going to be a good time to cross, just go now.*







*There are no traffic lights here.*







