

How I miss Jadatti's kiss

My beautiful Jadatti, white hair poking from her hijab, cooking mamounia for us all. Mama and Papa were still with us then, the whole family together. Her face was wise, wrinkles hewn by watching her country at war. She would hug me close and tell me that all would be well. She'd fill up my beautiful blue bowl.

And I could believe that all would be well.

Using the sliver of light, I can see the darkened outline of the door. The watery shaft of whiteness squeezing beneath gives maybe five percent illumination. Edie would be proud of me working out five percent. I hated percentages. And the word illumination. 'It's a top notch one,' she'd say.

But five percent is enough. Squeezing my eyelids almost together, the rectangular shape of the window is just visible. Curtains, big and heavy, nailed across it. Red, blood red, curtains with tassels around the edge, and a pattern. The tassels are starting to come apart, some threads hang lower than others. The smell that lingers in the fabric, that aroma of fried kubbeh and kabsah, it was our happy food. It transports me back to my shack in camp, to the white tarpaulin ceilings with red Safe For Children logos flapping up in the hot, dusty wind. When the direction changed, deflated by the gusts, the tarpaulins would press down on us. It sounded so scary

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that sudden crack, and the flicking movement would make us all laugh out loud.

Moments of those long days when I could forget I was alone.

I ache for the wind to press down on me now.

Echoing voices outside my room cause my stomach to heave. Quiet talk in low voices. They laugh sometimes, spit and cuss, complain the price is too high.

I cannot recall how my laugh sounds, how to make that noise.

It has been silenced by the unwelcome learning.

The scraping of dirty stubble against my cheek leaves my skin hot and red and raw.

What a man weighs, heavy against my body, squeezing out the life I have left. The smell of them - hair tainted with cigarette smoke, with grease, with engine oil.

Kisses forged through moustached mouths, blackened teeth, tobacco-tasting tongues. The grunting heave as they squirm. Low voices full of syllables and sounds from worlds unknown to me.

They never say my name.

Their noises remind me of those nights in camp. Different languages swirling around in the wind, odd words making sense. Amena used to remind me how I'd arrived at camp. My feet bled on the walk. Dust created red crusts inside my sandals. A sharpened pencil still clutched in my hand. She told me how her family would want her to get to Europe, finish her education.

'It is all I can do to make them proud now they are gone,' she'd say. Together with Edie, she was my new family. They must've overheard her chatter about going to school in England.

'We can fast track you,' they'd promised. 'Our friends will sort your papers and places in good schools, find your families. Come.'

Edie's words haunt me still. Warning we should only trust the aid workers. We'd giggled when we first met her. Our new carer, she said. She made us sound precious with that word, safeguarding.

Alone on this filthy bed I wonder did Edie look for us, report us missing next day when we didn't turn up for her kabsah? When our shack was silent and empty?

When the bowl arrives at the end of each day, the door opens just enough to place the food on the floor. The five percent light is turned back on. Then, the click of the lock. I sweep my hand over the cool tiled floor to locate the bowl. It's never the kubbeh they cook for themselves. As I eat, the darkness is my friend. Today's semolina as tasteless as yesterday's, encrusts the rim but still takes me back to Jadatti's mamounia.

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Served in my blue glazed bowl, topped with cinnamon and pistachio nuts. Its sweetness lingering in my mouth then followed by a kiss, a rain of kisses, as she'd tell me that I would become our country's next president, or maybe a pilot or an architect.

The Trafficker's Tale

I've had to trample on people to get to the top in my line of business.

Money makes our world go around. Everyone's the same from that point of view.

When you hear stories about trafficking gone wrong, that is when we are found out because the travellers die or escape, there's a TV debate about how people can do this. 'That poor dead child washed up on the beach,' they say. 'People suffocating in a locked lorry.' The communal scratching of heads and wringing of hands.

Well it's easy. I'm just a facilitator.

People and their families want to move into richer countries. I help them achieve that. I sort out their journeys, you know, a kind of travel agent, sorting out my steps of their itinerary. I carry all the risk which is why my commission is high. Burner phones cost money. Sourcing boats and pilots. That's what we call them. It's a tricky job. We give them training. Once they have the big stick, those without their own gun, all they need to do is maintain order and wear their own lifejackets. The ones we really rate, we give wet suits. Once they land safely, I take over. If they're caught or the boat develops a problem, know how to create a diversion when the authorities arrive. A medical emergency on board is always good, then they run for it, or look for the jet ski if we know what's happening and can help them out. They need to keep themselves safe for the next time.

Self-preservation, that's the key.

At first some of the pilots don't like to beat the fathers who are frightened their children are going to drown, or who ask for answers, fresh water, protection from the rain. The first beating is the worst, as I recall. They may have been doctors, judges, architects in their previous lives these travellers, but on our boats, they are all damp bundles of cash. Causing trouble- it's unsafe, not good for the risk assessment. It's put up or shut up in my business. A straight choice, but not everyone sees it that way.

They're the ones who end up going over.

The last one we put over could've been an Olympic standard swimmer, a really feisty guy. Still, after a few chilly Med minutes, that's what we like to call them, when the torch was passed over the dark water he'd given up. His wife was whimpering, shushing their baby. My business associate said the mother and daughter would end up at the house on Shore Street. They were the right age. The baby would be rehomed. They should think themselves lucky. They could have gone over the side with dear 'ol Papa.

No money-back guarantees here.

What happens when they leave my care is not my problem. I spend no time thinking about it. I look at the bottom line of my bank account at the end of every day and kiss the screen of my iPhone. That's my god, the dollars, the euros, the pounds.

What makes me good at my job?

I have lived that journey, known the terror of that crossing. We were lucky to make it unscathed, but as the master walked down to the shore issuing destinations for my family, I passed out. We'd had nothing to eat for three days. So, they checked me, left me on the ground to recover. But I heard them. Sending my Mama to work for the gang-master's wife, helping with their children. My sister to the den, my brothers to the fruit farmer. If they'd known about me, I mean, the real me...well, that makes me shudder.

I ran 'til my legs became solid, leaden. There was a church. The priest took me in. His housekeeper liked me. She fed me gnocchi and we talked about where I was from. We hit a bump in the road when she started to ask about my age. I overheard her asking the priest, did he know I was fifteen? He'd need to involve the authorities because I was a victim of crime, she said.

The result was another dodgy journey, but once the Italian police were shaken off, I made it to England in the back of a refrigerated lorry. It cost me, that journey, when I had no money. I walked every street, scoped out the town, visited everywhere I

could to find people like me. A cardboard bed under the railway arches was my home until the research was done. Nail bars, pubs, takeaways. I'd ask for the boss, say I was seeking work. I looked young, good-looking.

Vulnerable.

I'd find out everything, language, background, were they legitimate? Once we'd spoken, I'd ask for the toilet. And run. I could always clock a good time around the track.

I worked out who was too dangerous. Who had their own prejudices, desires. That's how I ended up with my business associate. He was young and clever too. He still had contacts back home. He locates the punters, the pilots, the craft. We had to watch the news, research, best methods to move people. RHIBs, he said. They're good, light and strong, easy to get your hands on without leaving a trail. Big payload too.

What we can't control- the dark, the sea. Finding your way across open water- we tried it once. Acknowledge your skillset, know what you're good at. We leave that to others now.

Money collections and arranging the Welcoming Committee shore side, that's my part of the deal. And the advice from Uncle. He helped us get going. He has good links, and lets us know if things are getting a little too close.

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My Mama and Papa always wanted the best for me, knew I'd get to the top in business somewhere.

I'm not sure they'd approve, but wherever they are, I would say this is 'full circle'.

Cinderella

In the back of the Ford Transit, Karam was cold, wet and bloodied. His heart beat in his throat. Every bump in the road hurt. The gaffer tape binding his wrists and ankles cut into his cold waxen flesh. The gag choked, forcing his breath through his nose. Only able to sit upright until the next corner or when the van braked, he rolled, braced himself.

The van came to a stop. Karam shuffled to the back doors. Lined with plywood, covered in paint and dirty scuffs, the windows were covered in reflective foil. He looked down the length of his body to work out what was causing the pain. His black bomber jacket was pulled up to his shoulders, his fingers and hands covered in scrapes and scuffs, his jeans wet in large patches. He was grass stained and mud spattered. One foot was colder than the other, his right foot shoeless and sockless, throbbing with pain.

Tariq's face was bloodied and wet from tears. He looked over at Karam. Karam shrugged.

Their journey continued.

In the cab, spindly roll-ups were lit and passed between the occupants of the bench seat. Amidst the tobacco fug, they exchanged congratulations, patted one another on the back.

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'Can tell you've been working out...picked him up like a frightened rabbit, that skinny
'un. Clean and jerk. Thought you about to press him up above your shoulders!'

'I'll do it when we get there. Happy to get the guns out.'

'Where now? Should I follow Billy's Golf?'

'Nah. Take the A38. MacDonald's anyone? Calories for when we get there?'

'What about the, erm...cargo?'

No MacDonald's and no full English for them tomorrow morning, I'd be thinking.'

Flashes of blue light illuminated the motorway. The patrol car slowed, pulling onto the hard shoulder. Beyond the guard rail was a drop, sudden and steep. Raindrops on the grass were picked out in the car headlights.

Reflected light skimmed the wet tarmac. Every nubble and bump in the surface visible. Opening the vehicle door, the officers put on their caps and silently surveyed the scene. Sharp shards of rain furrowed their brows, their eyes narrowed in the darkness.

The police radio on Burden's lapel crackled and spat.

'Charlie-delta-six to base. Exact location of this incident please?' he asked. He looked at his colleague, whose eyes darted around, scouring beyond the guard rail. Plumes of frozen breath unfurled from the officer's nose and lips.

'Incident reported beside emergency phone, ID 767. Four IC1 males handling two IC6 males on hard shoulder. One vehicle nearby, red VW Golf, index November-

delta-one-five-golf-Yankee- foxtrot. Believed stolen plates. Running checks on ANPRs in vicinity to locate vehicle. Report when checks made please.'

'Weird.' muttered Malik, warm breath funnelling from the raised collar of his service waterproof. 'We're in the right place. Only one person rang it in? A scuffle at the side of the motorway?' Approaching the guard rail, the officers shone their torches across the grassy drop in front of them.

'No tyre marks. Bit of road rage between boy racers?' speculated Malik. 'God, my stomach is rumbling. Is it buttie o'clock yet?'

'But just the red Golf? For six guys? Must've been a second car, especially the way they're built around here. You and your stomach. Like that plant, Audrey! Feed me now! I don't have a good feel about this. Let's look down this slope. We'll call time if there's nothing else.'

Slicing the soles of his boots into the incline, Burden smiled.

'This is how mountain sheep feel,' he muttered. 'And, by the way, it's your turn at The Greasy Spoon when we're done.'

Malik disappeared, landing with a bump at the bottom of the slope. His grunt echoed through the darkness. Burden smiled, until the cold hurt his teeth.

'Yes, I am OK, thanks mate. Found this. Tripped over it.'

Malik produced a black Puma training shoe. A man's, worn and muddy, its laces still tangled in a tight knot.

'You were right mate. Looks like we've just missed our Cinderella.'

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When the engine stopped, the van was in total darkness. Karam could hear the hoot of an owl close-by. Tariq cried beside him. The padlock securing the back doors rattled against the outside as the key was turned. The door-handle creaked, the door opened. Karam squinted out into the darkness. Moonlight illuminated skeletal trees lining the brow of a distant hill.

And the silhouettes of his captors.