

DANIEL TRILLING

Lights in the Distance

Exile and Refuge at the Borders of Europe

PICADOR

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It was like seeing a person come back to life, watching Jamal walk towards me across the town square outside the station. In my memory, he was the skinny, shivering young man I'd met in Calais in early 2014. Now, eighteen months later, there was a grin of recognition on his face as he hugged me.

I had gone to Calais because the city puzzled me: how was it that a crossing point between two European countries had become synonymous with refugees from thousands of miles away? Jamal was one of the first people I met; that winter day, he had emerged from a tent pitched underneath a canal bridge, into the drizzle. He was twenty-three, but his slight frame and loose crop of curls made him look younger. I had been struck by the way he spoke in lively, American-inflected English as he told me about his life: that he'd fled Sudan as a teenager; that he'd spent the first five years of his adult life living as an irregular migrant in the European Union; that he wanted to cross the Channel and claim asylum in Britain. We had swapped contact details, and I'd visited Calais many times after that, but I never managed to find him again. Sometimes I wondered if he'd been killed; there were enough stories of people being killed on the roads around Calais to make it a possibility.

But, after months of silence, Jamal had eventually sent me a message online saying he'd moved to a different part of northern Europe. I was surprised; he had been so set on the UK that he could already name the cities he wanted to visit and tell me where he wanted to go to college. What had made him give up?

It was the summer of 2015 when I came to visit Jamal in his new home town. We crossed the square and stopped at a supermarket to buy lunch. Jamal was as I'd remembered him: his laid-back walk, the way he would throw his arms open and widen his eyes when he wanted to heighten the drama of a story. He said he'd explain everything: how he'd ended up in Calais; what had gone wrong there; how he'd left. I said I wanted to know a lot, and that it might take several days of interviews. He was fine with that.

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We reached Jamal's apartment, in a block for newly arrived refugees, on the outskirts of town. Inside, it looked like student halls of residence. He showed me to his corridor: five single bedrooms, all for men; a shared shower room, toilet and kitchen. We went into the kitchen, put the food onto plates and carried them into his room. It was big enough for a bed in one corner, a table and some cushions in the middle, and a desk with a laptop and a couple of Stephen King thrillers on it in the opposite corner. Jamal said he'd saved up for the laptop, a second-hand model, using the subsistence payments he'd received as he waited for his asylum claim to be processed. At the foot of the bed was a Hoover; the residents were expected to do their own cleaning.

As we ate, Jamal told me about his childhood in a

suburb of the Sudanese capital Khartoum, and about his parents: pious, working-class people who saw the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein as a hero because ‘he stood up to the West’. Jamal described how his father had died when he was a baby, and how he’d grown up helping his mother and sister run a tea stall in the centre of town. He found school boring, and he liked to skip classes to play football with his friends, or watch the American television shows and movies beamed into his home by a Saudi satellite channel. He liked crime series the best: *CSI*, *NCS: Manhunt*, *Prison Break*. Or police comedies like *Bad Boys* (‘I like Will Smith’) or *White Chicks* (‘It’s about two cops impersonating their girls so they can see what’s going on’). He’d been taught some English in school, but he became obsessed with these American shows, copying the accents of black American movie stars and trying them out on his family. ‘They had a problem with me in the house because I was controlling the TV. My mum and my sister wanted to watch Arab series, but I would hide the remote. And when I was speaking with my sister, she would speak Arabic and I would annoy her by replying in English. They were asking me why, and I said, “Just because.” I liked it.’

Khartoum was usually a peaceful city, but since 2003 the government had been waging war against rebel groups in Darfur, in the west of the country. Sudan is ruled by an Arabic-speaking elite based in the east, and the government had used militias to carry out a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the ‘African’ inhabitants of Darfur. In May 2008, when Jamal was seventeen, a rebel group raided Khartoum. The attack was swiftly repelled, and the following day Jamal set off by bus across the city to pay the satellite bill, like he did every month. His bus was

stopped on a bridge that crossed the Nile, by soldiers who suspected fleeing rebels of disguising themselves as civilians. ‘They searched us. Everyone who has ID, they let him go; anyone who hasn’t, they stop him. I didn’t have ID.’

Jamal was put in the back of a van. ‘They beat us inside the vehicle and I was very scared. Back of the van, no windows. Many people there.’ After a forty-minute drive to an unknown location, they were put into a cell. ‘We didn’t know what was going to happen. The people there, we were just ordinary people. The rebels all had their own vehicles and they had left the city already. For two weeks, we stayed there, and my mum was worrying because she didn’t know where I was.’ Every so often, the prisoners were called for questioning. If they refused to admit to being rebels, the soldiers beat them. ‘With their hands, with a hose. Some people, with the guns. They didn’t care; they wanted our answer to be what they said.’ Jamal’s left forearm was broken with the butt of a Kalashnikov. Even now, six years later, I could still see the scar. ‘I had surgery, but in winter the pain is worse,’ he said.

After two weeks, Jamal was released without charge. He went home. His mother hugged him, his sister teased him – ‘Now, I suppose, I’m going to have to give you the remote control back’ – and his life went back to its old routine: tea stall in the morning, television in the afternoon, football in the evening. But, as Jamal described it, a shadow had fallen over his life. ‘The police told me I had to report to them for surveillance once a week. All the time, I’d go there: “You’re still here?” “Yeah, I’m still here.” It went on for a year, and after one year, I was like, “This is fucking bullshit; I didn’t do anything and I’m still reporting, and for what?”’ Before the arrest, Jamal had

been happy to drift; afterwards, he said, his life felt like a dead end.

He started to pay attention to the stories his friends told about cousins, or friends of friends, who had left Sudan for Europe. ‘We would be playing football, you see someone and he says, “My cousin is going to Britain, Mohammed’s cousin is now in Greece,” many things. We thought everybody who went had a better life.’

I asked Jamal what that phrase, ‘a better life’, had meant to them. ‘When I’m saying I want to get my life better and better, I want it to have what I’m dreaming about. But in Sudan I cannot have it. Like, if I say I really want to marry, I want to have some shops. In Sudan, I cannot do it, because of limited things that I have. But if I get to Europe, I will finish my education and I will work there and I will start to get a better life and I will marry. But if I sit in Sudan, I will not do this. This is what I mean about better life. Some people, they have a dream to live. Some people, they want to die for something. Like, some people they say, “I want to go there to educate myself and I want to come back and change the system here.” Some people say, “I want to change the government, I want to go there and see what they’re doing and bring back the ideas to improve the country.” We say this in Sudan: if you ain’t found something to die for, you ain’t fit to live.’

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There are lots of reasons why young Sudanese might want to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Their country is rich in oil, gold and cotton, but a corrupt ruling elite and a crippling US trade embargo, imposed in the 1990s after Sudan was designated a state sponsor of terrorism, have hindered economic development. In 2015, a UN rapporteur found

that the sanctions were having little impact on the elite, but had made life harder for ordinary people. The government's paranoid attitude towards its own citizens makes things harder still, especially for those who fall under suspicion, as Jamal did. Violent repression by the government of Omar al-Bashir has been forcing many Sudanese to leave since the 1990s.

The 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who leaves their country with a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' and can't safely return home. The story Jamal told me – that his government regarded him as a subversive – was likely to place him in that category. In theory, this gave him the right to claim asylum in one of the 144 countries that have signed the Convention. But unless you're a political VIP – say, a senior North Korean official who wants to defect – it's almost impossible to claim asylum at an overseas embassy. Although some refugees come to Europe using their real ID documents, visas are hard to obtain for people from most parts of the world. Others who come to Europe to claim asylum do so with fake IDs, or via clandestine routes.

Jamal started to ask around. There was a route through North Africa, across the Sahara Desert, followed by a smuggler boat from Libya to Italy, but in 2008, when he first thought of leaving, migration was heavily policed by Muammar Gaddafi's regime. You could die in the desert, he was warned. One of Jamal's friends from football had a cousin who had taken an easier route, flying from Sudan to Turkey, then paying smugglers to take him across the border to Greece. Jamal got hold of his phone number and asked him for the contact of the smugglers in Turkey. First,

though, he needed to get out of Sudan. He'd never had a passport, but he found a man in a bar who knew someone in the passport office, who said he could get a fake document for 2,000 euros. Jamal borrowed the money from his mother, although he didn't tell her what for.

'This is one of my rules,' Jamal said, as we sat on cushions in his room. 'If I want something, I will not say it's for me. I will say it's for someone else, so I can get something I need. Everything I want to do, this is how I do it.' Even his close friends didn't know what he was planning. 'Afterwards, when I get what I want, then they can know about it. If my friends knew, they would try and put things in my mind – this is dangerous, you will get caught – and it would confuse me.' It sounded crafty. 'Yeah,' Jamal said. 'Whenever I want to do something, I don't tell nobody. Just do it, whatever the consequences.'

Jamal's mum guessed what he was up to, though, and she thought it was a good idea. She helped him get a visa stamp for Turkey, via a friend who worked in the embassy, and lent him the money to pay smugglers there. Jamal booked a flight to Istanbul.

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Jamal left Sudan in the spring of 2009; he remembered the date, he said, because a Champions League match was playing on the television at the airport in Khartoum. It was a few months after his eighteenth birthday, and this was the first time he'd ever crossed an international border – an unremarkable journey, if it hadn't been for the false documents.

On arrival in Istanbul, Jamal phoned the smugglers whose contact details he'd been given. Two Arabic-speaking men – he didn't know if they were Turkish or

Middle Eastern – came to pick him up. They took him to an apartment in the city, where he stayed overnight, and then drove him to Izmir, on Turkey’s Aegean coast. There, he waited for a few days in an apartment with a dozen other people, from Sudan, Somalia, Egypt and elsewhere, who wanted to cross into Europe by boat. There were two false starts: one time, because the weather was bad; another, because a pregnant woman was part of the group and Jamal and some of the other men thought she might slow them down. On the third attempt, Jamal and the rest of his group were driven by minibus in the small hours to a deserted stretch of coastline a few hours from the city. By moonlight, the smugglers gave them a deflated dinghy and showed them how to blow it up. One of the group had been shown how to operate the motor. The journey took two hours, the crossing was calm and silent, and the group arrived on the shore of an island without incident. They destroyed the boat and threw the remains in the water, then set off inland to try to work out where they had landed. ‘We didn’t know where we were,’ Jamal said. ‘We started walking up the hill, then, after one or two hours, we saw an electricity pylon. An African guy with us knew some Greek letters, so he looked at it, saw the letter delta and said, “Fine, we’re in Greece.”’ After several hours walking through the hills, Jamal’s group encountered some police officers, who took them to their station, took their details and kept them overnight.

This was the second international border Jamal had crossed. But he hadn’t only moved from one country to another; he had crossed the EU’s external frontier. In 2009, according to statistics compiled by the EU border agency Frontex, there were 106,200 detections of unauthorized entry into the EU.

I asked Jamal if he'd had a plan for what to do next. 'No, just to Greece first of all. I didn't think it would be that difficult, so I just thought I would get to Greece and that's it. I will be safe in Europe, I said to myself. I know what I want to do there, in Europe. Turkey is not part of Europe, so they will not treat me the way that European people will treat me.'

The boat had landed on the island of Samos. There were now several sets of rules that potentially governed Jamal's movement. He had entered Greece without permission and without documents – he had ripped up his passport before leaving Turkey. The Greek authorities were within their rights to detain him and send him back to his home country, if they could determine where that was. But if he claimed asylum, then Greece would have to treat him in accordance with international and European agreements on refugees. Under the 1951 Convention, they would have to assess his claim on an individual basis. They were not allowed to punish him for entering the country illegally, and they were not allowed to send him back to Sudan, or any other country he had passed through where his safety was at risk. Under the Dublin system, it was Greece's responsibility to process Jamal's claim, since this was the first EU country he'd set foot in. But the Greek officials on Samos, knowing full well that most irregular migrants they encountered wanted to continue their journeys to elsewhere in Europe, or were willing to work on the black market in Greece, could neglect to ask if he wanted to claim asylum and send him on his way.

The police chose to let him go. They gave each person in Jamal's group a ferry ticket to Athens and a piece of paper saying they had to leave the country within a month.

In Athens, Jamal found his way to a Sudanese cafe, where the owners let him stay for a few days and advised him to go to Filiatra, a village in the Peloponnese, to find work. He went to Filiatra. He didn't like what he saw there – Sudanese men queuing up in the mornings to work on farms for twenty-five euros a day – so he asked the farm workers how to get out of Greece. They told him to go to Patras, a port in the west of the country, where ferries left for Italy. Greece is part of the Schengen zone of free movement, but it's cut off geographically from other EU member states by the Mediterranean, in one direction, and its Balkan neighbours, who aren't members, in another. At Patras, Jamal found some more Sudanese, living in abandoned train carriages on railway sidings near the port entrance. They told him that, since you needed ID to buy a ticket for the ferry, the only way to get into the port was by hiding underneath a lorry.

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Lorries are like the red blood cells in our modern systems of distribution. They often mark the final stage of huge networks that span the globe, bringing food from industrial farms or consumer goods that arrive on container ships to local warehouses and shops. And to keep these systems working smoothly, the EU has invested heavily in removing the physical and legal barriers to trade. 'There is no single market without integrated transport networks,' a 2012 report from the European Commission declares. The report states that 44 per cent of goods in Europe are transported by road, and boasts of the funds deployed to improve roads, help drivers navigate using satellite technology and allow hauliers to pick up business

in more than one member state. Lorry routes stretch across Europe and into Asia, and much like commercial passenger transport offers paying customers several classes of travel, the bulky vehicles offer a range of options to stowaways.

If you have the money and the contacts, you can pay a smuggling network to hide you among the cargo and take you, with the knowledge of the driver, from one destination to another. Otherwise, you need to hide yourself somewhere inside the lorry without being noticed. At ports and other freight-transport hubs, where large numbers of lorries have to park up or wait overnight, smugglers – or groups of migrants acting independently – might know how to unlock the back of a lorry and climb in while the driver is asleep, or away from the vehicle. It's riskier than the first option, and you don't necessarily know the lorry's destination, but at least you're inside. If you can't use either of these methods, because you don't have the money or you don't have access to the lorry parks, then you need to hide underneath, often while the lorry is in motion. This last method is the hardest and most dangerous. It rewards only the able bodied, and the migrants who try it are almost always men.

I'd spent a lot of time in Calais trying to find the spots where people did this, and a lot of time peering under lorries at home in London, trying to work out how exactly someone could hide themselves underneath, but I'd never quite understood it. I asked Jamal to explain.

'In Patras, there were traffic lights just before the port, and the lorries stopped there. They were in a big queue, waiting, with the smaller vehicles, so you go there and you run.' As he talked, I used the details to draw a diagram in

my notebook. There was a road junction just before the traffic lights. Three of them, one acting as lookout, would hide around the corner. When the way was clear, the lookout would beckon the other two across and all three would run straight at the back of the vehicle, out of view of the driver's wing mirrors. Then they would crawl underneath, hoping that the driver behind wouldn't spot them, or wouldn't bother to alert the one in front.

I still didn't understand how they held on underneath, so I drew another diagram, of two wheels joined by an axle. 'You see the axle? You have to lay down here.' He pointed to the gap between the axle and the underside of the lorry container. 'You hold on above – to cables, or anything you find that isn't moving – then you're all ready to go.' I added a stick man with his head and feet resting on the wheel wells on opposite sides of the axle.

Jamal explained this with the confidence of a veteran, but when he first arrived in Patras, aged eighteen, he had been timid. And after a few days, the police caught him. This time, they asked Jamal if he wanted to claim asylum; he said yes, and they sent him to a camp for teenagers, outside Patras. Now, his movement was being governed by the Dublin system, the rules of which he had avoided on Samos. If he wanted to claim asylum in Europe, he would now have to do it in Greece.

But Greece, experiencing a severe economic crisis, was not what Jamal had expected of Europe. 'You arrive in Athens and you see people sleeping in the street, eating from the garbage, shops closed down. Then you go to Filifira and they humiliate you there and give you twenty-five euros for a day's work. Then you go to Patras and you see how people like me are living: they're running from the police and the Greek community don't treat you well. So,

all this makes you say you don't want to stay in Greece and you will try to leave.'

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For the rest of 2009, Jamal used the camp as a base, taking trips back to Patras every few weeks to have another go at the lorries. He learned Greek and he bought a mobile phone with the money he earned doing odd jobs – painting and decorating, cooking – around the camp. This phone could play MP3s, and on the bus from the camp into town, he chatted to Greek teenagers about what music they listened to. 'I heard Rihanna in 2009 and I can't ever get tired of it,' Jamal said, explaining how he'd write down the names, then download the songs when he was back at the camp. 'I wanted to improve my English, so the more I listened to the music, the more I could speak.'

In 2010, he moved back to Patras, where he found a group of Sudanese men living in a disused factory near the port. There were about 200 in total, a few the same age as Jamal, but many who were older. Most of them came from Darfur, fleeing one of the worst massacres of the early twenty-first century; estimates of the death toll range from the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands. For a few years, the war was an object of global media scrutiny, after a campaign launched in 2006 by the Hollywood actor George Clooney. In 2009, Sudan's president, Omar al-Bashir, was indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, but attention had already started to drift away from Darfur. Over two million people have been displaced by the conflict, a fraction of whom have sought asylum in Europe; most still live in camps in Sudan or in neighbouring Chad.

Like Jamal, the Darfuris had arrived in Europe with little money, and were relying on small networks of friends and contacts to help them make their journeys westwards. In the daytime, the inhabitants of the factory would go looking through the rubbish bins of Patras for food to eat, old electronic goods and clothes they could sell, or they would wait in supermarket car parks and offer to take back customers' trolleys in return for the one-euro deposit. In the evening, they would chase lorries that were queuing up for the ferry departures to Italy. The success rate was low, so most of the time the men would go back to the factory to cook dinner and spend the evening talking.

Jamal mainly spent time with people his own age, but in the evenings he would go and sit with the older men and listen to them talk politics. 'We couldn't be sitting around with these people in Sudan because we were too young and they wouldn't have allowed us to stay with them,' he said. 'But in Greece everyone was equal, if you're small or big, or you're poor or rich.' In Sudan, the older men had been doctors, engineers, teachers. Sometimes they talked about the corruption of the Sudanese government, or the persecution they'd suffered at the hands of paramilitaries and the security forces. Other times they'd talk about Sudanese music, or history. 'I was surrounded with people who had many experiences of life. Even the way they talked, I loved it so much. They would discuss politics in a fun way.'

Jamal had stopped going to school at fifteen because he couldn't be bothered to keep up the work, he told me, and he started to feel ashamed about his own lack of education. 'In Sudan, because of the way we were living, we didn't have time for searching what was going on in the news. We were working, making food, playing with

friends, sleeping. In Greece, we had nothing to do; I was eighteen and my mind started to, like, catch everything around me. You start to realize what's going on there and make some questions. This is normal, every kid starts to do this, you know. The only difference is I was living in the factory. If I was in Sudan and I continue to the university, it will be much different. But these things came while I was surrounded with garbage and friends who were trying to cross to Italy and running from the police, so I didn't have the complete idea in my mind about everything. I was too upset, I was too disappointed and I was, like, "Why didn't I finish my school?"

One of the elder men in particular helped Jamal broaden his horizons. He was a veterinarian who had been working in Darfur and was tortured by the government-aligned Janjaweed militia during the war. Jamal spent a lot of time talking with him. 'Every time we spoke, I felt happy, because he's a very funny man, and any topic you ask him about, he has ideas about it. When you speak with him, you benefit from him.'

This only strengthened Jamal's resolve to get out of Greece and reach a place where he could go back to school. The people around him had one destination in mind. 'Every time someone left, you would ask where he'd gone and he would be in Britain. We knew it was easier to claim asylum there. In some countries, you have to wait years, but in Britain, you'd only have to wait three or four months.' They hoped everyday life would be easier there, too. Some of the elders would say Britain was less racist than other parts of Europe because it had a lot of black people living there already. Others suggested that Britain would treat them better because Sudan had been a British colony. A 2006 report by the IOM claimed that

Britain had the oldest Sudanese diaspora in Europe, and estimated the size of the community there at between 23,000 and 53,000. Jamal decided that Britain was the place for him, too – he had better English than most of the Sudanese he knew; he'd be able to get on well at school there. Only the vet disagreed. He told Jamal the others were talking nonsense and that Norway was a much better place to aim for; their system treated the Sudanese more generously, he said.

Jamal lived in the factory at Patras for four years, following the same routine: living on what he could find from the streets; being picked up by police, pushed around and released; trying but not quite succeeding to get out of Greece. Once, he said, he saw a Sudanese man, someone he didn't know well, crushed to death under the wheels of a lorry. Another time, he clung onto the underside of a vehicle long enough to make it onto a ferry bound for Italy – but he was spotted on deck and sent straight back to Patras on the return journey.

At the end of January 2014, Jamal got lucky. He made it onto a ferry and stayed underneath the lorry so nobody would see him. He crawled around on the floor, scooping up water to drink from puddles when he got thirsty, listening to the grinding of the ship's engines and counting the hours of the journey. If it took twenty-four hours, he would be in Ancona. If it took thirty-six, he would be in Venice.

It took thirty-six.