



Lamin
Drammeh

THE REFUGEE

If we bring flowers to people while they are still alive
as much as we bring flowers at their funerals,
many people would still be alive.

This book is dedicated to Valentina Merlo. The idea of getting a degree never crossed my mind. Sometimes I ask myself, "where would I be today if Valentine did not advise me to get a degree. How miserable would my life be without a degree?
I will never forget you, my dear friend.

What is life without clandestinity?

Immigrants are some of the strongest pillars of every strong nation, and when immigrants decay, that nation may not fall but it will surely lose its utmost strength.

Chapter 1

We end up with what we accept. I refused, I refused, I refused to fail; I refused to continue living the life of an aimless animal.

BETWEEN FROSTY RAIL TRACKS

Deceived by the ummah, praying like it is Jummah. It's the nature of humans. I clenched my jaw and took the hard knocks of life, like a hammer. Stumbled, then stood tall. With my tiny monkey feet, pussyfooting to slowly take a huge step, the Chameleon way, though my vertebral remains straightened up, the gorilla way. Never beat my chest, just some brain-picking, a lot of it. On October 3rd, 2015, laying on my back as darkness gets a good tight grip of my ribs and of my cloudy thoughts. I could not breathe, I was suffocating in thoughts; I had forklifted thoughts, backwards thinking, I was not thinking straight, I was having waves of zigzag thoughts sending scorching sentiments from all my cerebral cells to every cell of my nerve strings; afraid of thinking though I could not extinguish these burning thoughts. Gazing at the nothingness of the ceiling, tears ran down my cheeks to wet my pillow. I hugged myself to sleep as I repeatedly said quietly to myself, "It's okay, it's okay, it's okay Lamin, it will be fine. This too will pass, like all the many crossroads you have crossed in battlefields and avoided crossfire until those tough lives ceased firing shots at you. Hugging myself to sleep will eventually be something I would learn to perfection. It is a chilling feeling when the only person out there to hug you to sleep is yourself. As the years go by, I

grew stronger to need, or rather expect less and less hugs from people. Earlier that day I had a word with Corrado, the operator responsible for the apartment (asylum shelter) in which I was living. The apartment is on the third floor of a tower, a thirteen-storey building. Located on Via Enrico Conci, 72 in Villazzano, a fraction of Trento. The tower is called Torre 9 (Tower 9). It looks like a public housing project, also called "The Project" in the American, especially, African American ghettos, though it does not have all the familiar symptoms of a "The Project": crackheads, liquor stores and gun stores. It has three bedrooms, a huge living room, two bathrooms and a kitchen. I lived with five other asylum seekers. I shared a room with Usman, from Pakistan; Faliq is also a Pakistani young man who shared a room with Francis, from Ghana and Sajid, another Pakistani guy shared a room with Prince, from Nigeria. I loved the intercultural mixture because it helped me learn the Italian language quicker. From the third floor up and from the third floor down lived other Italians and foreigners who are not asylum seekers like us. We meet with them at the entrance of the building, on the elevator from time to time, sometimes we even come home with some of our neighbors in a city bus. Sometimes we greet each other, sometimes we respectfully ignore each other. Sometimes they complain about the disturbance to Centro Astalli. Not all of them, but I believe some knew we were asylum seekers, and it irritates them that we were neighbors. The apartment is a property of the prefect of Trento, handled by Centro Astalli association through a grant. Centro Astalli is one of the many associations in Italy that aims at providing shelter and hosting asylum seekers and refugees.

Corrado told me that the entitlement of my shelter ends on the 15th of October and there will be no

further prorogation since my stay had expired a month ago and it since had been renewed twice. This time I must leave the shelter and look for another accommodation elsewhere. The question was, where? I was not working, and I did not know anyone who could accommodate me.

Then I sat in my single iron bed and started thinking with my arms around my legs so they could hold each other, my forehead placed on my forearms between my knees. "Maybe the young Italian lady was right after all." I thought. "Perhaps it is more rational that I go back to Italy and apply for a scholarship for some university." It was the 24th of October 2015, in Mannheim, Germany. I had exhausted the period granted to me in the asylum shelter in Trento, Italy. Before setting off for Germany, I greeted close Italian friends of mine goodbye, one of these Italian friends (Valentina Merlo) told me that it was unwise to leave Italy for Germany. She asked why I would go to any other country after learning to almost fluently the Italian language, having lots of friends in Italy, obtaining a middle school diploma in Italy, and then starting all over again in another country, considering the difficulties both in learning the Deutsch language and making friends with the German locals.

By the first light upon the dawn of October 25th, 2015, I had already prepared my luggage and I was at the train station by 8 o'clock in the morning. I have figured it was in the best of my interest, in the long run, that I go back to Italy and enrol in the university. It occurred to me that with my asylum documents I had the opportunity to study. An opportunity which, if wasted, I may never get the chance to get a college degree.

I took a train to Zurich in Switzerland, from there to Milan, then finally to Trento. It was already past midnight when I arrived and a friend of mine picked

me up from the train station and let me sleep at her house for the night. I had already talked to some of my Senegalese friends over the phone about my situation and they agreed to host me in their apartment from the following night, for free, until I am accepted into a university.

Early in the morning of October 26th, 2015, I went to the "Centre for INFORMATION for Migrants" (CINFORMI), or rather, Information centre for migrants to meet with Merlo. Like Corrado, Merlo was also working for Centro Astalli which, like some other associations and cooperation for migrants like ATAS Onlus, has its office at the CINFORMI headquarters. I spoke with her on the phone that I was coming back to Trento the previous day while I was on the train returning to Italy from Germany. My one week stay in Mannheim was pretty much exhausted by thinking clearly about my future, observing the immigration situation in Germany, and thinking of Merlo's words on what I could achieve in Italy with The Refugee Status, and, most importantly, the potentials and qualities that she believed I had. She really did believe in me, though I never believed in myself, to be quite honest, I still have a very low self-esteem. I believe that is because of my humble beginning and rough upbringing. It is through my observation that I conclude that adults who have endured childhood trauma through child abuse struggle immensely to maintain high self-esteem and think high of themselves. They find it hard to believe in themselves and believe that they deserve valuable things in life. Words are not just spellings; they are a spell. Be careful what you tell your kids and how you tell it to them. The impatience in African parenting is the product of the poison of the generational curse most African adults are suffering from and passing this venomous spell down the DNA code of our

genealogy. I am not just jaw jacking; I am talking from my own childhood experience and how my worldview is right now as an adult. Once Valentina sees me, she goes, "ah the stubborn one, so you finally decided to return home?" To which I reply, "Thanks to your words, I have spent the whole week thinking." Then she asked me for all my school certificates (my high-school diploma from my country and my Italian middle school diploma). She told me she would do her research and that I should wait because it could take weeks or even months to get a scholarship.

Flipping pages without failing to take notes, gazing at alphabets without blinking, eating words without chewing, navigating through sentences without stumbling, dissecting paragraphs without doodling, crossing chapters without flinching at their sharp stories. I was holding a book, like a grudge. The Last Jihad by Joel C. Rosenberg was the book I was reading in the public library after my meeting with Merlo ended. I was asking myself questions, serious as cancer. Why do the Italians rescue me from the Mediterranean Sea in the first place if my destiny here in Europe was to suffer, in pain and misery? Perhaps they should let me drown and rest in my watery grave, down in the darkest belly of the Sea? Why are they now protesting open borders when they are not capable of taking care of migrants who are already living here in Italy? And if the so-called "good people" on the Left political spectrum have the interest of migrants (looking for a better life) at heart and not only hosting them to gain profit off them, then maybe hosting them alone is not enough? What if the Left-wing invest so much into helping migrants' integration by providing them with the right information about the Italian society in which they find themselves, would the Right-wing still be right that most migrants are only criminals?

Because of cause if you put human beings in cages of abandoned military barracks for a year and eight months (the required period of stay for migrants in some asylum shelters) or in many cases even way longer periods without educating them to cope with the harsh Italian standard of living and help them integrate properly into the Italian society, what you are doing is creating a generation of migrants who would resolve to crime and violence and inevitably crash and clash with poor angry Italian locals who are not very intercultural friendly and would rather shoot an immigrant to get one less mouth from the welfare. This is the problem; this is how the Left destroy immigration and this is why the right is somehow right about immigration. Am I wrong? If I am right, then I think this whole immigration politics at the European Union level is wrong. Then I said to myself, "Good lord, I have made the right choice to come back to Italy. I hope Merlo would find a university that would accept me. I will not be a waste, like most of the brothers and sisters I see day in, day out on the streets of every Italian settlement." Sitting next to me in the library was one of my Senegalese friends, he is older than me, probably in his mid-40s, he wore a hat on his grizzle and his beard is also partially grey, he wore glasses all the time, whether he is reading something or not. His name is Musa. At some point, Musa looked at me and said, "it is past midday, Lamin, have you taken your lunch yet." "Yes!" I replied, "I have filled my stomach with lots of words." He chuckled and said, "let us go to Caritas, they give free food to the poor." Caritas is a poor Catholic charity network that is armed with alms through grants and donations to help the poor in a way of combating poverty. I am too proud and too self-conscious to go join a queue at Caritas with poor Europeans rummaging around some stalls for some mediocre buffet which the

Church distributes to the poor one day before its expiry date is due. "I have to finish this chapter," I told Musa, "I will join you there later." He knows me and he knows it was easier for me to starve myself to death than stand in line for food. "I will bring something for you, do not worry, finish your chapter." Musa is a compassionate person, he has a challenging life himself, but he easily feels the pain others are going through, so altruist. He knew I just came from Germany without a single penny in my pocket and he also knew I was going to spend the night at Babou's house, the same house in which he was living at that time. In fact, it was Babou who told him to bring me home in the evening when he returns home since I did not know the exact location of Babou's house.

In the evening, after spending the whole day in the public library on Via Roma, Trento, without lunch (I broke bread with my friend in the morning after spending the previous night at her house), Musa and I took a train from Trento without a ticket because we could not afford one. After risking humiliation and getting kicked off the train, we arrived in Levico (about 25 to 30 kilometres from Trento), where Babou lived. Upon arrival at the apartment, I was introduced to the rest of the occupants of that house (seven people, including a brother of Babou, and now I am the eighth). Babou and his girlfriend slept in a room, there was another room in which his brother and another person slept, the rest (Musa and I included) slept in the living room like sardines, some on a rusty, dusty couch with some nails and broken woods poking out, some on the floor. Babou's brother cooked dinner and we all circled around and ate from the same big round plate; some used their washed-cleaned bare hands to eat because there were not enough spoons and forks for everyone. We were a bunch of failed grown

men or at the verge of failure. At the time, only Babou had a stable job and only he could rent a house. To succeed as an African migrant in Italy is a huge burden. You have a community of failed brothers to look after. It was a long day for me, but the night turned out to be even longer, it was a late October night in Levico (one of the coldest places in the region of Trentino) and there was no heating system in the house. Badou was working but not earning enough to rent a decent apartment, also he has a family back home to look after, financially, he needs to save for his own future because the dream of every African migrant is to earn as much money as possible to buy a land in Africa and build a fancy house on it, he needs to feed himself and seven hungry grown mouths living in his apartment. I was shivering even though I wore a thick coat with a couple of my sweatshirts on, and I was under a thick enough blanket. "You better get used to it, Omar told me, in two months you would think this is hot compared to the cold in December and January." Omar was also working but he could not rent a house of his own because homeowners in Trento and in many cities of Italy ask that the tenant must have a stable job with a permanent contract as a requirement to rent a house. Students are excluded because their parents pay the rent for them, mostly. Omar persisted in his house hunt but to no avail. He was not a student, and he is black, so the list of requirements gets even longer for people with his same skin tone. I could not wait for the next day to dawn so I could go to Trento and sit inside the warm public library the whole day. And once I am there in the library, I could not wait to go back home to sit around that big plate like an aimless animal and eat dinner with the others. The library is warm, but it has no food, home is cold, freezing, but it has food. To this day, I eat only one meal (dinner) a day for fear

of falling into extreme poverty again and not being prepared for hunger. How incredible, I am afraid to eat to always have a full belly. I am used to hunger, now, so much so that I seldom feel hungry even when dinner is ready and is smelling good.

Walking the streets and pathways of Levico as Musa and I headed to the train station to catch the next train to Trento after a cold shower at Babou's house, frozen dew lay bare on overgrowth fields that spread between settlements. Our stomachs were empty, our limbs were freezing, our bodies got weak, lots of teeth chatting on our tired jaws as our insensitive feet tiredly tried to stamp off frostbite on the freezing asphalt. I could not feel any of my toes. We arrived at the train station five minutes early, but it felt like hours of waiting.

"Gentlemen your tickets, please." The train conductor asked us. He caught us off-guard, we were constantly looking ahead, expecting him to show up from the direction we were facing, but he came right behind us, like a wizard. "I don't have any tickets." In a very low voice, I replied. The volume of my voice was turned down by shame. My forehead started sweating even though it was like minus five Degrees Celsius outside and my lips tightened up, I took a quick glance around the train with a guilty look on my face to see if people were looking and laughing or frowning in anger and disgust at us. My eyes, wide open. My mouth, a bit. I looked like a slave at auction, searching faces in the crowd looking for his new master to take him away from his cruel captives who brought him here in a mayflower, far away from my African May flowers. Most Europeans (Italians) hold the stereotype that every African in Italy is also an illegal migrant, and that Africans never buy tickets. Hence, I feel very uncomfortable when an African proves Europeans right on board a train and I feel so embarrassed

when I am left with no other choice but to tell a conductor that I have no ticket. If I have the money, I do not hesitate, I buy tickets, always. This time, unfortunately, I had no money, but the conductor was kind enough to give me options. I either buy a ticket on board the train with extra cost, or I get off at the next stop, refusing to cooperate, would cost me the third option: up to three hundred-plus euro fine.

Midway through the freeriding, against our will, Musa and I were escorted off the train at the next train station in Pergine. Poverty forced us out. Everyone on the train was gazing at us as though we were some criminals, perhaps we were, at that moment. We stood on the same platform waiting for the next train to Trento which was scheduled to arrive in the next hour. After an hour, in the freezing cold, every minute was unforgiving, and every second felt like eternity. Finally, the train arrived as scheduled and we got on board, entitled, as if we were supposed to be on board that train. An hour delay, but we finally arrived in Trento and warmed ourselves up in the library, sitting right beside the heater.

This vicious circle dragged on, repeated daily, till early January of 2016, when I was accepted and went to Pavia to attend lessons at the university of Pavia through a scholarship entitled specifically to holders of The Refugee Status. I arrived in Pavia on January 11th, 2016, at a university college dormitory (Almo Collegio Borromeo). I was taken to the lunchroom by the rector, and I asked myself, "how does he know I was hungry? Is hunger written all over my face?" For the first time, I saw a hundred plus rich white kids converging in a room and eating, and I was supposed to sit beside them and eat. Lord, I lack confidence. The rector grabs a glass and a fork from a table and starts gently hitting the glass

with the fork to get the attention of students in the lunchroom. Suddenly, the room was quiet, and I was standing beside the rector with my few belongings in my hand and inside my backpack. I looked like a lost homeless person, out of place. Everyone was looking at me like “eww, who is this dusty ashy black dude?” In my mind I was replying to them “I am the only black here, but this is not an auction, I’m not a slave for sale. Keep your money, you cannot buy me. I need your food, though.” They were looking at me from head to toe, especially at my torn-out shoes with consumed soles that you could almost see my heels poking out. “This is Lamin, the new guest student through the refugee-student program the university offered a scholarship I talked to you guys about. Lamin you can greet everyone now.” I was so shy that I could not say anything, I was not prepared for this. Also, I was thinking to myself, “food!!! There is a lot of food!!!” The rector looked at me and said to the kids, “Lamin will find a way to introduce himself in a different way.” Everyone clapped and the rector took me to the canteen kitchen to take my food.

In Borromeo I ate lunch and dinner, but I never showed up for breakfast, always afraid to eat too much and one day I will find myself in a situation of the past in Levico. I spent four years in that university dorm in Collegio Borromeo, the food was good, though the kids complained from time to time that the food was this and that. I think that is because they have a lot of food to eat. For instance, when the Italian anarchist, Alfredo Cospito went on hunger strike that lasted almost six months (from October 20th, 2022, to April 19th, 2023) while serving time in “41 Bis”, the section of prison put in place for convicts with link to the mafia. The whole nation was talking about him, the radio, TV, newspapers made headlines about him, the left and right-wing clash in

the Italian parliament over him when Giovanni Donzelli published sensitive documents about the anarchist inside Montecitorio. It was big news, my thought at the time was that people who go on hunger strike are people who have enough food to eat and if we give more attention to people who lack food as much as we give attention to people like Cospito, many people who died of starvation would have been alive. Soon after Borromeo, I cut lunch and started eating only dinner. During the day I eat only, maybe, nuts, snacks, sometimes biscuits or an apple. Occasionally I have a proper meal for lunch, but that is when I am in the company of others at a party, family gathering at work or sometimes even at home I feel like I want to eat lunch today. Never forgetting, though, that I cannot get used to the feeling of eating lunch. I go climbing mountains the whole day without lunch or breakfast; I play soccer without breakfast or lunch, only water and some snacks. My soul remains trapped in a body haunted by memories.

I quickly make friends anywhere I go but in Borromeo I observe the vibes and I said to myself, "no, this is not the place I want to make friends. I want to be by myself." And for the next four years I learned to be reserved and kept to myself. They say self-respect is dead and I went through the bottom of hell to resurrect it, now tell me how could you not respect that? Those kids were young, energetic, full of testosterone and semen. Between eighteen and twenty-four years of age, I was thirty-one years old. I do not need sticks and stones to make people respect me, I do not even need to raise my voice to tell people that they should respect me. I just respect myself. What you have been through can mess up with what you are into. I have come a long way, the roads were muddy, the bushes were theory, the days were thunderous and rainy. Yet, I

cannot let my past mess up with my studies. It was tough, I cut ties with these rich kids but maintained the peace until the day I graduated from the university.

I called Babou and the boys in Levico to catch up with updates, it has been a week since I had arrived in Pavia. I was told that Babou's brother went back to Africa because he was tired of living honestly in Italy as a poor African, so he stole a couple of cars, shipped them to Senegal and flew to Senegal to be a taxi driver. In the university I have met some good people and talked to them but not to a level of friendship. I met a guy from New York, the US, he was studying medicine and living in Collegio Borromeo. I asked him why studying in Italy instead of the US. He said because it is cheaper in Italy and that he could not afford the cost of living in the US. If you are black, Africa is the best place to hide; if you are a poor white, Italy is the best place to hide. In Levico I felt colder every night and hungrier every day. The train rides got tougher and of course, I got skinnier. For the first time I remember that I am an African and I was not supposed to complain about hunger. And trust me, I did not complain, not even for a day. Not to my Senegalese friends, not to my Italian friends, each of whom would be more than happy to feed a hungry mouth, especially a friend like Lamin for as long as I need to be fed. Though many years have passed, my Italian friends never knew I had passed through this struggle. They will only know it once they read this chapter. I kept my head up, never complained, not even to myself. I took that hard-knock life like a champion. The hardship was not able to break my spirit, not even able to take my smile away from me. Sometimes it took me four hours to reach Trento from Levico, many times I was kicked out of the train because I had no ticket, I had to wait for another hour for the

next train, again and again. Sometimes I am not too lucky, and I get kicked out three times on the same journey, sometimes luck comes my way and I reach Trento in one trip without getting humiliated in front of poor whites on board the train. My pride and ego were hurt but I clenched my fist and teeth and did not let my feelings further pull me deeper down the darkness of the rabbit hole. I am proud of myself for the fact that I did not allow myself to squander the hours of my pain. I have spent that period wisely, I would say. I have read a dozen good books, and it was during those trying times that I have written my second book: *The Journey*. It is a narrative of the journey I, among thousands of migrants, embark upon to enter Italy through the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea

THE REFUGEE STATUS

I used to share my tears, now
I tear my share of affection with
Living. The void of this journey
Keeps avoiding my footprints,
Hidden away in the endless
Mirage. No footsteps left for me to
Follow, no trace of my past steps
To walk back home. I fear not
To love but I love to fear the
Loving ones. My ego lived in
Layers of thick laughter, now
I'm just a soul living in eggshell,
Trying to excel the rituals of living.
Defined by ink, scripted on dead trees,
Granted to the escaped to be
A status that protects my shells
As a refugee. Surrounded by the
silence, the violence of mother
Nature defines the ego of my
Being. I live in the comfort home
Of my heart, the art leaves me
Wandering as a thinker, and that
Is the only place I belong. I still
Dwell constantly in my cognitive
Void, though I'm a missing home
To a home that I once call home. A
Place where siblings feed hatchlings
With seedlings buried in my footprints.
The fullness of my emptiness made
Me migrate into nothingness. Here,
My lifeless flesh sells more than my
Talent can breathe into the box that
Broadcasts drowns at closed ports. The
Universe is a weird ruin, so, I asked,
"What is the distance between the

World and the African?" Is it love?
I can measure my heart but can my
Heart measures the love I have within?
How can I relate to a thing when relation
Is just a mere paradox? Fix your gaze,
It's a mass of men who exit the cosmos
With pierced corpses while we cheer
For the victory of the National flag
While women in their masses, carried by
Their breasts to exit the universe before
They turn grey and wrinkle their ankles.
Still, I try to avoid the void, my heart is
Pitch black, heavy with tears since it
Becomes a norm for Syrian kids to
Confuse explosives with shooting stars
And men in corporate suits make
Artistic affluence off of kids exiting
Mother earth, leaving tearful siblings
Riddled with fatal wounds. Again, I gaze
Into nothingness as I aged, trying to
Shut my mouth and enjoy the show
Of the Afghan bloodbath, of the
Migrant sufferings, of the many
Women who cry in silence, of the
Raped, the abused. "Forget the world,
Lamin, you can't even save yourself."
I keep that inner voice in a loop
Until it becomes a subjective reality.
But wait, is the fear of speaking
Out not an objective reality?

Chapter

2

Our health is determined also by what we say and what we think, not only by what we eat. They say life is lived forward not backwards but tell me how could anyone forget about a friend like Milena?

DISPOSABLE SETTLERS BEFRIENDED

And each tiny monkey step I take, brings me to new beginnings where every win gives more room to lose. But as I grow older, my nails grow stronger to prepare me to wrestle with different challenges in life. Under the blanket of a starry night sky as the moonlight indicates us the watery path that leads to our Sicilian direction, fear sinking in my soul like droplets of lemon juice on a razor cut inflicted on a shallow flesh, I gazed at the moon the whole night, for this celestial orb might be my last sight before dawn. Lord, I love the sight of the moon, what a beautiful work of art. I was in a small boat in which there were not more than ten people in the middle of the sea, every sight providing the vision of stars kissing intimately the sea water as the only horizon. Some men were taking us from our small boat to a bigger boat. At the entrance of that big boat stood a Caucasian lady, she took some of our belongings and put them in a jar. She took my ring from my finger and a rubber bracelet that I wore all the time, for many years. "Welcome to Sicily." She said to me with a gentle smile on her face.

I have finally found the utopia I always long for. Especially from a couple of days ago when we were told by a Malian man who was in business with an Arab man who owns boats that transport people from Tripoli, Libya to Sicily, Italy. What a beautiful life

I have finally found, but then I woke up. I was dreaming of the dangerous journey that lay ahead of me in a few hours.

It was the 28th of October 2013, laying on my back in a dark room after waking up from a dream. In the dream, we have made it to Italy, alive. But "will we make it alive also in reality." I thought. It's snoring all around me. For some reason, these young men who were supposed to be on the same journey with me, managed to fall asleep in serenity. It was around 4 o'clock in the morning, I could feel a busy traffic of bloodthirsty bed bugs moving between my back and the bedsheet, I could feel bites of these little annoying animals all over my back, I could feel the itching irritability on my skin but for some reason, I elect to ignore the discomfort and let them have a meal of my blood without disturbing their dinner.

Someone asked one of the Italian coast guard personnel, "where are we now, I mean what is the name of this town we are approaching?" The guard smiled godly and replied, "this is Augusta." That was Mohawk MC asking, "Augusta?" He was always that hyperactive guy in the group, always talking loudly and causing troubles. "Yes, Augusta, Sicily. It is a nice town; you will love it there." The guard assured him in his Italian ascent. It was late afternoon of October 31, 2013, when we got off board the Italian coast guard that rescued us from our tiny little rubber boat in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea two days earlier.

My dream came true. Inside the Italian coast patrol ship was a lady who had a towel on the ground, soaked with bleach for us to step on to wash under our feet. Some wore shoes and were asked not to remove their shoes but to just step on the bleach soak towel on the ground. Some, like me, were barefooted and were asked to step on the towel anyway. Am indifferent feet bleaching process. The

lady took many personal belongings from some of us, like iron bracelets, rings, money, belts... she told them that all their belongings will be returned to them once we arrive in Sicily. After dreaming about it, I gave my ring and my cell phone to a friend of mine who was not boarding the rubber boat with us to Italy but accompanied us to the beach, to take them to my mother back in The Gambia so she would receive something from me in case I do not make it alive crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Italy. That was also because I have heard the Arabs (assistants of the boat owner) usually rob migrants of their money and valuables before getting on the robber boat. While getting on board the rubber boat in Libya, I was having a fifty-euro banknote on me but hid it in such a way that even if I were to pull it out and give it either to the Arab robbers or to the white lady, I would waste a lot of time. So, I simply told the lady, "No, I have no money on me." Also, because I do not trust anyone to give my money. I am a grownup; I can keep my own money. Who was that lady, after all, a bank or something? I tried to tell the other boys not to give their money to anyone, but they would not listen. "These are "white" people, Lamin," they said, "they will give all our belongings back to us. Do not worry about that." To this day, not even one of them gets any of their belongings, including their money.

At the port of Augusta await many journalists with sophisticated paparazzi cameras, many police cars, and authorities in riot gear, ready for action, and of course, spectators from different pro-immigration associations and activist groups with fliers and banners that held different refugee-friendly slogans to make us feel at ease and at home, occupy the sidewalks.

The immigration office in Augusta was located about two hundred metres from where the ships ducked. I

walked inline, still barefooted among other migrants; I looked like Kunta Kinte at his first capture in Kamby Bolongo (The River Gambia). We spent the night at the cold immigration office entrance, going through our first bureaucratic process in Italy, our fingerprints and some personal data were taken from us. Thank goodness Sicily is not as cold as the northern part of Italy, so the night was not of any struggle in terms of cold. The next morning, we were all transferred to different towns in Italy. Mohawk MC, Zala, Faa and I, among some fifty other people, were transferred to Messina, Sicily. Palanebiolo is a basketball court that is transformed into a makeshift emergency shelter for migrants and asylum seekers. We were so vulnerable there because the place was packed with more than four hundred beds, we had no privacy whatsoever, and we were exposed to aerosol and airborne diseases. We were told it was just for temporary accommodation and when a better place is found elsewhere, we would be transferred right away.

While waiting in Messina, I used the moment to learn the Italian language with the help of Milena. Milena was an Italian lady who was born in Milan but grew up in Messina. She worked in the university of Messina as a secretary and did voluntary activities for the Italian Red Cross. The first time I met Milena I was still barefooted and roaming about the basketball stadium. "Where are your shoes? The ground is cold, you will catch the flu." She asked with a genuine concern in her eyes. "I do not have shoes." I replied. We spoke in English because, obviously, at the time I was only a week old in Italy so I would not understand if she spoke to me in Italian. Milena spoke English to almost fluency. "They gave away shoes a couple of days ago, why did you not get a pair?" She asked, looking me right in the eyes. "I was in the queue to take a pair but

then there was total chaos and the Italian lady started insulting us, saying BASTA! BASTA! I am not a bastard, why would she insult us?" I said with a frown face. Milena laughed out loud and said, "Basta in Italian means enough. She was only trying to calm the boys down so they would not harm themselves trying to grab the best shoes. She said Basta! Basta, meaning Enough! Enough, not bastard. Hahaha" I felt ashamed of myself, but I laughed out loud myself admitting my ignorance. I think my pride will be the thing that will destroy my life. Milena took me to a store inside the stadium where the Red Cross volunteers kept second-hand clothes and shoes the locals of Messina donated to the shelter, she gave me some clothes and two pairs of shoes. "Where is your bed?" she asked. I led her to my bed as she held another bag of clothes, helping me carry them. After passing hundreds of beds, we arrived at my bed. "Here, this is Pa, the other one right there is Faa, they are my friends. We all come here from Libya in the same boat. Milena and I put the stuff on my bed, and she sat on the side of my bed talking to Pa and others in English. She asked us if we were interested in learning the Italian language and we excitedly said yes, we were interested. The next morning Milena came to my bed and woke me up for breakfast, a thing that had continued for all my days in that basketball court. After breakfast she asked me to call my friends to attend an Italian language class with her, as our teacher. I quickly grew strong interest in learning the Italian language, in fact after that same first day of lessons, I went to a nearby newsstand and bought a bilingual, Italian-English, English-Italian, dictionary from the fifty euros I refused to give the lady on the ship, to better learn the Italian language. The friendship with Milena grew even stronger when she introduced us to some of her female friends who were also

volunteers of the Italian Red Cross in Palanebiolo: Mariangela, Mary Lena and Cettina. They were all as nice as Milena. They took us out sometimes to see the town of Messina. Milena gifted us our first phones in Italy and bought us sim cards. The number I am using today to make and receive calls is a gift from Milena.

We stayed in Messina from November 1st, 2013, to November 27th, 2013, when we were finally transferred to Gioiosa Ionica in Reggio Calabria. We lived in Gioiosa, in Reggio Calabria, from the 27th of November 2013, attending courses in the Italian language, eat, sleep, and fill the toilet with foul odor, till March 12th, 2014, when six of us were transferred from Gioiosa Ionica, Reggio Calabria to Trento, in the region of Trentino (from the warm south all the way to the freezing cold north of Italy). All along, Milena and her friends kept in contact with us. They occasionally came to Gioiosa in a car filled with food items and clothing for us, even though she knew we received a monthly two hundred- and fifty-euros pocket money from the shelter. She made friends with all the operators in Gioiosa working for the migrant cooperation in that town. She always contacted the workers asking information about us and she would inform us in English how our asylum-seeking process was going. She and her friends would occasionally take us to Reggio, the capital of Reggio Calabria, to enjoy the town from the tiny town of Gioiosa. We always come home with a handful of gifts from Milena and her friends.

We arrived in Trento on the 13th of March 2014 as a form of punishment because some of us were considered “stubborn” and a “threat” to the wellbeing of our fellow migrants while we were living in Reggio Calabria. In my apartment, I was the stubborn one, the nonconformist, the “threat”. I always refuse to attend Italian courses and as a

repercussion, I got my pocket money deducted because as part of the rules of the shelter, every migrant living in the shelter must attend at least seventy-five percent of Italian language classes each month. And whenever my pocket money is deducted, I ask all the migrants not to sign and take their money until the people responsible pay all of us in full. And for some reason, they all listened to me and refused to sign to receive their pay, even though some of them were supposed to be paid in full. I did not hate school, I only hated that little town and I wanted to be transferred to a bigger town, so, as part of my protest, I always accused the migrant organization of stealing our blood and selling it to the Italian elderly. For this reason, the organization filed a complaint about me to the police department of Reggio Calabria. I went to the police station, and I was given a warning letter by the authorities. Mohawk MC in the other apartment was the stubborn one who always consulted me about what we were supposed to do next to create more tensions so we would be expelled from that town and transferred to a bigger town. Since the disciplinary letter did not work. It failed to change my and Mohawk's attitude towards the organization. We were told that for us the asylum seeking "project" ended and we would be transferred to another town. I celebrated the news. That was all I ever wanted and prayed for. From my apartment I was transferred along with Faa because we always agree with everything, from Mohawk's apartment, he was transferred along with Zala because the two are like Faa and I. From the apartment of Denis, he was transferred along with Abraham. Even though Zala, Faa and Abraham were always calm and quiet, the organization expelled them too because they were a strong ally with the three of us (Denis, Mohawk, and I). Even in Trento, Zala is always by

Mohawk's side and Faa is always by my side, the same is true for Denis and Abraham.

In Trento, after some bureaucratic process at the CINFORMI office, I was taken to Torre 9 in Villazzano. I did not live with the rest of the group with whom I came from Reggio Calabria, they were taken to Barco di Levico.

Hope ends when we stop believing, love ends when we stop caring, friendship ends when we stop sharing. Friends help us restore lost hope, friends share a part of their hearts with us when we lose our love, but when friends become strangers, hope and love become meaningless. When we win hope, when we win love but lose friends, we lose anyway. On a city bus from CINFORMI headquarters to Villazzano, I asked Giacomo, the operator who was responsible for the apartment in which I lived in Villazzano, at the time, while he was still working for Centro Astalli Association for migrants (that was before Corrado started working for the association. Corrado started working with Astalli when Giacomo resigned), "where are the rest of the boys?" To which he replied, "they are taken to another town, some 30 kilometres from Trento. You are lucky, you live in the city, they live near the farms." I was confused, I thought we all would live together since we were all transferred from Gioiosa to Trento together. "But I don't know how to cook, they cook for me, what am I going to do now?" I cried. Giacomo could not stop laughing. "Don't worry, one of your roommates is a guy from Ghana, I will ask him to help you, he is a good cook." The bus stopped and Giacomo and I got off. "Look! There! That building over there is where you will live from now on. You see, it's a very nice place to live. It is near the city centre, and this is your bus stop."

In Villazzano I lived, for the first time in my life, without my family and friends, especially for the first

time in my life without anyone from my country, but quickly I adapted to this new reality, accepting that growth is not only about gaining but also about losing. Growth is strength and one cannot be strong if one never gains, and one cannot be strong if one never loses. It is a part of life, and I grew so quickly in this regard. Occasionally I take a train and go visit the rest of the boys in Barco, spend a day with them, we cook, talk, and laugh. At the time, I could travel within the region of Trentino free of charge because as an asylum seeker I was given a travel card for trains, buses and cable cars including, renewable after every three months. The boys always showed me love whenever I was with them. Sometimes I even sleep at their place because all five of them lived in the same apartment, amongst them was a man from Iran.

The day after we arrived in Trento, Milena called me and asked how things are in Trento, she was worried it was too cold in Trento. But her biggest fear was how people in Trentino would treat an African migrant. Ever since I told her that I was going to be transferred from Gioiosa to Trento, she was always freaking out. She said it is very cold and people are not friendly to strangers, especially a stranger from Africa. She was a friend. Milena was a true friend. I remember, a couple of months after my arrival in Trento, Giacomo, who was also in contact with Milena since I came to Trento because Milena wanted to know anyone who was close to me and Giacomo is a very good friend of mine, told me that he was going to Messina to see the migrant situation there. I told him to greet Milena from me. When Giacomo came back to Trento from Messina, he brought a thick cotton hood for me from Milena. "Milena said you should always wear thick clothes because it is cold here." Giacomo told me.

Somehow Milena was right. It is very cold in Trento. The people are not very open to strangers but one thing I have learned about people in Trento is that their friendship is based on deep connection. And when they get to know and trust you as a stranger, they trust you even more than they trust their fellow countrymates. I remember in the elevator, in Villazzano, with Italians who lived above us used to cover their noses, maybe we smell bad, or maybe they just wanted to make us feel bad about ourselves; I remember the Italians who lived below us won't get on the elevator once the door opens and they saw us inside. So, I quickly learned to go on foot or refuse to get on the elevator once it's open on our floor and inside are some Italians, because they are always mean mugging. Not all of them, but some of our neighbors were friendly to us. Some of them looked at us strangely, maybe because we were poor migrants and we didn't wear nice clothes; I remember feeling out of place, feeling unwelcome, feeling the wrath of Italians when we tried to start a conversation with them to improve our Italian language. We just wanted to be nice, but it is never appreciated. I heard many people saying that the world is a scary place to live in, but I am sure the ruins of the world are better than the ruins in the hearts of human beings. Afterall migrants are just sons of a mother, Europeans love their children, the same way our African mothers love us. I wonder how they would like their children to be treated the same way they treat us as migrants.

On September 4th, 2014, I had an appointment at the prefecture in Gorizia, near Venice, in the region of Veneto to explain the story, or the reason behind my seeking asylum. After a month my asylum was approved but the rest of the group weren't so lucky, the two Nigerians, Mohawk, Faa and Zala received a negative response from the prefecture (their

asylum was denied). This broke my heart, so much I couldn't celebrate my asylum document. These young men were like family to me, I adored them, all of them. Through it all we went, together. It is painful to see a grown man cry, but I saw them in trying times, when rain won't stop falling inside their cloudy heads and it pour heavy down their cheeks, I have also seen them in promising times when rain ceases and the clouds opened inside their sunny heads, and a bright sunshine lightened up their faces through big smiles that run from ear to ear. Upon receiving the unpleasant news from the Italian authorities, for them it's a downward spiral into a rabbit hole: ATAS, the association for migrants that granted them shelter as asylum seekers told them that they have a month to stay in the shelter, after which they must find a place to live on their own. Which means they must find a lawyer on their own to fight for their asylum case in court, look for a place to live and pay rent even though they are not working and no Italian is ready to rent an apartment to migrants even to many who are autonomous and working, their transport cards will not be renewed by the organization, if they want to renew it they will have to pay with their money that they did not have, it means also that the organization will not give them the two hundred and thirty euro monthly pocket money. Basically, they are totally on their own on a land where they are jobless, did not integrate properly, in fact, they were not integrated at all, and they were as poor as poor can be. This news was devastating, I could only imagine what was going through their heads at that time. This is why when they took it upon themselves to sell drugs, I did not like or condone the decision, but I understood them fully. Getting kicked out of the shelter days after being denied asylum is the worst news ever, for any migrant. Especially if one is so far away from family

and loved ones, and one doesn't have a job and no one to turn to. Mohawk was already selling drugs since the first week we came to Trento from Gioiosa; Zala upon receiving the devastating news decided he didn't want to live in Italy anymore, that he would go to Germany. Since he had no job and of course, no money, he started selling drugs until the day ATAS came knocking on his door, asking him to leave the place. By then, he had enough money to go to Germany and seek another asylum, and that is exactly what he did. Mohawk stayed in Italy with some of his drug dealing friends. Faa went to live with a Malian friend of his in Calceranica, in Trentino. He did his best to stay away from drugs but eventually, he also got pulled, by poverty, into the drug business, and he sold for a couple of years before one of his many court appeals was considered and he finally got the asylum documents and started working at a clothing company. Mohawk spent a couple of years in prison before securing the asylum document with the help of his long-time Italian girlfriend whom he met in Gioiosa Ionica while we were still living there and she was working with migrants, us. She eventually moved to Verona sixty kilometres from Trento in 2015 and she has since lived in that town.

Our eyes see upside down, but can our minds see our ups and downs? The universe can't see its own beauty, but can the blind visualise his own darkness? We can't see the oozing teardrops of fish, but can a fish understand the grief of another fish? Can a tree feel the pain of another tree? One doesn't need race, ethnicity, religion, gender, social status to have empathy. All one needs is to be a decent human being to empathise with others. Because to look down on someone requires that you think so low of them.

Mohawk moved to Brescia in the region of Lombardy where he is still living and working in a metal mechanic company. On the phone, he told me he doesn't want anything to do with Trento because the only people he knows there are into drugs. He apologized to me on the phone right after his release from prison. Some months before his incarceration in 2015, I was called on the phone by the police station of Trento. At the time I was working as an interpreter for a cooperative called Città Aperta. I translate, interpret, and mediate between migrants and lawyers, doctors, psychologists, immigration officers from Italian to Mandinka (my native language) or in Wolof, which is not my mother tongue but a language that I understand fluently. The part of the police department in Trento that called me was the criminal investigation department, or something of the sort. The police asked where I was, on the phone, I provided them with the information of my location, and they came right away to pick me up in their police patrol car. In the car I was told "today it is a bit different from the job you are going to do. It is not the immigration office that is interested in your service but us." I did not understand what they meant by "us", but I did not bother to ask. I mean, I am a Blackman in a police patrol car. Imagine how terrifying that is for any black person. On the third floor of the police station, I sat in front of many flatscreens hanging on all four walls, basically I was surrounded by flatscreen monitors. Each monitor has a keyboard, a mouse, and a pair of gigantic DJ headphones. A policeman explained to me what the job was: "These days the drug dealers in Piazza Dante are selling a kind of cocaine that is laced with some very dangerous substance. An autopsy of three young Italians showed they consumed this new type of cocaine, and it caused their death. Now the police

are trying to clean the street of this substance by taking these drug dealers off the streets. Now you will help us in our investigation by listening to phone taps and audios we receive from bugs we plugged in Piazza Dante. If you can translate what these dealers are saying on the phone and in Piazza Dante, you would be paid a lot of money because it would be a huge help in the investigation. And you do not have to be afraid, we will not mention your name in any court or on any document if these people are caught.” I listened to all the audios; I was curious. I understood perfectly what they were saying, I recognized Mohawk’s voice and the voices of many of the dealers but after finishing listening to the audio, I told the police that “I do not understand this language, it is not my language.” that if they could find someone who understands Fula language, they would probably be successful in their investigation. That was not true but I wanted to get the hell out of that place so I could tell Mohawk that the police were looking for him. But first, before I could flag down Mohawk, I went to CINFORMI headquarters and told one of the workers what had happened and that I lied to the police. This person called the police telling them the truth, that I understood the language, but I refused to snitch on my brothers. The police were so angry when they learned the news. They called me on my phone threatening me that if they hear my name on any of their phone taps that I was the one who informed the dealers about the investigation and let them escape capture, I will be the one arrested and taken to prison. I did not care. I did not call Mohawk on the phone, but I waited until I saw him on the bus and told him everything and asked him to inform the others but not on the phone. I have known these young men since in Libya, I have so much love and empathy for them. They are like a family to me by

this time. No one hands their family members over to be imprisoned, unless one is a traitor, like the brother of Ted Kaczynski. Mohawk told the rest of the dealers, and these goons accused me of working with the police to send them to prison. The so-called Trentino gangsters, fools around them everywhere, stopped talking to me. I felt like George Washington came back alive in Trento: when my white friends saw me, they embraced and showed me so much love. I only wrote my first book at the time: *Wisdom in Poetry* but they treated me like I was George Washington and I have just written and published the declaration of independence: when I approached my African, especially Gambian, friends, they said to each other, “run brothers! Run! Look! George Washington the slave owner is coming to sell us to white policemen. All I did was try to help them escape the white policemen. Only Mohawk greeted and talked to me when I occasionally stopped by and said hi to brothers slinging in Piazza Dante. The rest would either walk away when I approach, or they will stay quiet until I leave. That was until some of them, a couple of years later, were released from prison and on the letters were written the name of the person who did the translation for the police that led to their imprisonment. They all apologized to me, including Mohawk. The person who snitched on them was the Senegalese tailor who hangs in the park (Piazza Dante) with them, someone they trusted dearly and considered as family even though he did not sell drugs. This is the reason I called my Senegalese friends for accommodation and not Gambians when I came back to Italy from Germany. Faa is living in Bologna where he is also working in one factory, the same town in which I also live at the time of writing this chapter, April 2023. I went to university and got a degree from 2016 to 2020, I have worked with

many organizations, associations, foundations and cooperatives for migrants and homeless people in different cities in Italy. I heard Denis went back to live in Sicily. For Zala and Abraham, I have never heard from them since the day they left Italy for Germany.

In 2017, just two years before I graduated from the University, Mariangela called me and told me that Milena was sick and was in a hospital in Milan, but visitors were not allowed to the ward in which she was admitted. "What do you mean no one is allowed to visit her?!" I yelled at Mariangela on the phone. "Calm, Lamin, Milena is seriously sick, she has a colon tumor but when she gets better, we all can go see her." Mariangela said. In mid-July of 2017 Mariangela called again and said to me that there is good and bad news about Milena. "The good news is that now we can visit her since she is not in the hospital anymore but living in an apartment in Milan. The bad news is that doctors said she has only a month left to live. I will send you the exact address of the apartment so you can go see her since you live in Pavia, near Milan."

On the 27th of July 2017 I took a train from Pavia and texted Milena from her new number that Mariangela gave me, "I am in the train, I will be there in forty-five minutes." Emotions overwhelmed me, I did not know how to react. I have not seen Milena since the 16th of November 2014 in Reggio Calabria when I returned to Gioiosa Ionica with a group of mountain climbers called TassoBarbasso to climb mountains in the southern Italian town. I took the opportunity to go to Messina to see Milena and her friends. I spent the day with them and in the evening, she accompanied me to Reggio Calabria, crossing with a ferry, then a bus to Reggio where I took a bus back to Gioiosa Ionica to join the mountain climbing association. Also, I did not know how to react when

I saw her in her poor health condition, knowing that I would lose her in a month, or less, maybe. I arrived at the location and went to the reception to ask for Milena Passari. As the receptionist looked through a list of tenants that live in that building to tell me on which floor which Milena lives, I looked to my right and saw the door of the elevator opened and a lady in plain white dress came out, she was bald and was carrying an oxygen bottle which has tubes that goes to her nose. We looked at each other through a glass door and I saw tears run down her cheeks. "You look good!" I said, smiling as the glass door opened and Milena stepped into the lobby of the reception. I gave her a hug. "I am dying, Lamin." The first words she said upon seeing me after years of just phone calls and text messages. We took a walk in the streets of Milan but not long since her breath was supported by an oxygen bottle. On the 30th of July 2017, I visited Milena once again for the last time ever, knowing I might never see her alive ever again. "You are still attending the university?" She asked as we sat in her apartment with her daughter and her daughter's boyfriend. "Yes, I am still attending classes." I replied. We took some photos, talked, joked, and laughed as we used to do. Soon it was time for me to leave. The next day I was supposed to be in Trento for the summer holidays and I was busy with parking stuff at my college dorm. After the longest hug ever, because we both knew that was our final hug, she was crying, her daughter was crying, I was fighting back tears, trying to be strong. "I will see you when I come back to Pavia from Trento." I whispered in her ear. "Pray to your God, Lamin" she whispered back. "Tell him to keep me here in this condition but not to take me away. I do not want to go." To that I cried with tears in my eyes. The strong Milena that I knew, was now sobbing. "Take advantage of everything this country

gives you, I mean, get that degree.” She said boldly, looking me in the eyes. “I will.” I said without looking her in the eyes. I did not want her to see me in tears, but she did see me crying and hugged me again. “You are a true friend, Lamin.” She whispered. “You are, too.” I whispered back. “I love you so much my dear friend.” “I love you too, Milena.” It felt like hugging a conscious coffin that is also breathing at a funeral of someone who is still alive.

On the 28th of August 2017, I woke up, turned my phone on, and realized it was without internet. My monthly unlimited internet subscription was overdue the night before, so I took a shower and went to town to buy some credit to reactivate the monthly subscription. So many messages and missed calls flooded my phone as the internet was restored. One of these missed calls and text messages was from Mariangela. “Lamin, where are you? I hope you are fine.” I supposed, immediately after reading the text, that it was bad news about Milena. Something tells me she passed away. I had mixed feelings: should I call Mariangela back, or maybe I should ignore her message because I was not ready to hear the news. “Be strong, call her back.” I told myself. “Lamin! I was trying to reach you the whole night.” She said in her trembling voice on the receiving end of the phone call. I could tell it was very bad news. “Hey Mari, sorry I had no credit and I turn my phone off when I go to sleep.” I replied. “This is bad news, Lamin; Milena is no more with us.” A long silence on my end which ended with me hanging up, and went home, turned my phone off, closed all the windows, stayed in bed, and cried till the next day. I heard she was taken back to Messina from Milan a few days

before her demise. She was only forty-eight. The death of Milena put me through depression for years. To this day I have not recovered from the feeling of sadness from losing her, inconsolable.

COGNITIVE KAMIKAZE

Here. Trapped in needle holes
as breathing becomes a hustle.
Here. Tickling my anxiety,
trying to babysit my thoughts,
in this cruel cage of a naked page.
Here. Trying to be authentic
in this corpse of my missing pieces,
waiting for their autopsy.
Here. Trying to be harder on myself
through self-bully so I can move on
with my burden to the finish line
of a new beginning.
Here. Strangling my patience
with a rapid pace as my pieces yell,
yearning to be at peace, at ease.
Here. On this warship, worshipping
my worries and loneliness,
Hope deflating, despair taking over
the soul of the sage in me.
Here. Ages of empty pages
of gazing sages with zero wages,
self-grazing on thoughts through
choking bars of philosophical barnyards.
Here. Stripping off my mindset
so my consciousness can sneak itself
into new pages of toxic thoughts,
snaking through scorching scripts,
from Socrates to Jean Genet.
Here. Trying to erase my phobia,
using broken bone powders
of Plato, Kant, and Averroes,
blend with ancient nicotine
from Egyptian mummies.
Here. Still trapped in needle holes
in a world of falling skies, of rape,

of war, of apocalyptic fires,
of bleeding oceans, of paedophilia,
of violent gunshots, of racism.
Here. Still questioning my sanity,
dating the universe with
its stars and scars, flare of fear,
fair enough I'm drowning in despair.
Here. It's a gene of generations
of genocide and holocaust,
fairness is dead and turned skeleton.
The theory of justice and Rawls
are just a premature insulin
of selective insomnia and dementia.
Here. Still I communicate with
my spiritual DNA, while UNHCR
and Human Rights Watch keep playing
ping pong with refugee brains,
you still are questioning my sanity?

Chapter

3

I have always dreamt of being financially independent. I may never be super rich but if I can sustain myself and not depend on anyone, financially, then I will escape depression.

REFUGEES FOR SALE

On October 19th, 2020, I graduated from the University of Pavia in political science and international relations, With COVID19 still at its utmost strength, the graduation took place virtually, through an online Zoom video call between me and the university to defend my thesis. I Asked the rector of Collegio Borromeo if I could use the conference hall of the college for the big event and invite friends. He confirmed that I could use the hall and invite as many students living in Borromeo as possible but guests from outside Borromeo could not exceed five people. I invited Renata (the mother of Giacomo who eventually became my Italian Mom-friend), Sara (a friend from the university) Vincenzo (one of my few friends and ex-student who lived in Borromeo), Emmanuela (one of my professors at the university of Pavia). From Borromeo I invited not more than ten students out of a hundred and fifty students I was allowed to invite. I think it was the rector's strategy who always wanted so much that I become friends with students from Borromeo, also, I suppose, he did not want to have a hall full of my graduation guests to curb the spread of COVID19, knowing that I might not invite anyone from Borromeo and the only people I probably invite are people I know from the university and people from Trento who would not risk their health for my

graduation due to distance, lockdown, and the region of Lombardy being considered a “RED-ZONE” (regions with very high rate of Covid infection; they are regions into and out of which movement is restricted or limited by law. High sanctions and fines are put in place for individuals who violate these rules without valid reasons like health and work). Despite Lombardy being considered a red-zone, Renata risked it all, driving from Trento to Pavia to attend my graduation.

It has been almost five years since I came to Pavia to study, and I have since lived in the same college dorm. After my graduation, I could not wait to leave Pavia for another city. Some days before the event, I called Matteo, one of my close friends from Trento to come pick me up from Pavia back to Trento on Saturday 24th of October 2020, so five days after graduation, Matteo also risked it all and came to Pavia to pick me up. In Trento I lived in the apartment of Renata where I am a resident because in 2019 when I was in the process of renewing my asylum documents, I went with Renata to the police station of Trento to provide my fingerprints. There we met a girl who knew me very well but whom I did not know. She said she knew me because she works with Citta Aperta as a coordinator who called me many times when my service was needed for translations. And that she saw me for the first time at one of my book presentations in Residenza Fersina (a big abandoned military barrack in Trento that was turned into an asylum shelter) on the international day for the refugee, the book presentation was organized by Citta Aperta. “Why did you not apply for citizenship? As a refugee and a holder of political asylum, you have the right to apply for citizenship after five years in Italy.” She explained to me. “I know, the only issue is that I do not have a five-year continuous residence and right

now I am not working. Somewhere I read that one must be a resident in Italy for five years and working for at least three years and earn not less than eight thousand three hundred euros in each of the past three years as requirements.” I explained to her. “What do you mean you do not have a residence? In the university dormitory you are not a resident?” Renata intervenes with concern in her eyes. She is a worrying person; she freaks out for the smallest thing. So caring. “No, I asked for it, but I was told by the rector that they do not provide residence for any student.” I told Renata, shifting views from her to the lady working at the immigration department of the police station. “But did you not have a residence while living in Villazzano from 2014 to 2015 under Astalli?” Renata asked. “Yes. I did have residence with Astalli but once they kicked me out, remember when I went to Germany?” I said to Renata. She nodded. “That was when they took the residence from me and gave it to the next asylum seeker who replaced me in that Villazzano apartment.” I continued. “Aah, I get it. You should have told me. Tomorrow we will go to the municipality of Trento to verify that you do not have a residence in Villazzano, if you still have it, that would be fantastic, you can apply for citizenship, if not I will add you to my house as a resident, we can do it at the municipality tomorrow and wait till 2024 when you will have five years residence and can apply for citizenship.”

While living with Renata in Trento after graduation, I spent the whole day at home in front of the computer, sending my curriculum to many companies through email.

The process of job hunting can drag on for a long time even for a college graduate in Italy and I felt I was depending on Renata so much, even though I have never uttered it out to her, I felt she could read it all over my face. She told me she could host me

for a couple of months but not for eternity. Her words were not said as a wrath of a menace because Renata is a beautiful soul. And she came to my life right before Milena passed away. In fact, I told many of my Italian friends that it is always Italian women who save my life many times. She said she cannot host me for eternity due to space and privacy, I guess, as her way to motivate me in getting a job and be autonomous as soon as possible. While I was busy sending curriculum online, Renata and Matteo were busy looking for a place for me to live. They told me that they know a friend called Laura who has a big house in the suburb of Povo, two to three kilometres from Villazzano. Laura lived with her girlfriend, Irene and Costantin, a guy from Romania. She has a dog called Light and a cat called Pistacchio. Laura told us that she has a room in which I could live, and since I was not working, the price was a hundred euros per month. She also told us that the room is a bit messy, and it would take her a couple of weeks to empty it of all the books and stuff and paint it, but she would let me know when I could move in and live with them. Everyone was present, I was taken there by Renata and Matteo, and in the living room Laura introduced us to Irene and Costantin. The cat and dog were also present. Probably saying to themselves, “does he bring us some food? Will the new tenant give us food every day?”

While Laura and Irene were busy preparing the room in which I was supposed to rent, on November 16, 2020, I secured a job in Milan after sending hundreds of emails of my curriculum to different asylum seeking and homeless shelters. A Non-profit organization of social utility called “The-Arc” hired me to work with them as an operator. My task as an operator was to help asylum seekers in their most basic and complex needs towards social integration:

fixing appointments to meet lawyers, the police station for their asylum process, sanitary appointments to meet a doctor or calling an ambulance, if need be, also calling law enforcement in cases of violence and unlawful activities. Also, the preparation and service of food was done by operators.

The problem with getting a job in Milan while I reside in Trento was that I did not know anyone in Milan who could host me. I told the news to Renata that I had a job interview that afternoon, she asked what am I going to do if I do not have a place to live in Milan? I told her that I do not know but I will accept the job anyway. I was desperate to be independent, especially financially. When Renata came back home in the evening, she asked how the job interview went and I told her that I was hired, I only need to go to Milan and sign the contract, the company, since I am living in Trento, agreed that I sign the two-month contract the same day I start the job. "But where are you going to live?" she asked. "Do not worry, I will figure it out. I can even sleep in the street, or in a train station." I said, jokingly. I was so excited. "My sister, Andreina lives in Monza, I will ask her to host you for maybe a month so you can look for accommodation after your first salary. But then we must call Laura and tell her that you will not come living with them anymore." She said. I called Laura and she called her sister. Both women, Andreina and Laura, were so happy for me when they heard my good news.

Early morning of November 16th, I took a train from Monza to Milano Prota Garibaldi, from there I took another train to Milano Certosa, and walked for like ten minutes to arrive at work. I was already at the shelter an hour ahead of my shift, I had a morning shift as a beginner with no experience so the supervisor can show me around and explain to me

in details what my tasks were and where I could find what tools if I need them, where food is kept, how it is prepared to be consumed by the hosts, also how to access the computer, what were the useful files needed on the daily basis, the diary into which important communication is written for colleagues whose shift begin after mine. I loved everything regarding the job, my colleagues were nice, though very competitive which often irritated me, the asylum seekers were some of the most beautiful human I've met, I loved the fact that I could call or write a doctor, the police, or a lawyer for a person and the asylum seeker follow all procedures and the task is successfully carried out and I could see the smile on the face of that person. I could go home satisfied, saying to myself, "yes! I helped this and that person, thanks to my service they are happy." However, the conditions in which these beautiful human beings were living were devastating to me and as well to them. The shelter hosts two hundred plus asylum seekers in an old, abandoned school. Its ex-classrooms are used as makeshift bedrooms, in each of them slept more than twenty people and in the ex-offices slept more than ten people. At night, way after midnight, when I have a night shift, I had to go, together with a colleague of mine, and wake the few people who did not sign the daily register to sign, also do a headcount to be sure everyone is present inside the shelter. Doing so, wakes everyone up. I hated this like I hate nothing else. The rooms were overcrowded and they bare a stinking odor that almost is piercing to my soul whenever I open any of the doors to the rooms, with flashlights shining on them while we count them or while they sign the daily register, I could see a busy traffic of bed bugs walking all over them, some scratch themselves to an extent that you can see wounds on their skin which is already covered with

insect bite marks. I cried whenever I had a night shift and I had to go on the nightly routine check on the rooms. Besides the living conditions, the one thing I also despised was the food served to these people, I am pretty sure not every animal would want to consume that food for survival. In fact, many of the asylum seekers bought their own cooking utensils and groceries, one, because they always complained about the quality of the food and two, because they always have a nostalgia for their native food. For safety reasons, they are not allowed to cook in the rooms, but they did it anyway in a hidden way and their electric stoves usually get confiscated once they get caught cooking red-handed by the operators, especially operators who are Italians. Some African operators like me, kept a closed eye and a tight lip, we pretend we see no evil, so we say no evil. Most of the migrants were able to feed themselves because they were working, for the most part in pizza delivery companies, very few worked full-time jobs, even at Amazon warehouse in Milan, some are working with metal mechanic companies, but this is only one per cent of the asylum seekers living in that shelter. Also, each asylum seeker is entitled to two euro and fifty cents a day which is given to them monthly, so, each of them receive a pocket money of seventy-five euros a month.

The two-month contract ended on the 16th of January 2021, and I had to go back to Trento. I have spent a month at Andreina's house, going to work and after work I looked for house solutions online by taking as many private numbers as possible and writing them down on a piece of paper. Private numbers because looking for a job or a rent through agencies, for me, is a waste of valuable time. For jobs I browse the internet, typing for example, asylum shelters in Lombardy, using Google search

engine and the algorithm provides me with thousands of results regarding my interest. Then I would click on the links to the various cooperatives, foundations, and organizations for migrants (NGOs basically). Once the link is open, I look for the email of the secretary, manager, human resources, and I would copy the email and paste it to my Gmail "compose" dialogue box and type an introductory letter, attach a pdf file of my curriculum, and then click on send. Then wait for good luck. When looking for a house to rent, I do almost the same process: apartments/rooms for rent in Milan for example on google search engine, click on links, and look only for private numbers, write them, as many as possible, on a piece of paper then call them one after the other. That is how I easily find jobs and houses for rent. I once went to register at some job agencies in Trento, and they took my curriculum and all the information they needed from me. They said they would call me whenever they find something for me. I was impatiently waiting at Renata's house for days as if I had just taken an AIDS test after having some irrational affairs with a strange lady and now, I am waiting for the results. After a few days without a word from any of the agencies, I started looking up on the internet on my own. I took matters into my own hands. After getting that first job and a house rent in Milan from Monza with the help of the internet, to me house and job agencies do not exist. I do it on my own and I always get results quicker than agencies. By the way, those agencies in Trento, to this day, never called me back.

"Hey Laura, how are you and Irene doing, how are the pets and Costantin? I hope all of you are doing well. I was calling because my two-month contract here will end next week and there is no renewal. I wanted to ask if the room is still available because I

am planning on coming back and started looking for another job.” I told Laura on the phone. “I am sorry to hear that, Lamin. Yes, the room is still available. Just let me know the exact day that you plan on returning to Trento so I can resume preparing it for you.” Laura said. “I will be in town on the 17th of January because I have already informed my landlord in Milan that I will hand the keys over to her in the morning of the 17th so I can take a train and arrive early in Trento.” I said to Laura. “For your information, now we are living with another Italian girl called Michiela. Costantin is not living with us anymore.” She said. “That is fine with me. But what is the price of the house?” I asked. “I will keep it at the same price, a hundred euro since you are not working. When you start working the price will increase.”

After spending months at Laura’s house, I started getting lazier by the ticking of every passing second. I did not send any curriculum and I spent almost ninety percent of my days in my locked room, reading books after books even though Laura’s house is always freezing cold. The only time I get out of my room is when I am going to the bookstore to buy more books and when I am going to cook dinner or going to the toilet. I think I was falling into depression.

One April morning of that same year, 2021, I woke up to an idea and got up from my bed and did exactly that. I woke up telling myself, “The two-month salary I have received from Milan is running out and soon I will find myself depending on friends, something I do not like at all. I must invest the little money left before it runs out. But what am I going to invest? Uh, a sewing machine. You are crazy. You do not even know how to sew.” I was having a conversation with myself while I was still in bed. Immediately I jumped up from the bed, took a

shower, put my clothes on and headed to MediaWorld to buy me a sewing machine before I changed my mind. There I was, inside that electronic mall roaming around with poor whites all over the place. I went to the section where sewing machines are kept. I have spent about half an hour carefully inspecting all the different types of sewing machines as if I was an expat in tailoring. Finally, I grab one: SINGER M3305. I went to the teller, paid for it, caught a bus and headed home. "What a stupid decision." I said to myself as I unpacked the machine and placed it on my desk. "What am I going to do with this now that I have bought it." I conversed with myself. "I will go on YouTube and watch videos about tailoring." I typed on the search engine of the platform: tutorial for singer M3305 sewing machine. Right away, a video titled, "learn how to insert your bobbin", came out as one of many results. I clicked on it and in ten minutes I learned how to insert a bobbin. The problem is that the machine would not sew anything even though I have inserted the bobbin correctly. And inside the accessories compartment I have learnt that some tools were missing. "Aha, perfect! Now I have the right excuse to return this machine to the mall and get my money back, it was a stupid idea anyway." I packed everything and rushed to the electronic mall and flagged down an employer in a red t-shirt. "I want a refund, this machine is not working, and some spare parts are missing." I said to one of the men working in that mall. "Here we do not refund. We will look for the product that works and replace it with the faulty one." I was broken hearted because the man gave me another machine that was tested and worked perfectly. I took it home and tried again. This time it works, and I fished inside my closet for old clothes of mine that I do not wear anymore. In two days, I was making my own designs on t-shirts that I bought

from a clothing store. In a month following the purchase, I was making incredible tailoring projects and selling them to my friends, Italians, and Africans alike. I became active and motivated once again. In June I started sending curriculums again. Within a week I got a call from a homeless shelter in Milan who was ready to hire me. I started working with them in mid-June of 2021 and continued with my tailoring till this day.

HATE AT FIRST SIGHT

Take me home, bury me home.
I have blown the dog whistle
To give voices to my suffering.
This land has consumed me with
A tag around my weeping soul.
We peep through turtle cracks,
Tatted on our stomach from hunger.
The title of a refugee is a burden,
Bury me in the hot African sand
Where my ancestors flipped their fins.
Bury me in this mysterious place
That yields young fruits and flowers,
Where roots sprout, spread, fail in the cosmos.
You think cynicism is romanticism,
I think lyricism is semantic webbing.
Bury me within stars that quake, am an
eerie alien, yet, an eely sapiens, like a
weary serpent. I shed my scaly sole as a
weird wonder. Tearfully, I wander. Still, I
Wonder. Why? Unwanted upon arrival.
There is always a will for the refugee
And there is always a way for our ruin.
Sleeping in places where hellhounds
Seek to escape their own misery.
Trying to tame the stories of our scars,
Teasing life, playing tricks with survival,
Trying to outsmart death in deadliest
Shelters where we cuddle with the fear
Of losing surviving friends who walked
Barefooted on cursed sands where
Living and dying eclipse in souls.
Who am I? Who are we? What are we
To this land where titles are sacred?
Where we sought refuge from nothingness,
undress our souls to be hated at first sight?

Harvest my dying soul in this battlefield,
Soldiers dying to rewrite dinosaur tales
In that sea of water, parted by Moses,
Dwelled by drowning African babies,
Buried in promising gills of big killer fish.
Finish the chapter, welcome to Sicily,
Chap with men sneaking behind curtains.
It's Mafia and mayflowers, you may fade
Into those romantic April and May flowers
Of the big southern island where callous
Ribs seek to warm our broken hearts,
Sewing our emotions onto surreal affections.
The big news has UNHCR and SPRAR keep
Cherry-picking the brightest refugee emotions.
Hate at first sight becomes the norm when
Refugees become bullets in Mafia gun barrels.
When suffering is home, where do you go?
Maybe we must grind our dried bones
To build home in our marrow drainage pipes?
What if home is no longer home for us?
What if we are predestined to be homeless?
All the skeletons we buried, are they better off
dead?
What if heaven has no ghetto for us to call home?

Chapter 4

Not only what and how we eat says a lot about our health but also what and how we think and speak.

FIFTEEN HOURS OF NOTHINGNESS

In late April of 2015 I was scrolling down my news feed, feeding myself with lots of misinformation from misinformed people - useful idiots - useful in the spreading of slogans and propaganda created by diabolical propagandists who are up to no good. Suddenly, as I kept scrolling down the rabbit hole of the social media trap, squandering precious time, something caught my attention. It was a short video of about one or a couple of minutes long. Nervously, I clicked on it with hesitant tendons of my thumb, it blew in my face like the Kaczynski pipe bomb. That one click haunts me till this day; that one click ruined my life.

When I was working with migrants in Milan, a Pakistani guy, as I bent over a sheet of paper to sign a medication registrar to indicate that he took his sleeping pill and showed him where to sign, he was laughing as I handed him the pen so he could also sign. I thought, "well, probably he saw something funny on his phone, because nowadays everyone is on his phone, or perhaps he is going crazy, given the conditions in which he is living. I couldn't figure it out. After he finished signing, he looked me straight in the eyes and said, "you are still very young, why are you losing hair? You are getting bald

so soon." All along he was laughing so hard. So unnerving. "Well. I replied. "Europe is not a place for the weak. I came here without friends or family, and I didn't even know how to say hi in Italian. I worked so hard and graduated from the University just last month. I am paying my rent, tax and supporting my family back home, financially. It's normal that I am aging fast. But at least I never needed pills to sleep." He didn't like that response at all. He goes, "hey bro, I was just joking." "And I was joking too, don't start it if you cannot finish it. Ha! Ha! Ha!" He went out of the office, furiously.

By April 2015 I had already lived in Italy for eighteen months. During those months, so many unpleasant things happened to me, directly and indirectly: people who despised me for no apparent reason except for my ethnicity and geographical background. I've maintained my composure and concentrated on the incredible amount of love I felt from the small circle of friends I've always managed to maintain, and this helped maintain my mental health. I try to concentrate on things that I can change, not on those that I cannot change. I cannot change the racist attitude of some people towards me, but I can change, or rather control my attitude and reaction towards these negative remarks and gestures from some backward thinking people. Most of them, by the way, are poor whites.

After watching that short clip, though, something snapped in me. It was a video of another migrant rubber boat capsizing in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Arguably, the most disturbing experience is to see a grown man cry, hearing a couple of young voices cry out in their final minutes for help while they were helpless and vulnerable in their lowest state of existence where no amount of help would bring them back to life, broke me into pieces. I've watched that video as these young lives

cried out for help in Mandinko, my native language,
they pleaded,

PLEASE HELP ME,

PLEASE HELP ME,

PLEASE HELP ME,

PLEASE HELP ME,

PLEASE HELP ME,

PLEASE HELP ME,

PLEASE HELP ME,

Until their pleas faded slowly. I went back to work from a lunch break, and I couldn't think right, I went home at night, and I wept, these voices captured every inch of my brain like a haunted house from which I couldn't escape. I soaked my pillow with tears and before I realised, another day was already dawning. I didn't sleep, not even for a second. I thought of every episode that happened to me since July 15th of 2013, the day I left my country, the day I left my family, friends and loved ones and sold my soul to the external world, of which I knew little to nothing. "Those voices could have been mine." I thought. I could have died at sea, just like they died before my naked eyes as I watch that video.

This feeling of self-pity, pity party, the reminiscent feeling, the sleepless nights, the loss of appetite, even though I had lots of activities, projects to carry daily, dragged on for years. At that period in my life in Trento, I was doing an internship at a shelter for the elderly in Mattarello, I was doing a voluntary service at "Italian conversation" a conversation between Italian locals or people fluent in the Italian language and migrants. The initiative was an idea of Giacomo to help migrants improve their Italian. It was Sara Rebecchi, one of the volunteers, and who to this day I consider one of my best friends, who suggested that I become one of the volunteers because thought my Italian was good enough to help other migrants understand the language, I was

also attending a middle school (Terza Media) in Pergine called Marie Curie. I was enrolled in the institution by Centro Astalli by mistake. Well, for them it was the perfect thing to do because I was attending the obligatory Italian language classes at the CINFORMI headquarters among the rest of the migrants. From there the best students are selected by the NGO to get a middle school certificate at Centro EDA of Trento or in Marie Curie of Pergine. While I was attending lessons, I realised the subjects were English Language, Mathematics, Geography, Italian language. After a week or two, I was asked by some staff of Astalli how the classes were going. "Boring, I already have graduated high school, it is stupid I have to sit in a classroom to learn the English language and Geography." I explained. I did not include maths because for me even basic math gives me a headache. Anyway, I was running from one activity to the next. When I wake up in the morning, I would hit the roads and would only come back home late at night, around midnight sometimes.

On May 12th, 2015, I came home from school at around 21:00 - 22:00. That day, like many days, I had to work at the shelter for the elderly from 09:00 till 17:00, then I had to attend the Italian language course for foreigners from 18:30 till 20:30. I took a train from Pergine at 21:02 and arrived at Villazzano at 21:23. By the time I arrived home from the train station, it was somewhere between 21:30 - 21:45 on the clock. I was hungry, dizzy but mostly exhausted. I put a pot on the stove, trying to boil some water. Living far away from my African home where our mothers never allow us (men) to cook, cooking in Africa is a women's thing, very rare you see a man cook. But I cooked even in Africa, but I was very young, maybe thirteen, fourteen years of age when my mom went to the market to sell, my sisters went

to school, and I was left home all by myself because I had to go to school in the afternoon. I could take lunch money from Mom so I would not have to cook but I understood from an early age that my mother worked so hard and struggled to feed me and my siblings, she paid all our school fees, bought us uniforms, shoes... so I refused to take lunch money from her. Mom would cook the stew at night and let me cook rice in the morning so I could eat something at midday before going to school. At night there is a big Tom and Jerry fight between me and my sisters. They always find my left-over lunch in the kitchen and laugh at me when we are all at home at night. Sometimes they would say, "Today someone chewed stones." Other times they would say, "Today someone ate porridge and stew for lunch." When I cook rice, either I over cook it or I eat it almost uncooked, dry, and hard to chew and swallow. Mom would say to my sisters, "My Mino will learn I have learned to cook." In cooking, I first learned how to boil water, then the rest was to experiment with different ingredients and see what works. However, I still don't know how to cook rice so I either cook pasta or I will cook the stew then boil water and pour it on some cuscus. It is easy to prepare Cuscus, you just need to know how to boil water, pour it on the cuscus and wait for maximum five minutes. Now I know how to cook with no salt and low fat. I was going to help myself with some pasta. I put all the ingredients, tomato paste, tuner, salt, a bottle of extra virgin olive oil, on the table and went into my room to munch on a half apple, with the intention of eating the other half after dinner. In my room with a half apple in my head, two bites missing, I tried to sit on the edge of my bed, and I couldn't. Felt like heavy stone with a rope tied to it and then tied to my diaphragm and ripping my stomach apart. "What's going on?" I was thinking out

loud. I gave up sitting. I tried to stand up straight, but I couldn't stand either. I could only stand while bending a bit. I started feeling pain in my stomach. The pain was progressively agonising. I went inside the kitchen and turned off the stove. I gave up sitting, now I also gave up cooking. It occurred to me I should go outside and take a walk; I was positive it would pass. I underestimated the gravity of the situation, it was a gamble between life and death, if only I could tell, but I couldn't, could I? I walked for thirty minutes while slightly bent on my stomach all along. The pain was getting unbearable, and I almost gave up walking as well, to be quite honest, I almost gave up living all together. "Maybe I will fall and die at the next step I will take." I kept repeating this thought, in despair. I thought my legs were a hearse, carrying me to the undertaker, but those agonising steps would turn out to be the ambulance, the ultimate sacrifice that saved my life. Finally, I reached the street that leads to the hospital, and I thought to myself, "maybe I should go to the hospital, taking a walk is not working." I turned to that street and in five minutes I was inside the Santa Chiara hospital. At the reception desk I couldn't speak, so I pointed a finger at my stomach. The lady asked for my anagraphic information, and I reached out for my pocket and pulled out my wallet, took out my health insurance card and handed it to her. She wrote down my details and gave my card back and asked me to sit in the line and wait for my name to be called over the public address loudspeaker. I gazed in her eyes with my eyes saying, "can't you see I am dying?" But she didn't pick up on that, or perhaps she just didn't want to acknowledge my situation as a priority. "There! She pointed. "Sit there and wait for your name to be called." I am not only a foreigner, but I am also a foreigner with a skin tone not very welcome in this country. People dislike us

for no genuine reason and would fume at us over the least things that they would otherwise smile about if the skin tone was different, and the ascent was British or American. The lobby was filled with people waiting, none of them looked as horrible as I looked. I couldn't stand up straight and I was walking so slow. Everyone in that lobby, I couldn't see from behind my head, but I am sure even the lady at the reception desk was looking at me as I painfully snail across the room and tried to sit down but with no avail. I stood for like five minutes and I couldn't bear the pain any longer, so I bent all the way down in such a way I was holding my knees. I stayed like that for about ten minutes, ten minutes that felt like eternity. Then I decided I would go back to the reception and beg the lady to help me see the doctor. I tried to stand up, but I couldn't. I could only reach like ninety degrees; I couldn't go up further than that. I walked like that, so slow towards the reception, before I could even talk or make a gesture, my legs gave in and there I was, laying on the ground. I was so embarrassed. "You need to help this man!" Someone said out loud. "Yes! He came in here in pain." Another person said. "Someone please, help him." Now everyone is a hero. A guy came running with a wheelchair. He tried to help me on my feet and sit me in the wheelchair but the overwhelming pain I was feeling won't let me sit. Suddenly, there was complete chaos in the hospital. I saw two doctors running towards me with a hospital bed and some IV drips to numb the pain in my abdomen with liquid painkiller dripping in my vein. They then helped me slowly lay down in that bed and rolled me into a ward, like a giant teddy bear inside a shopping cart. It was painful. It was painful. I was screaming and crying like a little girl. I was injected repeatedly with a painkiller and the pain would go until the dose was

gone, and I would start screaming and crying again. The doctors worked on me all through the night with scanning, X-Ray, and other examinations. Anytime the painkiller dose is gone, and the pain comes back, I would scream the whole hospital until I am injected again. At around 03:00 to 04:00 a doctor finally told me that I was going to have surgery. I was told I had a stomach ulcer, and it was not looking good, the only solution was surgery. I then pulled out my cell phone and took some photos of the code on my wrist, it was a white bracelet given to patients at the reception. White bracelet means a patient's condition is not very serious. A red bracelet was what the lady should have given me, but I had to wait longer at the lobby than I was supposed to because of that white bracelet and would have waited even longer if I hadn't fallen on the ground. I sent the photo to some of my Italian friends with a message that I was in Santa Chiara hospital, and I will be having a surgery. In and out of consciousness as three Italian girls were asking me some personal questions. Later I understood they were trying to keep me comfortable and be sure that the total Anaesthesia dose is in effect before the surgery is carried out.

I woke up in a small room, confused. Disoriented. I wanted to ask myself what in the world was I doing there but the patient gown, needle in my vein, plastered to my wrist, the IV drip, transparent tubes jutting out of my stomach and nose, and Matteo sitting in a chair, zero centimetre from my bed were all the answers I needed. I was laying down in a single bed in an Intensive Care Unit (ICU). "Matteo! What are you doing here this early? Are you not working today?" He laughed and said, "I want to make sure you have your breakfast, but so bad I am a bit too late. It's already seven o'clock in the evening." My confusion grew even better, "what do

you mean seven o'clock? I had an operation a couple of hours ago. Look! The sun is rising outside." He smiled and said, "maybe it's already tired of watching over you the whole day and now it's falling. It's sunset." To be assuring, he showed me the time on his cell phone. "Wait, so I spent fifteen hours sleeping here." It is embarrassing to say but those fifteen hours were the best moments in my life, I never felt so relaxed and with my mind totally free of worldliness and worries, no nightmares, nothing. It was like my brain was being emptied of its memory for fifteen hours. But after that, reality clicked in, and I felt sad all over again. For two weeks, good friends came and went, they never left my hospital bed side empty and lonely.

Some weeks or a month following my release from the hospital, a roommate of mine felt sick and he asked another roommate and I to help him call the ambulance. That was when I realised, I had made the right choice for not calling an ambulance and walked myself to the hospital. I dialled 118 and an operator picked up the phone. From the receiving end of the call, a man spoke, asking lots of questions: is the patient conscious, is he responsive? What's his name? Can you spell that for me? I am sorry, you speak too fast. Can you spell it using names of places? "FALIQ, that is F for Firenze, A for Ancona, L for Liguria, I for India and Q for Qatar." He thanked me and asked for the surname, the spelling of the surname using places. They always do that in Italy, spelling using places. To me it is so annoying but some people, especially Italians themselves, are so good at it. M for Milano, N for Napoli, R for Roma. People who are so good at it would spell my name - LAMIN - like this, Lazio, Ancona, Milano, India, Napoli. And my surname as, Domodossola, Rome, Ancona, Milano, Milano, Egitto

(Egypt), Hotel. He asked for the patient's nationality. We were on the phone speaking like foreigners with some weird accent, so it was easy to tell we weren't Italian natives but some sick aliens. He then asked if the patient has a permit of stay? If it was still valid? I felt like screaming in his ear, "SEND THE GODDAMN AMBULANCE, HE IS IN PAIN!" Then he said to us that he was going to call and send someone from The Medical Guard and that person would check on the patient to verify the necessity or not of an ambulance. So, we waited. So, we waited, he would send someone, so, we waited. One hour has almost passed since the initial call for an ambulance. We waited. A guy rang our doorbell and we let him in, first peeping into the peephole because people these days can be crazy, so we peep through the peephole to see people. He came in with a heavy medical toolbox, maybe first aid, like a plumber, only he was dressed nicely. He inspected the patient for what seemed to take fifteen minutes then he said, "he needs to go to the hospital, now. It's serious." And I asked, "should I call the ambulance?" And he said in a low voice, "don't worry, I'll call."

After almost thirty minutes, the ambulance finally arrived. Men in uniform spilled out of the vehicle and rushed into our house and helped Faliq lie down on a stretcher, lifted it up and went downstairs with him into the ambulance. The next day in the afternoon, I went to visit him in the hospital. He had surgery. His problem was different from mine. He had his appendix removed because it was filled with substances, probably pepper seed and tiny stones. Pakistani food is always super spicy, they consume lots of pepper seed. His illness was different from mine. He was suffering because of food, I had suffered because of a video, he had his appendix removed because it was filled with substances.

Pepper seed, stones. “Stop eating too much pepper seed and wash your food so you don’t consume stones.” I said, jokingly before I left. We all laughed. “See you tomorrow.”

AUTO-SLINGSHOT/CROSSED

Dressing my words
So they could dwell sacred places in junkyards
Haunted by forklifted thoughts
I wish they had killed me instead
Now am reminiscing about my sanity
I have walked through barrels of guns
Slingshot at my present time
My past keeps looking at me
Scared, traumatized, interrupted
Melting off is my pitiful soul
Dressing my words
Meanings that mean nothing from the beginning
"Break down the walls, repaint the memory!"
My shadows keep screaming at me
"A twisted idiot", that's what they'll say after
reading
this
I have been wanting to want nothing but puzzled
smiles
Hidden behind codes of sacred scripts
Calling the clouds in Ge'ez "please put my bones
to
rest"
I have been living in skulls, filled with Judah's
ashes
A detainee in my own imagery, how do I come to
this?
Dressing my words
To reincarnate all the missing peers, eaten by the
blue
Mediterranean, the silver bullets, the golden
Sahara
A revolutionary revolting to escape myself
The past is holding a gun, aiming at me
The present is showing me a badge – warrant
I must be a law-abiding citizen to my hunted
thoughts

Cynical believers still searching for my veins
To inject in me some motivational insulin
This poem has grown wild enough to be a squatter
camp
Leave before the slaughter begins.
Dressing my words
Sorry for the vivid details
A manly man walking among men
Lost in this junkyard, wiggling my tail, waiting for
my
turn to be recycled, though I prefer being discarded
A wounded lion, smitten by the cruelty of itty-bitty
kiddies who keep drinking liquor out their mamas'
titties
Crack the shells, shave off your glances so you
can peel
off my scales
You want to step in the footsteps that my feet kiss
no
more?
Get naked in front of your own guilty conscious
self,
weep in your single bed as you watch your slain
self
develop stigmata
Am drowning and the water is rising higher and
higher
Stuck in this skull with this someone in my head,
crazier
than I ever will be.

Chapter

5

Fast money, fast cars and fat bras will
mislead you.

HE BLED SO HE COULD STAY ALIVE

"I am getting married Lamin; I am getting married." A grown man told me, all excited. His name was Bubacarr Ceesay, but since I have known him from Libya, we called him Blood. "Well, congratulations! I am more than happy for you." I replied with a voice in my mind saying, "you shouldn't do it brother, it's a trap. Especially if you are already trapped here in Europe as an undocumented "illegal immigrant married to a woman in Africa and you live in a different continent is not very wise." Marriage, I believe, is a diabolical agreement signed between two people, one day you are so in love with one another and a couple of years later you are building a casa against each other. It is a scam and your money, as a man, is the price. No woman in her right mind is in for marriage because she cares about your feelings, she is in for what you bring into that household, financially. No one cares about your feelings as a man, it's all about how much you provide.

Ironically, I have made the same stupid mistake six years later. Ninety-nine percent of African migrants dream of coming to Europe, making as much money as possible, buying land in Africa, building a fancy house on it, going back to Africa for a vacation and marrying a pretty girl, recommended to them by their families or relatives (for the most part). Every

time I have a conversation with migrants who live in the shelter and who just arrived in Italy, I would face these questions, “how long have you been in Italy?” “Did you get the asylum documents yet? Did you go back to Africa yet?” “No, I have not yet gone back?” “But why? You should go back and get married.” “Because I am not in a hurry to go back to Africa, and I am not in a hurry to get married.” They would laugh and say, “Lamin, go to Africa and buy a big house and marry a beautiful girl, have lots of kids and leave them in your fancy house and come back to Europe to earn more money and start some wealthy projects in Africa.” Most of the time, to avoid long discussions in which I am not interested, I just tell them, “Yeah, you are right, that is exactly what I will do. For now, I am working hard to save as much money as possible because I have just graduated with no money to finance this big dream.” I always say this jokingly but today I realized words are not just spellings, they are a spell. I got married to a girl I do not know at all. Family and friends’ pressure make me do it. It lasted little more than a year and the girl filed for divorce, in a traditional way, lucky me, we got married in a religious way, no contracts were signed so no lawyer was involved, no court case. We got married through words among family members and the Imam and divorced through words. I told her that I was not able to come to The Gambia because of my Asylum, and that I am planning to apply for citizenship in 2024 and I have to wait for another three years for the result which could be either positive or negative. She told me she could not wait that long, that she is still young and could find someone else. Rest in peace to our marriage, November 2021 to June 2023. From June 2023 to date (just yesterday, May 25, 2024, I was on the phone with, first my father, then my mother) the family of my ex-wife is asking for money from me.

They claimed, traditionally a husband must do the virgin party which costs ten thousand dalasi (Gambian money) which is roughly a hundred and fifty euros, the husband needs to buy fifty clothes for the wife. Anytime my father calls me about my ex-wife's family financial demands, I always tell him, "How much are they asking for, I will send the money tomorrow." My dad is always furious and says we should not pay anything. Over the phone I said, "Dad, I do not want conflict, and despite the conflict, I do not want to hear anything about this situation anymore, it has been almost a year, and I cannot still move on with my life. I have so much to deal with, I am working a parttime job because of the driving licence course that is dragging on since July of 2023. I have a test on the first of June 2024 for the practical because I have already passed the theory test since October of last year, I am looking through documents required for the renewal of my asylum which will expire in September of this year so I have to start the process three months before the expire date is due, also I am going through some documents required for the citizenship application which I plan to finalize in October of this year. I have a lot to worry about, please ask the family of my ex-wife the total sum of money needed so I can be free from them." He said, "I sent my brother to the family since, you know, as a tradition I cannot be in direct contact with the family, plus the family lives in the village where I was born, and my brother lives there too. They ask for ten thousand, then fifty thousand for the clothes." Okay dad, Next month I will have a lot of financial projects (I want to build the foundation of my house on my land in Gambia, I have to send the monthly hundred and fifty euros for the family back home, but I will send extra hundred and fifty euros for my ex-wife. You know, it is June and Eid-Adha is the sixteenth on that same months

and I have to send almost four hundred euros for your ram, also for the driving licence test I want to pay for three hours' drive and the exam fee and other costs, almost another three hundred euros to the driving school). But I will see what I can do." My mom called immediately, and I hung up the phone with my dad. "No, we are not going to pay a single penny, they only want money from us. Keep your money and concentrate on what you are doing for your future." "Mom, listen, I am paying to give them the financial victory they crave, also I am paying for my peace of mind. I want to move on. I do not want to go to work and my colleagues see the sadness on my face, and I have to fabricate an excuse, blaming it all on the cloudy weather and when it is finally sunny, I blame it on burnt lunch, lying about how terrible of a cook I am. or on insects in my eyes from the bike journey to work. As I am writing/editing this chapter, my sister called, "mom said she called you last night and you want to pay money to your ex-wife. If you do it, I will hate you forever." Jokingly, "this is my life, stay out of it, you have your own marriage and kids to worry about." Then I talked to her with logic, repeating the same thing I said to my parents on the phone last night.

It was October of 2015 when I came back from Germany, hungry and cold, going back and forth from Davide house in Levico to the public library in Trento when this grown man told me he was getting married. I remember vividly telling him that I had an opportunity to go to the university and he was one of the few African people who believed and encouraged me to go for it. While still studying in university, my second year, to be precise, I bumped into this same man on my way to Trento for a weekend, he was in some filthy rags, in front of the Milan central train station, observably homeless on the cold street standing beside a makeshift bed on

the ground on which scattered some even dirtier rags than the ones he had on his back.

"Hey my man!" We grab each other's hand so tight with big smiles on our faces. In this struggle, there is nothing more easing than spontaneously meeting a good friend that you have not seen in a minute. We greeted each other and I asked him how his family back home is. To which he replied happily that all is well. I then asked him about his wife, and I noticed a change in his facial expression. "She left me, she left me, my brother." He replied with an overwhelming sadness in his eyes. "But what happened, she was always happy on the phone with you. You too were so in love. Why?" I asked, looking him in the eyes searching for answers. "Yeah, she was happy because I was providing. I shared with her the little money I received as an asylum seeker. Now I have nothing, my asylum is denied, and I am kicked out of the shelter." He cried. "Oh! I am sorry about that, where do you live now?" I ask, pretending I didn't notice he was homeless. Or maybe I was not very sure he was one and wanted a confirmation from himself. "There." He said in a low voice, pointing at the makeshift bed with his eyes staring at his shoes. "Maybe you should go to Caritas, they provide shelter for the homeless." I suggested. "Oh, I am doing my own things, brother. I used to hate brothers selling drugs but now I understand why they do it. But hey, look, I am just doing it to get my ticket to Germany or Finland so I can try my luck once again seeking asylum." He said. I could see hope in his eyes. "But why don't you hire a lawyer here in Italy and make an appeal against the decision on your asylum? You could be lucky to get your asylum approved through an appeal." I asked. "I don't want to be profited on again by these Italian Mafia organizations that control the migrant flow. They are only interested in open borders so they

can bring us here and profit on us. Once the government denies a person's asylum and that person is not paid anymore by the State, the mafia kicks them out of the shelter." It was a long discussion but then we had to greet each other goodbye.

The weekend was over, and I went back to Pavia, the town in which the university is located. It was on Tuesday when I visited one of the asylum shelters in that town, something I did often. Some of the asylum seekers once they saw me, they approached me. One of them needed a lawyer, one of them needed an enrolment for the Italian middle school, and one of them wanted to know why his asylum-seeking process was taking years. I was not working as a social assistant or as a legal assistant. I was just a refugee who was studying in the university. I didn't have any answers regarding those questions. "I think you guys need to consult people working for you in the shelter." "Lamin, you know better than us that these people are not working for us, they are working on us, for profit." They argued.

The next day, a Wednesday morning, I had my headphones on and Tupac's song "They don't give a f*** about us" was playing at full volume. Elisa, an Italian girl whom I know very well through the asylum shelter where she worked as she studied in the faculty as me and she also knows me well through the university, my writings and the comunità Sant'Egidio, approaches me and I take the headphones off. "Hey Lamin, we are organizing a demonstration next week against the closed ports by the new Italian government. Would you like to join us?" She stated. "But what are you trying to achieve from this event?" I asked. "We want the government to open the ports so lives at Sea could be saved. Those people need our support. They are human beings; we must help save their lives." She cried.

"And once their lives are saved and brought to safety on Italian land, what's next that we should do for them. Or their dignity ends only when we save their lives from the Sea?" I asked. "I don't understand, Lamin, what are you trying to say?" She demanded. "Well, my dear friend, I think it's important we focus on the Sea, but equally important, we need to focus on the ones we host inside our asylum shelters. If not, we would just be hypocrites." I concluded and walked away, putting my headphones back on. "...we need help 'cause we dying Give us a chance, help us advance 'cause we trying Ignored my whole plea, watching us in disgust And then they beg when my guns bust..." Tupac was screaming in my ears. Those were the days when I heavily listened to his music. It has been years since I last played his music. When it comes to Rap music, now I listen to Rakim, Nas, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole and other conscious rappers. But generally, I listen to all kinds of music, from country to afrobeat, soul to R&B, Reggae to African traditional music. My favourite music genre changes from time to time. I used to like reggae, then Hip Hop, now my favourite is Mbalax (Senegalese music). And my favourite musician also changes from time to time. In Reggae, I used to like Bob Marley, then Jah Cure, then in Hip Hop I liked Tupac, then Nas, Rakim. I always love Michael Jackson but right now I am in love with Senegalese Mbalax. I went from Youssou Ndour to Ndongo Lo, now my favourite musician is Thione Seck.

On the day of the event, lessons were over and some students who wanted to participate in the demonstration were standing outside mobilizing more participants. I exited the classroom and faced a Sea of students, a couple of them asked me if I would come with them and I said no. But I stood there for a couple of minutes to talk with them as we

always do after class. Then I heard Elisa saying to some students, "I asked Lamin to join us, and he said we are racist." Bitch I did not say that. I approached them and denied the allegation, explaining to them the reason I am not participating.

Two years later, on Wednesday, June 3, 2020, I received a phone call from a friend from Trento. He notified me that my friend, Blood, was killed in Germany by another migrant. What devastating news that was. "Oh, no! Why? What happened?" I cried. "It is not very clear to me, but I heard they fought over a German woman." Then I started making some telephone calls through WhatsApp to some friends I know in the same town in Germany where Blood lived. It turned out Bubacarr went to Germany to seek asylum shortly after I met him in front of the Milan train station as a homeless man. According to sources, thanks to Eurodac regulation his asylum was denied also by the German authorities, and he was asked to leave the country due to "Dublin regulation", failure to do so he would be forcefully removed from the country and deported back to Italy by the Germans. At the time of his death, he was playing hide-and-seek with the German authorities and his only hope was to get a German wife so he would be granted a permit to stay in Germany. Unfortunately, the woman he was romantically involved with was not ready to settle down. She was seeing another man who happened to be another migrant, a close friend of Blood and who is also from The Gambia. Suspecting an active relationship between the two, Blood, after a party at a local club, went to the house in which his friend was living. Sure enough, his friend was in bed with the German woman. Blood went to the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and confronted his friend. They fought while the woman ran for the door because a knife was involved. They wrestled to the ground but

the other guy overpowered Blood, took the knife from him and stabbed him several times in the neck and stomach. Blood managed to get up and ran outside for help, unfortunately, it was around five to six o'clock in the morning. According to sources, seeing him in that manner, people ran away from him instead of helping him, even if he repeatedly asked people to call the ambulance. He went as far as a kilometre or so away from the crime scene before he collapsed due to excessive loss of blood. He died in a parking lot, in the street, like a dog. A vertical fundraising page was created for him aiming at taking his body home through GoFundMe.

OPPORTUNITY COST

My hobby is to negotiate with my aching,
aging in layers of deceased hopes
Hopheads and godheads in a smoky room
smooching each other's ugly secrets
Living organs should be priceless treasures
but in a modern age of desperate settlers
Our brain cells are commodities with price tags
How deep is your trauma? Mine is profound
Trading emotions with sex slaves for a
better understanding of our related stories
Meanwhile we cuddle with the misinformed
wiggling our tails as we stick our tongues
trying to break the cycle of these stories
As we bleed. This is not our motherland
we are just bullets, loaded for profit
screwed to the last atom of our veins
by the mafia in their political gun barrels
Our bones are barking in our flesh
ready to break with a trigger press
The Press determines the fate
of this staged public opinion
We are exhausting our medulla capacity
trying to break the Press remote
to tame the smoke of media pollution
Peeping the status quo through our wounds
abyss is the length of refugee scars
The expression of your mental chaos
is digging deep into our skin
Hush the ego, read a book, travel the world
A country is nothing without people
Many love the flag but don't know
who the education minister is
Even the informed struggles with misinformation
applauding and kissing the messenger
while slaying the believer of the message

Those standing with Open Arms are misinformed
Those against open ports are also misinformed
Still, we fill our lungs with media smoke
suffocating from love and hate
walking on this philosophical graveyard
where Machiavelli, Galileo, Gramsci
grinded their bones to enlighten
the darkness that blurred the minds
Here we are, picking up love with our smiles
while you plant pain beneath suffering skins
bleeding and pleading, yet you let us perish
as you sell your consciousness
to gain manipulation from your education
The matrix is to keep captive of the mind
so even Houdini wouldn't be able to escape

Chapter 6

Suicide is a permanent solution to
temporal problems.

PERMANENT SOLUTION – WELCOME TO ITALY

The miles I have walked to get where I am today are so mean that no shoes were able to survive the bumps I trodden. Blades I ducked, I ducked some punches, I even ducked some bullets, I ducked wire fences and I even ducked police, escaped enemy lines, I had to run. Running, running. Once the running ceased, I realized, then, that the obvious must not be ignored, the harder part of this epic escape is that I must escape myself. Running, running. I took deep breaths until my lungs hurt. Running, running. I ask myself, "why am I dying to live when I am just living to die?" It is, I believe, easier to run away from a physical situation than to run away from the mental trauma that the physical situation has caused. So, I kept running, running. Pateh Sabally was a young Gambian who ran, and kept running, and running. From a country in which I was born and ran from. Never look back. Running. On Sunday the 29th of January 2017 he decided to end the pain all together and stop running. He reached the finish line by jumping off one of the bridges (Grand Canal) in Venice. The news came at a time when I was studying at the university. I didn't know Pateh personally, but I tried to imagine how he must have felt mentally in order to resolve his

situation in such an extreme fashion. In my mind I was having conversations with the dead, sitting on his tombstone, smelling his tomb flower, asking questions, "why, brother? You could have been anything, why do you choose to resolve your temporal problems with a permanent solution?" The tomb cracked open, and the graveyard felt cold, all the sounds of birds, insects and tree leaves held still. Voices from the dead, in a raspy voice replied, "my mother, your mother, our mothers are the only people on earth, throughout our existence who know our true worth and value. The rest of the world knows, too, but only when we are dead and gone. That is the only time the world stops for a moment and moans our absence. That is when they come to our funerals with flowers that we needed so much while we could smell them. As long as I live in the white man world, I figured, I will never have my dignity, I will always be stripped naked of my pride; the white man will always be happy long as I live on his terms, and my rights to live as a decent human being will always be denied by the European. If I cannot live to enjoy the same rights that this so-called civilized world pretends so much to defend and spread across the globe, even if that means bloodbath, then I do not want to live another day under the sun. I hope they will laugh when I am dead." I then asked him, "why that date and that place, you could have gone in your own room at a different date?" He chuckled heavenly and said, "it would be a different day but the same struggle. I knew the European air on those days was saturated by pity, sympathy, and grief. Europeans were reminiscing about the horrors of the nazi gas chambers, remembering vividly every single European life lost in those tragedies. Would they save a black life in front of their eyes? I knew they would rather have the memories of white life than to

save a black life. Venice is a tourist destination where the whole world meets. What is a better way to go than dying in front of the world that pretends so much to have such immense care for a human life. I hope my death will expose their hypocritical attitude." A teardrop rolled down from my orbits, touched the tomb concrete and it was blood. "But why can't Africa be an alternative?" I asked, with burning tears still dropping at a rapid pace. "I have built myself an empire from nothing, lost it all and hope for a better life, misery is all I see, that's my state of mind on a regular basis. Nightmares of brothers drowning in the Mediterranean Sea; nightmares of brothers screaming "PEACE", letting magnum bullets be emptied in their heads as trigger-happy Arabs chased them through the barrel because they were tired of running from Libyan law enforcement. Mama is old enough to not be able to feed herself let alone providing a hot plate for a grown man. How can I coexist with my mother with this mind state? So that I will become part of the product of the poison that boosts crime rate in my country? I would rather have my mother bury a son than deal with a mentally disturbed, traumatised son, considering all the money she would spend on voodooos, jujus, and black magic trying to heal my mental illness and my forklifted thoughts." It's so quiet, for a moment at the graveyard. I hesitated on the next question, but I had to ask. "Why not try selling drugs like many of our brothers are doing at the squares?" At the time of this news, I had not yet seen any photography of Pateh, so, in my mind his response was, "brother I am too fat, picture me running from the police. It is another dead end for me, ten seconds run I catch an asthma attack. I had many dreams and many wishes but all along I knew I was born in a race of people that grew up only to

be screwed up. We always bloom but we never blow up to great success."

I got up his tombstone and sat down in a chair in my dorm room and tried to continue studying but I kept thinking of this tragedy. Hours later my cell phone rang, and I looked on the screen, my mother was trying to reach me. I picked it up and greeted her, but she was talking to someone else. My mother never calls me and talks in the first thirty seconds, she is always talking to someone else, some kids, my dad, or some other person. I am used to it, so I stayed quiet until she realized her phone credit is running out because in The Gambia, I suppose, the most expensive thing is phone credit, especially if converted to megabytes for internet use. You lost a lot of money for spending a couple of minutes on a WhatsApp call. And that's the only means through which we communicate. She called mostly when she needed money. It is very rare for someone to buy phone credit from The Gambia and call you only because they care about how you are doing. I cried about it but in time I got used to it.

This time she needed money to buy more cement and sand to start constructing a house on the land she bought many years ago. She wanted to move from the house in which my siblings and I were born and raised. She always said she was tired of the rent she never paid because that house was given to her and my dad by the owner, who was his uncle, a very wealthy businessman who was a brother to her mom and lived nearby. I always complain, "but mom you are not paying rent, why are you in a hurry to construct another house?" To which she would always reply, "my uncle is getting older by the minute and when he dies and the will is settled, the child of his who would be lucky to have this house might ask us to leave, he or she might not have the mercy of his father, my uncle. Her words were

prophetic. His uncle died in 2016 and in 2021 all the families living in those apartments, whether they were non-relatives and paying rent or relatives in the case of my parents, were asked to leave the building complex in a given period of time. But a couple of years, in 2019, before the eviction notice, my parents already finished the construction and moved. As of 2023, that complex is reduced to rubbles.

On the phone I told my mom that I was not working and that I was only studying. She was so heartbroken and asked me to quit the university and get a job. She hung up by saying, "remember that you have elderly parents who cannot work anymore to feed themselves and soon will probably be sleeping in the streets.

Looking at a sharp knife blare sitting on my desk, I thought maybe I should squeeze it in my windpipe and end it all. Perhaps, after all, Pateh did the right thing. But no, I would not let this struggle kill me, I never have a meaningful life anyway, you cannot kill anything that is ready to die, especially you cannot kill something that has never experienced life. But I always survive tough times and I will overcome this one as well. I will graduate, get a job and help my family out of poverty. Tough times don't last, tough people do. And if the only thing hard times do is reveal your true friends, you are probably a weak person. Hard times should reveal who you are, how tough you are to overcome any circumstances with blood sweat and tears.

Since Italian is not my first language, not even my second language, I always asked help from my Italian classmates through this fight. In the end, life is a struggle between living and dying, having a hot plate to keep kicking is a necessity for survival.

"If I die, take my body to Africa, my mother will be glad." This is a suicide note left on a CPR wall by

Ousmane Sylla, a migrant from Guinea. CPR is an acronym that stands for Centro di Permanenza per Rimpatrio. It is a detention or rather a concentration camp for deportation. As of May 2024, there are ten deportation camps in Italy.

Ousmane came to Italy in the summer of 2023 in the hopes of reaching his brother in France where he dreamt of becoming a musician, but he couldn't. He complained about violence in asylum camps in Italy up to the town council level, but no one would listen to his plea. "CPR is designed for people with the same psychological problems as him – Ousmane." These were the words of Matteo Piantedosi, the Italian minister of interior, answering questions on LA7 TV that documented the life of Ousman in Italy, from the day he came to the country to the day he committed suicide in a deportation camp in Rome on the fourth of February 2024. Ousmane was perfectly normal before being taken to the deportation camp. It is the Italian Government that drives him insane through the inhumane conditions of the deportation camps. Ousman experienced two of them. First, he was detained in Trapani, then transferred to Rome. The full documentary is still available online, titled, 100 Minuti – Welcome To Italy. I was lucky to watch it on the same day it was aired. I just finished watching the news by Enrico Mentana and he announced the list of hosts of Lilly Gruber on Otto e Mezzo and then he also announced that on 100 Minuti there will be a documentary about CPR and the journey of a migrant. I wanted to go to bed after Lilly Gruber, but I said to myself, "it is going to be a long night because I am curious about this documentary. It was a long night. Not just the length of the documentary, which is two hours long, but I turned on my bed the whole night. I could not sleep. I thought I would have another ulcer attack.

FIGHTING FOR MY PLATE

Life is short, time is running out,
Mama's ark is too old to shed my scales,
Her utensils too fatigued to fill my plate.
It is time for me to follow the waves;
following streams of consciousness
on tearful roads that tear my fullness
While I try to be whole and define survival,
I defy the norms and walked mean miles.
Meanwhile I cuddle with the darkness
hoping it will lead to the promised land
where hellhounds are meant to bark;
where capitalism offers plates to
starving mouths; where I rub shoulders
with strategic fighting heads. Biting dust
and fire to "man up" to insulting voices
just to receive some insulting salary.
I value family survival over my feelings. Here!
We flinch, we dodge, we punch to grab a plate;
casting spells to fit into the dine session
with our bleeding nose and blistered fists,
using my wizards and their clerics.
The struggle cannot kill me, I was born dead.
Here! I plugged corporate bones off bleeding
illiterate ribs, grinding marrows into holy pens
to rewrite The Big Bang theory to starving kids.
Still, I write masterpieces on sentient flesh
while I remain the master in pieces.
I flipped pages, stained with Mama's tears
in this foreign country without her warmth,
trying hard not to fall in the drainage pipes
of this junkyard, seeking to discard me.
I have grown too frail and too odd
chasing corporate bills to pay the bills
that breathing has become a struggle.
Grains of my grimy fingers are hard to analyse:

today I am painting yellow dots into sun;
tomorrow the sun into yellow dots.
From a dancing child to a starving star,
Fighting against the pull of the Black Hole
where all the dead stars are buried.
I cannot trade shoes with peers on Mama's ark
so I split my atoms and keep walking on
moonstones of dead philosophical fossils,
wailing out words that mean walls,
trying to change my words for extra plates.
My poem and prose have become lukewarm
and fill my cosmic skull with questions
of despair: what if the ark was never
meant to be my savior? What if the
ark was never meant to be a revolution?
What if the ark was meant to coexist with
my lie and their truth? What if my truth
was never meant to be a trendsetter?
What if true truth was never meant to be true?

Chapter 7

You will never have a friend as heartless
as money.

STOLEN CONSCIENCE

On Wednesday, April 5th, 2017, my brothers (twins) called me. "We are ready to go to Germany. We will depart from Palermo this evening and arrive in Milan Central train station tomorrow morning or early afternoon. If you don't have classes we can meet at the railway station, we already have tickets for a Flixbus which is scheduled for departure at late evening from Milano Lampugnano to Mannheim, Germany." Sanna said, I could hear the excitement in his voice but on the receiving end of the phone call, I was not happy at all about the decision to go to Germany. I replied, "Are you sure you want to do this, my brother? Why not give it a second thought? It all seems so spontaneous of a decision to me." But I could hear the other twin brother's voice a little bit far, saying, "tell him we exhausted our camp (asylum shelter) duration, and we are asked to leave since last week." The twin holding the phone repeated what his twin brother said, then he added, "we have been begging them to allow us to stay a couple of weeks so we can look for accommodations from some Gambian friends we know here in Palermo and also try to look for a job. We couldn't have an accommodation from anyone, they all said they already have more people in one apartment than agreed on the house contract, in fact some of their hosts hide during the night to enter the apartment

and sleep and early in the morning they leave the apartment, so they won't be seen by the landlord." Before I could say anything, I heard a voice in the background, a voice I did not recognize, perhaps the phone call was on a loudspeaker, this person said to my brother, the one holding the phone, "tell your big brother not to waste your time, there is no future for immigrants here in Italy, not even for Italians." To this my brother giggled and said, "come to the train station tomorrow." I was quiet for a few seconds, trying to digest the words of the other person. "Okay, see you tomorrow." This whole situation gave me mixed feelings, I didn't want them to go to Germany, I rather they try their chance here in Italy, but I also feel like maybe it is good that they have a German experience, then, they will have a better judgement on both countries. After all, the other boy on the phone is somehow right. Here I was, in the university and not even myself was safe from the hardship, intolerance of the Italian populace towards migrants. The probability that there is no future for me, even with a university degree, is still high.

The next morning, Thursday, April 6th, I received another phone call, this time from Buba. "Big bro, did the twins call you? Buba asked, worryingly. "Yeah, they called me yesterday." I replied, with a low voice. "I don't think this is a good idea. They could have told me, "I have a place here where I work, I can ask my boss to allow them to stay until they get a job here in Lecco, or in Milan." I was not even thinking of that yesterday. "You are right Buba! But now I think it's too late, they already bought their tickets. Let them see things for what they are with their own eyes, then, they will decide definitely, like you and I, and many others did." Buba sighed, then said, "that is true, experience is a teacher, they will learn. Germany doesn't give documents to anyone from sub-Saharan Africa. Many Gambians are sent

from Germany and many people call me for help, I offer them hospitality and help them get a job. Now many of them are living here in Lecco and working. Anytime they change their mind they can call me. Your family is my family, I helped people whom I didn't even know when I was in Gambia."

Buba is a son of my great-uncle, his father is an uncle to both my parents. My maternal grandmother is a sister to Buba's father, likewise my paternal grandmother. Not obviously from the same mother and father but it's a very big family and they were all relatives. My parents gave birth to seven children, all of us were born in the same compound in which Buba was also born. The compound was a property of Buba's paternal uncle, who was my great-uncle, a brother to Buba's father. This makes Buba my first cousin.

I went to Milan Central train station and welcomed my brother to Milan, a city that is not a stranger to me since at the time I was living in Pavia where I was studying in the university. We took some pictures and took them back to Pavia to show them my university and where I live. In the evening, I took them back to Milan, in Lampugnano to take their Flixbus to Germany. Lots of more pictures were taken before their departure. Because we did not know when we would see each other again.

Two years later, Sanna, one of the twin brothers called me on the phone telling me that he was coming back to Italy because his asylum was denied by the German authorities due to the Dublin regulation and he was asked to leave the country. He refused to leave and started playing hide-and-seek with the authorities until one day, the day before he called me, he was caught and was given a final warning to leave the country, in addition, they put a red stamp on all the documents the Germans gave him. With the red stamp, any police or

immigration officer who stops him would have the right to arrest him and take him to the nearest deportation camp. He was told this by the authorities, only they didn't tell him to which country he would be deported upon apprehended. He was worried he would be deported back to Gambia. I knew he had his asylum approved here in Italy but at the time I didn't know with the Dublin regulation, authorities can only deport you to Italy, so I didn't know what to advise him. "Call Buba and take a train immediately, flush all the documents with red stamps in the toilet. Did you have the Italian permit of stay in your possession?" I was worried for him. "No, I left it with one of my friends in Italy so the Germans wouldn't know I had an approved asylum in Italy." This is an ignorance we all felt victims of. We have no idea a fingerprint recognition system existed. We think by hiding the Italian permit of stay we can seek another asylum in Germany and the authorities would not know. "What about your Gambian passport?" I asked him. "They put red stamps on that too." He replied. "Oh my God, then you have to be very careful while using public transportation, especially on the train from Germany to Italy. Did you call Buba?" I asked. "Yes, I did call him. He gave me the green light." He replied. "Great, I said. I will call him, too."

Sanna came back to Italy and stayed in Buba's house until he got a job with the help of Buba through the people he knew. Sainey, the other twin brother stayed in Germany because he had a knee injury while playing football and he was told by authorities that he will be updated on his asylum process after his knee surgery.

Buba came to Italy in 2014, he lived in a shelter in Ballabio, Lecco, a town located north of Lombardy 54.8km from Milan. Life in the shelter, Buba always said, was so boring for an almost professional

sportsman. In Gambia Buba played football so well that peers gave him various nicknames, "Cristiano Ronaldo", some called him Skills for his great talent with the soccer ball. The name Skills is the one that stands since Buba, not only football, but also very good at playing tennis.

While in Lecco at the asylum shelter, Buba goes on regular jogging around town. One morning he decided to take a longer jog and a change of route. On this new route, he discovered a sports centre and he stopped by to watch a tennis training game between two people. After the game, while Buba was still standing outside against the wire fence, one of the contestants waved at Buba as he was about to continue his jogging. He waved back and stopped as he noticed the man was approaching him from inside trying to initiate a conversation. "You like tennis?" The man asked Buba. "Yeah, I like it, in fact I play the game even when I was in my country." Buba replied, smiling. "Oh, really?" The man asked with surprise written all over his face. "Would you like to come inside and play a couple of games with us?"

Those couple of games changed Buba's life for almost ten years. He was hired by the manager of the sport centre as a caretaker of the centre and a trainer and coach for the game of tennis. He receives a six hundred euros monthly salary; he is given an apartment inside the centre for free of charge. Buba earned more than two thousand euros a month because he coached wealthy businessmen, lawyers, people of high socioeconomic status and he charged each thirty euros per hour. Since he loves playing the game, he trains four to five people a day. Having an appointment of his own, he helped lots of migrants who, either were kicked out of asylum shelters upon exhausting their stay or received a denial asylum response and either they

asked to leave, or they leave on their own, or they lose their job and have no means to pay the rent. Sanna is one of these people. Buba took them under his wings and asked his students if they knew someone who was looking for employees and if they could help his friends with accommodations. He helped numerous people riddled with despair, to this day, most of these people are working and living in their own houses thanks to Buba.

I write Buba's story because, one, somehow, I'm benefitting from his humane gesture. Right now (as I am writing this) I'm living in Sanna's apartment which Buba helped him find through his boss. I always come here whenever I quit another job, something that is increasingly becoming my claim to fame. Two, because three days ago, September 13th, 2023, Buba called me asking for my help. "I want you to browse the internet for apartments for me." He said. I was watching the news, but I turned off the TV, thinking, I can watch it later on YouTube. "What happened, Buba? Is everything okay?" I asked. I was so worried. "My boss, the manager of the sports centre, asked me to leave the apartment no later than the 1st of October 2023. He said his boss, the owner of the centre, said I am fired, and I should leave. I cannot verify this information because I have no direct contact with the owner of the place." Buba told me. "But why? Did you quarrel with the manager?" I asked. "We quarrel all the time because at the end of each day he jokingly said to me, "today you made this amount of money" which I hate so much, but now it's not anymore, a play fight but it is getting serious. His son turned eighteen and started coaching other people. Since I have way more customers than him, he and his son started causing problems. They always comment on how much I get a day, compared to how much his son earns a day. Last week he said I should stop

coaching and only work as a caretaker. I told him that if I stop coaching then I will quit the job because I cannot live off six hundred euros a month. The quarrel continued to a stage that it turned physical. I was quarrelling with father and son and suddenly, the father slapped me, and I slapped him back in front of his son. He said I should resign, and I told him I am not resigning unless they lay me off. Because I know I have a life contract and getting fired for no genuine reason, I have some advantages, I know this because I have spoken with one of the lawyers that I'm coaching." Buba explained. "I agree with what the lawyer said. Do not resign voluntarily, wait until they themselves fire you. I will be working tomorrow but on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays I am always home, you can stop by and let's look online together for some houses." I said. On Thursday morning, October 14th, 2023, Buba came home when Sanna was at work, I browsed the internet, from one site to the other looking for cheap apartments, we took some private numbers and started calling them one after the other but to no avail. At three thirty in the afternoon, I told Buba to come back on Saturday because I had to attend the driver's license lessons. That night Buba called me and told me that the manager asked him to go with him to the labor union office and he was given some documents that he did not understand and wanted me to see them. I told him to bring them on Saturday because I was studying at the time.

Early Saturday morning while I was standing on the balcony of the third floor on which Sanna's apartment is, looking at the traffic underneath, something I do sometimes to have a clear knowledge about how the traffic of vehicles work since I was doing the driver's license. Preparing myself for when I will get my own car and start

driving. I saw Sanna walking to a car, and I saw Buba and his Senegalese friend in a red SUV and Sanna was given something that I couldn't see clearly from above. When Sanna was inside, he told me that Buba and his Senegalese friend gave him some cooking ingredients and they are going to the supermarket to buy some more because today they will spend the whole day here with us. Some minutes passed and the two men rang the doorbell. Inside, they brought with them some sugar for brewing green tea, some French fries among other food items and cooking ingredients. Buba was holding some papers, he threw them at me as he entered the living room and sat on the couch beside me with a big sigh. "I want you to look at these, I want to know what is written on them." Before I started reading, Abdul, Buba's Senegalese friend, joined us in the living room and we greeted each other and shook hands. And he said to me, "So, in order to see you, one must come to this house? Eh Lamin, you know that it is not illegal taking a walk around town." We both laughed. Abdul and Sanna are coworkers at a welding company in Ballabio, some hundred meters from the sport centre where Buba is living and working. In fact, at lunch break, Sanna and Abdul go to Buba's apartment to cook lunch and eat all three together before they resume work. "I don't understand, in the end you resign voluntarily?" I asked Buba. "No, we only went to the labor union because my boss said we must talk to someone there about how things were going at work." He replied. "Buba, but this document is a resignation letter sent to your employer and a copy to you, this means you are no longer working with them since yesterday October 15th, 2023. What happened at the office when you went there with your boss, here it is written "voluntary resignation" which means you have resigned on your own, and

that you are not fired by them. Do you know what that means? It means you have no benefits from your employer." I told Buba. "How is that possible?" He asked me. "I have no idea, but it seems you have been played, you have been fooled, you have been tricked into a voluntary resignation." I said. "He is, Lamin." Abdul said. "I always told Buba, don't trust these white people, they only follow their interests, they don't care about your friendship, once their interest is finished on you, you are nobody to them. He said his boss is his friend and I told him he is there to work, not for friendship. I have worked in that metal mechanic company for fifteen years now, Buba came to that town and found me there, I have no Italian friends at work because I know my colleagues are not my friends and I don't even want an Italian to be my friend. My father brought me here when I was only five years old. I attend Italian schools and I had friends among them, but they are people of interest, since I know that I only befriend Africans and when Buba came to that town I was happy, I always told him to be careful with these Italians. What kind of a friend does this to their friend? Now where are they? The ones who helped you help your friends. I told you they helped you because the interest was that you were their coach. Now that your boss's son replaced you, their interest is not in you anymore, none of them will be willing to help you like they were, now you have to turn to your African brothers for help. I told you this that one day these white people you think are your friends and trust them so much will betray you and you will only have your African brothers to look after you. I know this because I see scenarios like this all the time." Abdul stated. "You don't understand." Buba said. "Okay, I can take that. I don't understand, just like I never understood anything." Abdul replied. "What I'm I going to do now, Lamin?" Buba cried. "On

Monday morning go talk to a lawyer, maybe it's not all too late." I told Buba. Abdul started talking without calling Buba's name and looking at him. "I told you; I told you. Remember when I even told you to stop posting photos on Facebook and Instagram and concentrate on your job. You never listen. You keep posting beautiful photos on social media. I told you that your behavior on social media is not helping your brothers in Africa. Now your biological brother is in Tunis trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea because he thinks you are living a perfect life in Europe with those photos you keep posting with your silly outfit." Buba laughed and said, "you are crazy, Abdul." Abdul and Buba are like Tom and Jerry, one minute they are fighting, the other minute they are friends again. "Buba, did you call the Pakistani guy for our cuscus?" Abdul asked. "No, I thought your mom is cooking for us tomorrow?" Buba replied. "Yes, but tonight we need dinner. Abdul said. "My mom is working tonight. I already told you." He added. "Ah, yeah, I remember you told me." Buba said. "She is old now; she should stop working this hard." Buba added, laughing. "Yeah, and you will feed his six children living in Africa? My mom is not like you, she came here and started working so hard, no friends, not even African friends. She skipped family gatherings to go to work. She takes extra jobs to send more money to relatives in Africa who live in poverty. Sometimes she worked even without a contract, even when she was undocumented. She ran from one job to the other even when she had no car. Half of her salary went to rent, now she bought a house with my dad. She never posts pictures of her cars, her house, her shoes, her clothes on social media. In fact, she doesn't even have a social media account. She always advises me to be very careful what I post on social media. She said what I post can mislead

people in Africa into thinking life in Europe is perfect, this can prompt many into trying to come to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. She said to me, "imagine someone in Senegal saw your beautiful picture of Europe and the next day he starts the journey to reach Europe and die either in the hot desert, or get killed in Libya or drown in the Sea, are you not the one who killed that person, indirectly?" This is why I stopped posting all together on social media. But you never listen to what I say. You keep saying that I don't understand. Now the Whiteman played you, and you have your brother in Tunisia, stuck. You see, I like Lamin, I have known him not long ago, but I like that he is not even on social media, he has no friends, if he is not at work, he is at home, if he's not at home he's at work. It is hard to believe he is African" Abdul stated. "I have my own shortcomings, Abdul. I'm quiet, I know what I want but I also have little patience. I have quit different jobs. Yes, I am African, but I am also Lamin, something I have never forgotten. I value friendship based on trust and compatibility; this is hard to find so I keep to myself. I have a Facebook page, but I use it exclusively to share my poems and read poems from other poets who are members of various poetry groups on Facebook. I post only one poem a month, never post a photo of mine since I deleted my old Facebook account in 2021. One of the reasons I closed that account is that I believe there are no true friends on Facebook, also I have the same exact belief as your mother: I don't want to be the reason for someone else's suffering.

Buba moved from Ballabio to live with us. In the living room, Sanna slept on the couch, Sainey and I slept on the sofa bed. In the bedroom, Sheriffo and Godfriano shared a bed and Buba slept in a chair. We shared the apartment, food, and privacy with Buba for some weeks until he bought a plane ticket

to The Gambia for a vacation. “Lamin, I will go to Gambia and relax beside my beautiful wife and two children in my beautiful compound until this stress is off my chest. It is not good for my health that I stay in Italy right now. I can feel the pain in my stomach all night long. It has been almost a month that I am not sleeping well. I need some emotional support from my wife and kids.”

Buba came back from Gambia in January of 2024. I showed him all the websites he could look for jobs, I also advised him to go to the job agencies and that if he is patient, he will get a job. Buba is a force, such a relentless human being. He did nothing other than going to job agencies leaving his curriculum and different jobs until February when he finally secured a job at a recycling company. “Lamin, I got a job, I went for a test yesterday and today I went to sign the contract at a recycling company. It is far from here but I will wake up at five o'clock so I can arrive on time. The salary is thousand five hundred euros for a beginner.” He told me excitedly. “Congratulations! I am so happy for you.

In mid-February, Godfrienzo brought his Nigerian countrymate to live with. Now we were seven people in a one-bedroom apartment. I looked for a house and found one in Mandello, not very far from Lecco. It is a single room in an apartment, I shared the living room, the kitchen and bathroom with a tenant from Cameroon and the landlord is Italian. I lived there for a month, from the fifth of March to the fifth of April, I was bailed by a co-worker who knew I was struggling to pay a four hundred euros single bedroom and he told me, “Lamin, I took a two-bedroom apartment in Cantù, fifteen minutes' drive from work, Orsenigo in the province of Como. I am in the process of bringing my wife to Italy, but she will be here next year. Why not you go live there because I will not live there until she is here. I will

continue living in the apartment given to me for free by our employer from 2018. The apartment is big, and it costs only five hundred euros a month, but you are not going to pay the rent alone. I will pay two hundred and fifty euros and you pay the other half plus the bills. I accepted the offer and now I have been living in Cantù since the fifth of April. I go to work on a small electric scooter. Come rain come shine. Sometimes I arrive at work all soaked with rainwater, sometimes I arrive with red eyes filled with insects. Every day I curse the driving licence school for not calling me yet for the test.

While I was living in Mandello, Sanna told me that the landlord gave them a notice that they should leave the house when the contract expires in February of 2025, so they were looking for apartments online but not in a hurry. And while I am lining here in Cantù I was on the phone with Sainey who told me that Bube found a house near where he is working and now, he is living with him, and that Sanna said if he is not able to find an apartment till February of next year, he will also join them. "This is life Sainey, you never know when you will need the help of others. Sanna lived with Buba when he came from Germany, he was ashamed of himself for depending on Buba. Buba lived in Sanna's apartment, and he was ashamed of himself for depending on Sanna, and now who knows. Be good to people while you are smiling, you may need them to wipe your tears."

THE MINIMUM WAGE

The taste of work still on my hands,
Still salty with my sweat as I try to
Barter bread with my well-being.
My feet touched the land, barefooted
In Sicily. Life gave me another chance
To keep kicking, I kick more rock than a
Baby in his mother's stomach. I followed
Trails of deceptive wind, coming from
Loud voices with hidden tongues.
I crisscross each Saharan sand grain;
I barely survived the Libyan crossfire;
I crossed the Mediterranean Sea
Just so everyone can have a piece
Of what I have earned. Bread received.
I passed the breadbasket. The
Minimum wage is a tiny pie, the
Landlord bites the bigger slice. And
That, is the opportunity cost of
Roofless night snores, even when
It snows. Like a cash cannon, I stood
At cash sending bureaus, shooting
Dead presidents as a way of passing
The breadbasket for my family back
Home to have a taste of my salty sweat.
I work for hours, peeling me off my aura,
So many can devour, even the foul ones.
Sending bills to pay their bills till I'm
Short of bills. I curb my ego to feed
The hungry, the needy, the greedy.
Feeding mouth, upon mouth with my
Open mouth. Sometimes I forget I
Have my own hungry mouth to feed.
The taste of work still on my hands,
Still salty with my sweat as I try to
Babysit grown-ups in corporate suits.

I deal with bosses like a pimp would
Deal with a pregnant prostitute: cut
Them off, without a numbing needle.
I'm never laid off. But I'm paid off. From
Boss to boss to boss to boss to boss
To boss to boss. Yet I'm paid in full.
I never quit a job, I only quit people.
When competition replaces compatibility,
Competence becomes blurred by the
Wrath of unwanted companionship.
Each boss swallowed the blue pill, I'm yet
To find a leader who makes the job
Interesting. They can't destroy me, I'm
Never created, yet I took the bitter pill
As they treat me like a fetus. Still I grow.
To keep my mind clean, I have to keep
My hands dirty, and I am not afraid of
The duty, even if the deal is deadly.
The taste of work still on my hands,
Still salty with my sweat as I try to
Abort the old self that won't allow the
Birth of the new self. What are the
Consequences of my digital footprint?
Finally, I shed from my old cocky self.
Fake pics, silly outfit, "perfect lifestyle".
It is indeed a sad world with happy faces,
Perfect on IG, yet I'm living couch to couch;
Plotting bugs, living house to house. Like a
Shepard of bedbugs for people living
Hand to mouth. Still I'm living app to app.
Selling lines, telling lies, taking lives.
Unknowingly. Of those who believe to
Buy the stories of a "perfect life in Europe".
My digital facade is being followed, it
Had trails of deceptive wind. My voice,
So loud. My tongue, hidden. A circle.
Victims. Some drowned, some traumatized.
Victims. My actions, my fault. News feed.

Victims. The new skin is my reserved self
That seeks no attention, no approvals.
It only feeds on the hidden rituals of
Capitalism that turns the world into a
Big public bathroom, everyone peeing
On their feet. You get a work, still you
Need a work, you skip family, you show up
For work, you running from work to work,
You never late for work, taking extra work
With no paperwork. My new brain breeds
Questionable questions, making some
Relatable relatives rationalize on
Rationality till their ego cease feeding
On the "news feed", and feeds on the
Echoes of the economy. Now we eat one
Another for a glorious minimum wage.

Chapter 8

The absence of tolerance is the opportunity that provides fertile soil for hatred to sprout bigger and stronger with deeper roots.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Sitting on a kitchen counter with my head buried in my phone, I gazed at the screen, lost for words, that writer's block everyone exposed to the keyboard experienced on a regular basis. My WhatsApp is opened, a text from Laura looking me right in the eyes as though it was asking me, "will you respond?" Laura is a woman, she was a roommate and landlord who rented to me a room in her house, located in the suburbs of Trento. At the time of the message, I was living in Lecco with my brothers because I had a job at a migrant shelter in Orsenigo, Como, and Laura was still suffering from a breakup from her ex-girlfriend, Irene, even though a year had passed since the romantic separation. Her WhatsApp message distracted me from the reality that surrounded me at that moment. "Bo yoro jang, I have downloaded an app on my phone, could you please help me understand it?" Saidou demanded. Bo yoro jang literally means someone from far away (Bo means from, yoro means a place, jang means far away) it translates, a foreigner. There is this joking relationship between Gambian and Malian migrants. We joke about which nation is farther away from Italy. Malians say, "to come to Italy from Gambia, you need to pass Senegal, then Mali, so, Gambians are the bo yoro jang." Gambians say, jokingly, "No, Malians are the bo yoro jang; you have

Mali, then Senegal, then Algeria, then Tunisia, Gambia, and then Italy." I got distracted from gazing at my phone. "Yes, bo yoro jang, let me see." I said to him as I took his phone from him and he pointed at the app on the screen of his cell phone, "this app!" He exclaimed, all excited. "Ah, this is a quiz app for a driver's license test. You know, earlier this month, October 10, 2023, I passed the test, let me see if I remember anything." I said. "Oh really, Saidou again exclaimed with passion, so now you can drive a car?" He asked. "Not really, I have only passed the theory test, now I'm waiting for the driving license school to call me so I can start lessons for the practical." I explained. "How many months would that take you?" Saidou asked. "It's six hours compulsory practice, this means an hour drive per day for a week. If I feel like I have learned, I could ask to book a date for an exam. I would drive around with an examiner and an instructor from the driving license school. If I pass the exam, I would be given my driver's license. If not, I would do more training." I explained. "Ah, I get it, would you help me get a license after you get yours?" He asked. "I can help you study the manual until you are ready to write the exam for the theory. With the practical, unfortunately I cannot be of great help because in order to teach someone how to drive on a public road, I must have ten years driving experience." He looked disappointed but then he said, "could we start studying the manual tomorrow?" Saidou is a very ambitious young man. "Well, I'm not working tomorrow but on Tuesday I will bring the manual, we can start the lessons, but first you need to understand the Italian language well enough to understand the manual and the quiz. Once you understand the topics very well from the manual, the quiz is just a walk in the park. I know this because I have seen many people spending more time on the

quiz app than they spend on the manual. I have prepared for the theory exam in two months. I knew the quiz was loaded with tricky questions and some Italian words that I have never heard of before, so I spent more time understanding in detail the arguments of the manual. I did only take a couple of quizzes or three before going to bed, the rest was repeatedly reading the manual for a month and half. When I started doing the quiz, I gave it my everything: time and energy." I said to him. "I will do the same, you will see." He said. "Let me try one test, surely I will have more than three errors." I said. "What happens if you have more than three errors?" He asked. "The quiz is composed of thirty questions; you answer by clicking on either the true or the false button. Out of the thirty questions you must at least answer twenty-seven currently. This means the maximum errors you can make in order to pass is three, more than three errors mean a failure." I explained. "Play! Play, let me see if you still remember it." He exclaimed. "Surely I will fail. Today is October 21, exactly eleven days since the last time I had opened the manual or the quiz app." I said as I read the first question on the screen. I ended the quiz after answering the thirtieth question. Four errors and twenty-six corrects. I gave Saidou his phone back and pulled out my own. WhatsApp is still open and the question, "when will you come to Trento?" Stared in my eyes. I typed, "sweetheart, you know I would take the next train to Trento just to comfort you if I was not working." I took a moment and thought of the message before sending it. I thought maybe that sounded a bit romantic and I have no intention changing the taste of Laura, she's not into men and she's still invested, emotionally, from the situation with her ex-girlfriend. Then I erased those words to avoid confusion and, I was not very sure she needed to talk to me in person in

Trento for emotional support or maybe she was just asking. So, I typed something different: "I will be in Trento, maybe, in a couple of weeks." And she replied, "Do you need accommodation?" And I replied. "If you have a place for me, I'll be happy, if not I will stay at my mom's (my Italian mother)." Then she replied, "there is always a place here for you." That puts my heart on defrost. Such a sweet soul Laura always is. Still sitting on the kitchen counter, lunch is smelling good as Abdullah stir up the sauce of spaghetti. The Pakistani guys make omelets with cheese and onions, and of course, lots of spice. Some more eggs, eighteen to be precise, boiling in a separate pot. Lassana making tuna salad: cutting onions, cucumber, washing the salad leaves and momentarily biting off pieces of omelet brunch he made earlier sitting on the kitchen counter next to me. I had on an apron, stained with lobster sauce even though I was not cooking but monitoring activities in the kitchen. I put it on to avoid getting my clothes dirty in case some food accident occurs in that busy kitchen of single young migrant men full of energy driven by high testosterone and youthfulness. Indulging the bustling kitchen life with happy young faces makes me so calm and content inside. So, I took my phone out and took some pictures of these young migrants.

At around 13:30, lunch was ready. All the food prepared was taken to the tables of the big lunchroom of the shelter. Everyone seated, those who cook, those who helped in the kitchen and those who just sat on the lunchroom couch and watched TV, around the tables. Two men from Mali and Ivory Coast stood behind a separate table where they served spaghetti and tuna salad on the same plates with a boiled egg on the sides. Pakistani people prefer omelets on their plates and only one guy from Nigeria was enjoying lobsters because he

bought them and cooked them separately from the food provided by the foundation responsible for that shelter in question. I started working with this foundation from mid-July of 2023. I like it that this migrant shelter allows migrants living there to buy their own food if they like and cook, also it doesn't serve almost-expired packaged food, brought to the shelter in a truck for migrants to involuntarily consume because they have no other alternatives. Here the foundation hired a chef who does the grocery based on the ingredients the migrants are used to eating in their countries of origin. On Mondays the chef goes to the supermarket for the grocery in bulk, on Wednesdays he goes to a nearby Pakistani store to buy seven kilos of steak, five cartons of chicken, spices, and cooks only dinner. For lunch, we the operators working there with the migrants, a daily lunch menu is prepared and pasted on the entrance to the kitchen. At midday one of us would go round checking who is present at the shelter at that moment and asking them if they will eat lunch. This is to be sure that the exact amount of ingredients needed for lunch on that specific day is provided so the disposal of food waste would be avoided or limited. After knowing how many people would eat lunch, we ask for volunteers from the migrants themselves to prepare the meal. Sometimes the volunteers are overwhelming, sometimes we have literally nobody to volunteer, in that case we either beg one of them who we know cooks very well or we cook something edible ourselves for them. I cook at home for my own consumption and sometimes I invite up to ten or sometimes twenty Italian friends over to eat at my house. I am not afraid to cook for myself or for twenty Italian friends, but when it comes to cooking for almost thirty young migrants at a shelter for work, I get nervous. When Saliou, one of my colleagues,

took a holiday from work and traveled to Africa after eight years in Italy without seeing his family, I learned to cook dinner at the shelter. I have learned quickly as Saliou tells me all the ingredients and measurements. Even when Saliou came back from Guinea after a month, I continued as a chef, it became almost my main task at the shelter, which I do not totally dislike because I love cooking especially, I like cooking for others, only I would like to do more than just cooking. I talked to my boss about it, and she told me that when I finally get my driver's licence, I would be given something else to do, like accompanying migrants to various appointments and doing the grocery. There are five operators at the shelter, three Italian women, Celia, Silvia and our boss, Irene, two African men, Saliou, and me. I am the only one without a driver's licence. I took my apron off, grabbed a fork and went to fight for my plate. At the table I sat between Muctarr, a boy from Gambia and another from Mali. Lately there are a lot of migrants from Mali living in the shelter: Lassana, Saidou, Abdullah were new arrivals a couple of months ago along with a guy from Sierra Leone; a couple of weeks ago there were also five new arrivals, one from The Gambia and the rest from Mali. In total there are seven Malians out of the twenty-two single male adults in the shelter. There are also three families living in another building block, next to the one housing single male adults. Out of the three families, only one is having two little children, the other two are each composed of a husband and a wife. We all compliment the cooks and enjoy our meal. "I haven't seen my boy today, the short one from Sierra Leone, I've been looking for him all morning." Muctarr Said to me, worriedly. "Ah, Albert always does that. It's a routine, he goes to see some of his friends in town and comes back after lunch." I said. "And he is not

having lunch?" He asked. "His roommates kept a plate for him. During our headcounts we always include him because like some other guys when they are going out, they come to the office and ask us to keep lunch for them because perhaps it will be after lunch by the time they return to the shelter." I explained. "So, what happens if..." Muctarr was interrupted by one of the new Malians with whom he came a couple of weeks ago from the Red Cross emergency shelter for migrants. "Look! Look! He laughed, "Are they in your country, too?" The Malian guy asked, showing a video on his phone to Muctarr. They both belly laughed and Muctarr said, "if you keep watching these videos, you will be foolish and damned, just like these dirty people." I didn't see what it was, I didn't look because I was still so invested in the conversation with Muctarr, and I was ready to answer his question because I knew exactly what he wanted to ask. "He is showing me a video of two French men kissing near that famous Iron tower in Paris." I stayed quiet for some time. "Are there many homosexuals here in Italy?" He asked. Yes, I said, even the wind and the trees are gay." He laughed. "You are funny." He said. "What do you think about them, I mean the gay people?" He added. "What do I feel about them? Just like black people, I feel nothing." I said without looking at him. "But do you agree with them?" He insisted. "Agree? No. Just like black people, I don't agree with them." I said, this time looking him in the eyes. "Now you are being ridiculous. You don't agree with black people? And you are black?" He said, laughing. "First of all, I don't have to be black to disagree with black people. By the way, what's the difference between a black person and a gay person if you take away skin color and sexuality?" I asked. "You cannot compare the two. Even the blind knows that the sky is up; everyone knows these people are not pure."

He stated. "The blind knows that the sky is up, but the wise knows that the sky is also under his feet. The world is spinning around, my brother, and everything is upside down. Someone is living below you, and they are experiencing the darkness of the night while we are enjoying lunch at this moment." I debated. "Bro. It seems like you are in favor of these people." He said. "Look brother, I have traveled the world, mentally and physically. I have met black people for the first twenty-eight years of my life, I do not agree with most of them, I respect them all as humans though I do not understand them; I have met Arab people, I respect them as human beings but I do not agree with them or understand them; I have met Europeans, I respect them as human beings but I don't agree with them or understand them; I have met Asian people, Jewish people, gay people, feminists, I have met basically all kinds of people, I respect everyone as human beings but I do not agree with most of them and I do not understand them. I treat everyone with respect and compassion. I understand that the first step towards compassion is not racial, religious, sexuality, gender, nationality, or any of those many things that are meant to separate us, the first step towards compassion is the understanding that we all struggle in one way or another. I may not understand people because perhaps that's human nature, we don't understand ourselves in the first place let alone understanding each other but I understand that with compassion we could at least coexist by respectful ignoring one another. I love humans for who they are. Never forget that we are all humans, and we are humans first before we are blacks, Europeans, Jews, Arabs, homosexual, or heterosexuals. A pregnant woman knows there is a human living in her belly, she doesn't know, at least initially, if it is male or female, terrorists or a Nobel

Prize winner, a Muslim, Atheist, or agnostic, rich or poor... life comes first for me, the rest is not important to me. The only thing that makes me cut someone out of my life is if that person has a bad attitude towards other people." Muctarr went silent for some seconds, almost a minute. "I think you have a good point." He said in a low voice without looking at me. "I mean, how would it make you feel if someone hates you and thinks you are not normal or not pure only because you are black?" I asked. "I would be sad and angry because it is not true, and it is stupid." He said, again in a low voice. "Exactly, I said, it would make someone else sad and angry. Many people, gay, black, women take their lives because they are so sad and depressed because society is so hostile and unkind towards them, not because they are not human beings but just because they are blacks, gay, women." I explained. "That is sad. It just sounds strange to me that two men or women can be naked in the same bedroom, touching and pleasing each other. I cannot just wrap my head around that vision." He said. "It would not be strange to you if someone had not made you believe that that interaction is abnormal and evil, when in reality it is just two humans who are showing love to each other, just like you, as a man, show love to a woman, get naked in the same bedroom with her, touching and pleasing each other." I said. "You make a lot of sense; I have to be honest. I am not, however, sure if it would be easy for me to accept homosexual people." He said. "You don't have to accept people to respect them, you can disagree while respecting and allowing them to exercise their rights as humans to live in a peaceful environment where they do not feel threatened by your disagreement, it is called tolerance. If everyone in Italy was intolerant, you might have been dead somewhere in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea.

What if an Italian person walks into this building and starts shooting at us because we are blacks, and he doesn't agree with our existence in his home country? The same way you pray that never happens, is the same way someone who is different from you also prays that their lives are not threatened by those who do not agree with them. If, in reality, every one of us is different, why not we practice tolerance and kindness in our daily reciprocal interactions to make our daily struggles a bit easier for each other? This is one of the things needed to be taught in asylum shelters, tolerance, kindness, and respect, by those who are in favor of illegal immigration and are working directly with migrants. But in this country, no one wants immigration, those who pretend to love it are only using migrants for profit. If those who are in favor of open ports truly are into the wellbeing of migrants and not just in for profit and seeing immigrants as products, then they would work harder for their correct integration through information and education of Immigrants about Italian society, not just the language that not even the Italians care about. I think open ports and hospitality are not enough because what kind of society are you creating if you force tens of thousands of Immigrants into an already existing society that doesn't want them for the color of their skin and you keep them in asylum shelters for months or years without preparing them, giving them the right tools through the right information, getting them ready to coexist with the locals. Many sell drugs after the shelter ends or even before, some steal from stores because nothing concrete is being provided to them by the shelter. They leave the shelter still not disillusioned. They still have the wrong ideas about living and socioeconomic conditions of Europe. And hence, those who are not in favor of open ports and

illegal immigration, understandably, believe they are right in standing against illegal immigration. The actions of some migrants in the Italian society after the shelter only exacerbate the hatred toward immigration through the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkan routes." Muctarr listened attentively as I rant. "I would love to talk more with you. I think there are many things I don't know, and I would love to know, and I believe you can teach me a lot." I looked through the window and saw some Malians gathering outside and one of them holding a soccer ball. "Hey guys, I shouted, "we need to wash the dishes first, then we can go play some soccer." After the dishes were washed, I went into the office to write some stuff down while the boys went on playing soccer on a basketball court. There is no soccer field, so they cut the overgrowth in the old basketball court and made it a soccer field without grasses but hard concrete. When it rains, they don't play because the court becomes slippery.

ESCAPING THE IDENTITY OLYMPICS

Listen to woke toxic poet with his
stable truth, stapled on terrified mind
Imprisoned in my own imagery
Trying to escape the picture
Screaming...
'Change your pace'
my shadow is warning me
I am as mean as the clock hand
hanging on a prison wall. I'm buried in self-bully
Screaming...
Constantly knocking on heaven's door, but death
rejected me before I drown in Jehovah's teardrop
I'm scarred but not scared of shard souls
Old souls are a dancing lizard tail, no need to be
scared,
my soul is a tomb flower, a sweet premature insulin
Who is to disorient woke toxic poet?

Chapter 9

You don't have to be black, white,
woman, man, religious, or non-religious
to experience happiness and sadness, all
you need is to be human.

ANOTHER EID AWAY FROM HOME

June 24, 2023, at around 09:30 in the morning I drift off to sleep after a long night shift that just ended at 08:00 in Centro SAI, on via Mattei. Centro SAI is a refugee camp in Bologna that hosts almost five hundred migrants from different countries in Africa and Asia. My phone started vibrating repeatedly and noisily on a cupboard beside my tiny single bed. I looked at the screen and it was Lamin Camera calling. I picked it up and started walking outside the bedroom, across the living room to the balcony because a roommate of mine with whom I was sharing the single room woke up by the loud vibration and was staring at me like, "dude! Pick your damn phone and go talk somewhere else, I'm trying to get some sleep." He is a twenty-three-year-old Italian boy, his name is Marco and at the time he was working as a security guard at different supermarkets for a security company called SecurItalia. He had night shifts mostly, occasionally he had also morning and afternoon shifts. I don't like him at all. Not because he is Italian but because Marco is the worst roommate you could ever imagine, his half of the room is all messed up with clothes littered all over the place: on the bed, under the bed, more pile all over the floor, among the pile are also old useless electric bikes, dirty boxer shorts, dirty socks, ruined charger cables, empty

shopping bags, opened suitcases with more clothes in them, opened wardrobe doors with more clothes hanging out of them. Sometimes I come home from work and find a pair of his dirty underwear beside my bed and kick them off towards his half, when he comes home, I would complain but it kept happening, so I stopped kicking them and started throwing them out the window using a broomstick. When he comes home from work, he leaves his pistol on the dining table in the living room with bullets scattering all over the table. He never cleans, neither his side of the room, nor the kitchen counter when he finishes cooking, and he is a damned messy cook. He always stole my food to cook. I kept threatening him that I would call the police if he didn't stop stealing from my grocery. "Look Marco, I'm a refugee in this country. You have your parents just some kilometres away from Bologna, if things go bad, financially, you could easily call your parents and the problem will probably be solved. I, on the other hand, don't have no one to turn to, financially. We both work and receive similar amount monthly, and who knows, as an Italian citizen maybe you even earn more than I do, we both pay four hundred euros monthly rent, I have a family back home to which I send at least a hundred euros monthly, and other expenses, it is not fair that you also steal food from my mouth. If this should continue you will leave me with no other choice but to call the police on you." I don't know if it was out of sympathy or fear of the police, but he stopped stealing my food. And I feel sorry for him, sometimes when we are both home at night, I make a plate for him when I cook dinner.

On the balcony I spoke with Lamin Camera. "We, the Gambian association in Trento, are organizing a party to celebrate Eid AL Adha on July 1st in Trento with all the Gambians, would you like to come party

with us? He asked. There will be a lot of meat and a DJ set. It will start at around five, towards six o'clock, and will finish after midnight." I thought about it for a few seconds. "One minute let me see my work schedule." I said as I ran back inside and fish for a timesheet inside my backpack. I grabbed it, pulled it out and ran back to the balcony. "I'm working on Friday night, and I will finish on Saturday morning. It is going to be tough; I will be exhausted but I will try to catch the train at nine o'clock and arrive in Trento at one o'clock. I will sleep a couple of hours at my mom's and come to the party around five o'clock." I said. "OK then, we see at the party, bye. Oh, each participant must pay twenty euros for the cost of meat and some food items. I will pay your quota if you do not mind, you could refund me when you will be at the party." I could not turn down the invitation because Eid to us is like Christmas which everyone celebrates around family and friends to feel the sense of connection, the sense of family and share the peace and oneness through food, drink, and laughter. Eid in a foreign land, far away from home and family is sad. Having the opportunity to be invited to an Eid party and the opportunity to be around people from your culture and country is a blessing in itself. If I was working on that day, I would take a leave, just to be with people and not spend that day in my single bed with Marco.

I woke up as the train made a sudden stop, I opened my eyes, in front of me sat a young lady, I looked past her to see people standing at the entrance of the train with their luggage trying to exit the train. I looked out the window and saw "Trento" written on the blue board. I hurried on my feet and snatched my backpack from the cabin above me and sped to the exit of the train before its doors were locked and left for another town. I made it out of the train and went to the bus stop, I took bus number six to

Villazzano, a fraction of Trento where my mum's house is located.

My phone alarm went off waking me up. I looked at the screen and it was 16:45. I have been sleeping for two and half hours, but they weren't enough, I was still very tired. I got up, went to the toilet to wash my face then dressed up.

At the park I could hear reggae music playing from a distance, but I couldn't see anyone. The public park is huge and hilly. I followed the sound of the music till I saw a group of people and I assumed it was a group of Gambians. I walked closer and sure enough it was a crowd of Gambians, some dancing, some grilling the BBQ meat, some cooking jollof rice. I greeted everyone, refunded Lamin Camera for the twenty euros he paid as my contribution quota for the party, and then I joined the ones playing freestyle with a soccer ball. It was a typical African party: chicken, banana, watermelons, lots of sugar. I occasionally filled my cup with some Coca-Cola and other sugary drinks. I went to the DJ to connect my Bluetooth and play my music because I heard it was an open DJ, anyone with good music can connect and play his music. After fifteen minutes my phone is disconnected because they said I only listen to music from the mid-1800s, music that no one listens to now.

We ate lots of meat and rice, and everyone had a good time. I helped the ladies, Italian wives of some Gambian guys, babysit their little children. Many photographs were taken, many conversations were made, many laughter, many jokes were cracked. The music stopped at around eight o'clock in the evening. I heard the park authorities told organizers that music couldn't go on later than nine o'clock. Either because of that or because by that time, no one cared about the music anyway. Everyone was busy in group conversations. I have met a boy who

was new to Trento, like many new migrants from Gambia living in Trento who came to the town after January of 2016, he doesn't know who I was. "You are also living in Trento?" He asked. "This is the intellectual, we put our money together and send him to the university so he could be the next dictator of our country. He went to university near Milan in 2016. You don't know him; you are new to Trento. He was the vice president of our association." Muhammed Drammeh, the president of The Gambian association in Trento, told him before I could even reply to the boy. "Which side in Gambia do you come from?" The boy asked. "From the town where all the madmen of the Gambia are born. He is from Bakau. The only person from that crazy town whom I know that is not physically fighting with everyone and insulting the private parts of peoples' parents." Again, Muhammed replied as if I have no mouth. In The Gambia, in general, there are very bad insults, especially in my hometown, Bakau. For them EFF you and EFF your parents are not hurting enough for an insult. They use horrible ones like, "I will put pepper and salt in your mother's vag***, I will tear your mother's vag*** into pieces, I will force you back into your mother's vag***, your mother's red vag***, I will cut off your father's pe*** and put it in your aunt's vag***..." mothers receive most of the insults because people in The Gambia have huge respect for their parents but even greater respect for our mothers, I think that is true for Africans in general. They use private parts because people there are hypersensitive about private parts. Insulting someone's parents' private parts is very painful to us, that could get you hurt, or even killed. I love conflict but I hate violence. The only time, in my whole life, I physically fight someone is only when they insult my parent's private parts. I am ready to be killed if someone insults my parents in

that fashion. I make sure that person doesn't insult anyone again in their lives. I remember playing soccer and kicking a boy and he fell to the ground, upon getting up he said the unspeakable. A friend of mine who knew me very well said to him, "run, you are dead." I caught up with him while his back was against the wall, I ran top speed and smashed his chest on the wall with my heel. He fell to the ground unconscious. "I have my mouth, Muhammed, I can talk for myself." I said. "What advice can you give me?" He demanded. "I don't know if I am the right person to give you advice." I replied. "Why not L.? If you don't give him advice, who else will. You must give advice, not only to the newcomers but even to us who came here before you." Saff said. "Well, this is not great advice but try to integrate. Try to get to know people here in Italy. Friends are like a good meal, choosing the right friends is like preparing the meal. Be picky, a chef knows how to cook with no salt, and low fat. Cut the fat from the meat, let your table have enough plates for good people, no bacon, some people are swine. Buon appetito. Be wise, watch people. Avoid being nobody. To risk being nobody could be detrimental to your mental health. Being nobody is when you don't integrate into the country in which you are living, people don't know you because the Italians don't want to know you anyway, and the Gambians are worried about their own lives. So, you live here for five, ten or however many years and you know nobody, and nobody knows you. One day you want to go to The Gambia for a holiday because you think you have people there. You arrive and realize nobody knows you there. A stranger in your own town, and in reality, you yourself don't know anyone there because the friends you once had there ten years ago have moved somewhere else, the kids who grow up now don't know you because they were just

babies when you left. Once you arrive in town everyone starts asking, "who is this?" They look at you and you look at them as complete strangers. You realize you are nobody in Italy and you are nobody in The Gambia. To avoid this, know people here, show yourself, be open to people. Not everyone in Italy is racist and not everyone of us is a good person. We have liars amongst us, we have criminals amongst us, we have thieves amongst ourselves. Amongst us are also good people, honest people, hardworking people who are not interested in cunning anyone. This is because we are also humans, like other human beings of different skin color, different nationality, different socioeconomic status. We have feelings, negative and positive: we are here laughing, tomorrow we might be crying at someone's funeral. This means we can experience happiness and sadness. All I said here are characters of human beings, you don't have to belong to a certain ethnic group, race, nationality, gender, to have these traits, all you need to be is to be human." I explained. "That was a hell of an advice, I took note of everything you said." The boy said, thanking me. Then the conversation became a series of stories of experiences of some Gambian guys who went to The Gambia and almost nobody knows them. At midnight we were done cleaning the area of the park where the party took place. Some people went to a three-day reggae festival in a car; Lamin Camera and his wife drove me home and then went home, not very far from where I slept. I deactivated my phone alarm Clock and went to bed; my eyes were already closing, and I was yawning while I was already in bed trying to reply to an apology WhatsApp message from one of my Italian lady friends who I was supposed to meet that afternoon before the party, but she had a change of plans, and we couldn't meet.

Sunday afternoon at the train station while I was buying my tickets back to Bologna, I met a Samba, he is a singer and was also present at the party the day before. "Boy L., you are going back to Milan?" He asked as he approached me. "Bologna." I rectify him. "Ah, now you live in Bologna?" He asked. "Yeah, since March of this year." I said. "L., is there any town in Italy where you haven't lived yet?" He asked again. "Today you are in Milan, tomorrow in Turin, the next day in Bologna." He added. "Because I always have shitty bosses who are the complete opposite of what a leader should be, and as you know very well that I have a short temper and no patience. I look for another job when they start to act like idiots, and I always find one in a completely different town." We talked as we walked towards platform two to take a train to Bologna Centrale. He took the same train even though he's stopping at Rovereto, the first stop from Trento. "Are you still working as a translator?" He asked. "Yeah, I do it sometimes, but it is not my main job as it was in 2015 here in the Trentino region." I replied. "Oh, I remember when I was still living in the shelter in Marco, that small town in the outskirts of Rovereto, I used to see you come almost every day to work as a translator, you probably won't remember me." He said looking on the ground with a nostalgic gaze, as though the ground was a time machine that was projecting motion pictures from those memories. "I confess, like many other brothers who lived in Marco refugee camp, I don't remember you. I am a little donkey." I said, to auto-critique myself and avoid being defensive. "But is your refugee status approved?" I asked because about ninety percent of Gambians get their asylum denied and it is one of the main concerns of Gambians and migrants in general. "Yeah, thank God now I got my documents. My first attempt was denied, I didn't give up, my

second and third appeals were also denied. I was asked to leave the shelter since my first attempt was denied. The second attempt was hard bro. I had nowhere to rest my head. I slept on the streets of Rovereto, early in the morning I went lawyer hunting, I almost reached the deadline before I could find a lawyer who was willing to take my case. At night I would rap myself to sleep, that is how I have learned to rap because when you are quiet brothers think you are sleeping, they steal your belongings, clothes, shoes, blankets. But saying that human beings are equal is an insult to some people. We love to say Italians are infidels and will all go to hell but bro, I swear to God if we don't change our attitude, we will all die and go to hell and nonbelievers will die and walk past us while they go to heaven. An Italian elderly lady met me in the freezing cold street while she was taking her morning walk and gave me a room in her apartment. Since I was always rapping because it became a hobby, she said to me, "you are always singing, are you an artist?" I thought it was a disturbance to her quiet environment. "No, I sing because where I used to sleep my stuff is always stolen when I was quiet. If it disturbs you, I will stop." He said. "No, no, no... actually I like to hear you sing. I know some African singers, if you want, I can introduce you to them." He added. "Bro, that's how I met this group of African rappers here and I started rapping to the mic in a studio. She helped me get a full-time job. On my off days I went to the studio to pursue a career in music. Now here I am, touring within Italy to perform at African parties and events while maintaining my job. Now I see these new arrivals posting lies on Facebook about the lifestyle they never live. I look at them and say, "You don't know life, you don't know suffering. Bro, if they suffer the way I did, the suffering will humble them. I have been kicked, I

have received punches in my most defenceless state, violently attacking someone in his sleep says everything about that attacker's life. It's cowardly. I have been pinched; I have received beatings when I was just an innocent child of some mother who doesn't know the lifestyle her son is living in a foreign country. But I kiss the ground as they hit me, leaving me defenceless. They push me, they tease me, they kill the old me. Each hardship they inflicted on me makes me realize who I really am and makes me question myself if I want to live my life like that. I promised myself never to see myself ever again in that lowest of the lowest. I would do whatever it takes to stay on my feet." He finished explaining as he reached for his backpack while the train stopped at the Rovereto train station. He stood up, shook my hand, and walked off the train. I watched him take the stairs that lead to a subway. I thought of his story all through the journey to Bologna, as though I have no painful past myself, very similar to his story.

THE LAST TEARDROP

Kick me, hit me, kill me!
A web of threads clouding in my
Skull, trying to push me forward
While my shadow pulls my backwards
As it revisits my troubling past
Where pain awaits me in plain sight.
I refrain not in this web of a war zone,
Cutting flesh from darkest of hearts.
My spell and their wizards eclipsed,
I flinch not, this is a war, am a soldier,
My soul is dying from all the efforts.
I rectify my sanity and then baptize
my soul in flames for an illusive payroll.
They're lost fools with medieval mindset;
I am a found wisdom, drinking from a
Cup of talent and traumatic lessons.
The corporate market is the new
squatter camp, no loophole for the
hungry mouths on the unemployment
line. Lining up to be hired into the
Part of the population that was born
Just to pay the rent and die alone.
Kiss me, tease me, beat me!
These intimate verses come from my lungs,
now I am carving out these metaphors
of my chaotic dance to fight for my plate.
Seeing myself in scenes that I deny,
Wondering where I am standing, while
My standing keeps wandering itself in
Streams where I sink, as I try to float.
It is a war zone of the self that I have
Found multiple times; self that I have
Have lost twice as much, to reasoning.
The tragedy of this comedy keeps
Congratulating the fighter in my soul.

I am sinking in my thinking, with tears
In my eyes. I see many begging for a
Life, less glorious; I am willing to die
For a life of glory. My story is not a
Fairy tale. It involves knives, bullets,
Bombs, blood, sleepless nights, overthinking.
My past is a voodoo power - traumatic;
my present is a juju artist - optimistic.
This Black Magic leaves me in dilemma.
Push me, pinch me, punch me!
I am still forking fools from hell's doom;
snatching flesh to separate them from
Bones. My soul cried, waiting for someone
To say, "You are amazingly strong."
I know my mental strength is way more
potent than my physical strength.
Am dying, suffering in silence. Pulling
The thread of web in my head as a line,
And my talent as the hook. Impatiently
Waiting for sharp teeth in shallow waters
To take a bite. Still waiting for someone
To give me a Spark. Just a spark. And I will
Light the fire in me and set myself ablaze.
To the other person, I'm just lazybones.
This is more frustrating than my heartbeat
In this battlefield with the self. My homework
Needs framework to create more fireworks.

Chapter 10

It is more humane to show your emotions than to brag about your expertise, express your opinions and your philosophy.

BORN A SLAVE, DIE IN TRIBAL BATTLEFRONT

On a couch, facing a TV, turned off. Beside me to the right, sat Abdul chain watching some TikTok reels on his smartphone. Sainey and his twin brother, Sanna, sat on another couch to my left facing the door to the balcony. Both, like Abdul, had their faces burned in their cell phones watching various African drama groups. I was holding a book between my palms and my face, surrounded by loud noise. I started a chapter minutes before the boys got home from the supermarket, so I felt like finishing the chapter before fully engaging in the conversation that they were not having. The internet and social media, indeed, have an immense impact on social decline. Soon G. Fall entered the room and sat in the little space left between me and Abdul. He also has his maximum volume on his cell phone. He greeted me with a handshake before free falling all his heavy weight on the couch, like a ton of potato. It was hard to read with all the rowdy around me, but this is just a typical African refugee household, not my first experience since I am making a living by working with refugees and asylum seekers for more than three years and I lived in various asylum shelter as a refugee myself for two years from November 1st, 2013, to October 15th, 2015. I concentrate on reading even though there are many phones with loud volumes at the same time. It is more frustrating, annoying, and difficult for me to concentrate on

reading when there is noise from only one phone beside me because then I hear everything, and I become occasionally interested in what the video on the phone is saying. When there are many of them, it feels like a crowd of people talking at the same time, I cannot understand what they are talking about." We the Mandinkas need to stick together to defend the purity of our Mandinka tribe." G. Fall suddenly states, starting a conversation, finally. "What are you trying to achieve with that goal?" Sainey asked. "You know these Wolof people are trying to destroy the Mandinkas. Before it was the Wolof president, Abdou Joof, now it is again a Wolof president, Macky Sall, trying to make life difficult for Mandinkas. But if we unite as Mandinkas from Mali, Gambia, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone and Casamance (southern Senegal) we would exterminate all the Wolofs in a single battle." G. Fall cried. "What a stupid idea." Sanna jumped into the conversation. Abdul did not say a single word even though he is from the Wolof tribe. His silence is not wisdom, it is because he had no idea what G. Fall was saying because Abdul speaks only Wolof, French, and Italian. When he is around to visit my brother, Sanna, who is his coworker, I try to speak to everyone in the Wolof language so Abdul would not feel uncomfortable and confused. Talking to Abdul in Wolof in front of my brothers is like an Italian trying to speak English to a British person in front of other Italians. The Mandinka tribe is the largest in The Gambia, but Wolof is the most spoken because to many, it sounds cooler than Mandinka. People in Gambia laugh at you if you don't speak good Wolof. Speaking in the Senegalese Wolof accent and slang to Abdul is like an Italian trying to speak English with a British accent. But I am confident my Wolof is as good as my Mandinka because many Senegalese people confuse me with

one of them when I speak the language, in fact some even asked if I ever lived in Senegal before. I have listened to Senegalese music since I was very young. In fact, Abdul, whenever he visits, he sat on the couch beside me because I listen to old Senegalese music from the 80s, 90s and early 2000 and Abdul always want me to download them for him from YouTube, convert them from mp4 to mp3 so he could listen to them on his phone without adverts always interrupting. On my Curriculum Vitae I put both Wolof and Mandinka as native languages. I also used it professionally as an interpreter in various court houses and prefectures to translate Wolof-Italian, Italian-Wolof for asylum seekers. The conversation between the twins and G. Fall turned into a heated argument, I had a couple of pages to close the chapter. The shouting became intense, and I went inside the kitchen, closed the door behind me and opened the window. "... that is true but look how many Mandinkas are risking their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to enter Europe." G. Fall stated as I opened the kitchen door and entered the living room, put the closed book on a cupboard beside the couch and went out on the balcony but left the door open so I could hear the conversation. "Lamin, have you downloaded any new music yet? I mean, old ones. You know, the ones that make us friends." Abdul asked, laughing, as he came to join me on the balcony where we stood, looking at the traffic below. "Not much, just two songs." I replied. "Oh yeah, you did? Which singer? Which songs?" He asked. I could see the joy and passion in his eyes. "Youssou N'Dour - Sunu Yaye, from 1996 and Thione Seck - Papa, from 1997." I replied. "Send them to me via WhatsApp, I will add them to my Playlist at home when I open my computer." The twins and G. Fall took the conversation to the kitchen by the time I got back in

the living room with Abdul. I sat on the couch gazing at the ceiling thinking: what if we unify the whole humankind as one tribe, one nationality, one race instead of each group uniting in different sections divided from the rest? The problem in Senegal and most African countries is more of a resource mismanagement than tribal bias. I think we need to see the human side of people and show the human side of ourselves, I am not as interested in the professional side, political side, or philosophical side as I am interested in the human side of people. To earn the trust of people, you must love them, show them their lives really matter. It is only through the human side of people can we love each other dearly. When Europeans came to Africa, they found Africans practicing slave trade. According to the Islamic religion, prisoners of war could be used as slaves. They could be sold as private properties to interested individuals, as sex mistresses and house maids of their masters. The Europeans soon took interest in the commerce and started buying as many slaves as possible and sending them to the new world, the Americas. African slaves were sold in the market even to Arabs. The difference between the treatment of African slaves in Africa and elsewhere out of the continent is that in African households, slaves did not receive torture and inhumane treatments from their potential buyers. Treatments such as castration to avoid African slaves breeding with Arab women were received in the Arabian world; severe beatings and long hours of labor on plantation and sugarcane fields were received in the hands of the European masters in the new world. In Africa, slaves were considered as members of the family where they served, mostly, as maids. Today, descendants of these slaves are still recognized and categorized in a cast of slaves especially in the rural area, they are no longer doing

free labor for anyone, but they can only marry among themselves, not to people from different casts. When they die, but this is exclusively in the villages, they cannot be buried in the same cemetery as the members of "noble" casts. Sometimes violence erupts between them and the so-called nobles because they want to end the discrimination against them. "I find it hard to understand how you think, G., seriously! How can you, as a descendent of slaves, faced the discrimination and all the hardship from my people who called themselves "nobles"; come here to Europe, hopping from job to job because of racism, and now you are talking about the extermination of Wolofs for a tribe that do not even fully recognize you as a full human being." Sanna cried, keeping a serious face as he put a big plate of rice and chicken sauce as lunch for all of us because we normally eat from one big plate to keep part of our culture. I like it because then we all eat well and not eating separately from each other with everyone eating from their individual plates while having their faces buried into their phones. "Sanna, you don't understand, those are a small minority in the villages. Not everyone in Senegal or in Gambia discriminates against me." G. Fall explained. "No, no it's the same. I don't like that. If I hear someone talking like that about slaves, I will be equally angry and shut them up. With this type of negative thinking, I suppose you should revoke your asylum and go back to Africa, we came to Europe because we don't like those kinds of thinking we had to deal with in Africa." Sanna stated without looking at G. Fall. That's how Sanna is when he is angry, he would not look you in the eyes. "Hey, Sanna, I'm sorry if I make you angry but if you were a Senegalese, you would understand my point much better, Ousmane Sonko is the hope for Mandinkas. He will be the first

Mandinka president in the history of Senegal." G. Fall insisted. Sanna did not say a word. "G. is always angry at someone. I'm sure it is one of his racist bosses he is complaining about." Abdul commented for the first time as he sat between Sainey and G. Fall around the plate on a cloth that was spread on the floor underneath the plate to make cleaning rice grains easier after the consumption of the meal. Nobody commented on Abdul's statement. "If you don't take it easy these white people will kill you with stress and heart attack." Abdul continued. Always speaking in the Wolof language to G. Fall who is more fluent in the language than all of us, me and my brothers. Again, no one commented on Abdul. "Look at how they treat the Casamance region, only because the majority of people in that region are Mandin..." G. Fall insisted. "Enough now, G.! Enough!" Sainey exclaimed. "I don't know why we should suffer from the suffering white people put him through." Abdul said, jokingly as he looked at G. Fall, laughing. G. Fall went on ranting the whole duration of the lunch, but he was only talking to himself since no one replied to him. I wanted to have an educational conversation with him but for the huge respect that exists between me and my brothers from childhood, I do not want to address their guest. I don't know how they would feel about that. I don't want to be rude towards their friend because they would never even think of disrespecting someone who comes to the house as my guest. Eventually, the topic changed, and everyone started talking and laughing.

SOVEREIGNTY AT STAKE

Their scandals that skinned our sovereignty
The blood they spill as our tombstones
Somehow, we managed to swim – drowning –
Our nails no longer can grip our dreams
They sign pacts of bloodstain – we bled –
Our lips no longer can kiss our guts
Bullets in flowers
Smiling tyrants – Hitler? – hell no!
Our joyful funerals won't make him smile
Blissful ignorance fuels corporate markets
We pat the wolf that we can't digest
Hegemony in the lungs of false consciousness
Smoke my bones but fierce with me
Trying to have a meaningful conversation
With breathing walls in human faces
With breathing nails and nuts. Tough, rough
Trying to show them my bones but
They grind my skeleton into powder and
Laugh at my dripping blood – crucifixion –
Trying to ease their breaths but
They keep chasing the clown
As though he's an effing "Simon Says"
Trying to pay attention but it costs a fortune
Trying to strangle the darkness but it cremates me
Trying to hide their faces but the gods are already
naked
The nation weeps, we got drizzles
The old settlement needs a tissue
For the old dog it isn't an issue
And now even kids need a pistol

Bonus

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Do not take my words for it, ask questions, many. Ask refugees and migrants how they truly live their daily lives in a foreign home far away from home.

MY DAILY QUESTIONS

What was the sweetest lie you have ever been told?

Would you kill five people to save one?

If yes, why?

If not, why?

Does freedom actually exist?

If yes, how does it benefit humanity?

If not, what are/is the alternative/s?

How does human freedom, if it exists, affect the freedom of animals?

If thunderstorms could cause earthquakes, will we survive it?

Do you believe in equity and justice?

If yes, why?

If not, why?

If there was no evil would good be still meaningful?

What is the difference between the human and animal soul?

Are they the same?

Are they different?

Will there exist truth without the existence of lies?

Where is the fountain of human consciousness?

What is the meaning of life?

Where is the primary source of our dreams?

What is the ultimate measurement of human happiness?

Does happiness exist or is it just a mere illusion?

What are the material and spiritual definitions of a "Good life"?

If the human species would at some point, go into extinction, what would be the main reason?

Do we have a collective responsibility as humans towards the planet?

If the life expectancy of human beings is to increase to a thousand years, would peoples' behaviours towards one another and the environment that they live change?

How do you define absolute wisdom?

What are the costs and benefits of voluntary solitude?

If you have the power to change one, just one thing, what would it be?

How would our lives be without identity? In other words, if one is to be born without a name, nationality, culture, society, religion, race, class, gender, position, possession, education (institutional and household), how would one's life be?

Is identity just a form of inheritance?

Where is the origin of human intelligence?

Would we as humans be happier without intelligence?

Why do humans have such a strong urge to distract?

What are the ramifications of every single person's reality being a little different and unique to them?

How does consciousness benefit a man from an evolutionary standpoint?

The concept of "you", is it temporary or permanent. In other words, the part of you that is made of atoms (the physical you), is it permanent or is it always changing?

Is there a beginning of human creativity?

And what are the limitations of human creativity?

What is the link between intelligence and happiness?

Free speech has evidently become both damaging and beneficial to the modern human. Should there be limitations to free speech?

What is the philosophy behind quantum physics?

In death, is it the body or the soul that dies?

Are we a reflection of a certain God or are we a reflection of the environment that surrounds us?

What has your existence benefits the environment in which you live?

What illuminates our thoughts?

**Can natura survive without Man?
Can Man survive without nature?**

What is the state of the mind that says, "I don't know"?

THE MOUNTAIN SPEAKS

I keep undressing my consciousness,
So the mountain could see all my scars.
I pour the story of my skin,
And of my heart on the rocks.
The mountain speaks,
“Sometimes even stars fall with burning tears,
We call it shooting star.”

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