

Leaving Kafr el-Sheikh

It was a sultry evening in the ancient Egyptian town of Kafr el-Sheikh. The night was windless and everything appeared calm and still. Ahmed, Mohamed, Omar and Mostapha - childhood friends - were sat outside a dimly-lit coffee shop. A waiter appeared and took their order.

Ahmed spoke for the group.

‘Four apple shisha please.’

The waiter disappeared and returned with four hookah pipes. The pipes were burning nicely. Ahmed also ordered coffee.

For a while the four friends sipped their drinks and worked on their individual pipes. Then Omar, who at fourteen, was the youngest of the quartet by two years spoke.

‘Tell us again Ahmed, how we will get there, the cost and the risk.’

Ahmed was sanguine about such grave matters. The worsening economic and political situation in his homeland meant that he no longer saw a future for himself in the country of his birth. There was also the reports from his cousin, Ra. Ahmed tapped his smart phone until a mirage appeared on the screen. The image was of his cousin Ra, seated inside a high-performance car, adorned with plenty of bling, and decked out in the latest designer fashion. A beautiful girl sat in the passenger seat.

‘Look at Ra here, is he not living the high life? Look at his car and his cloth. And then, brothers look at the rags we are dressed in.’

The others gazed at their moth-eaten hand-me-downs, and dusty cracked footwear.

‘But the risks Ahmed and the cost?’ said Omar.

Ahmed took a lengthy pull on his hookah pipe. Clouds of apple-flavoured tobacco streamed from his nostrils. ‘Tomorrow we meet the fisherman Gaba Shehata. He will be our guide. The cost is \$1500 yankee dollar, with a further \$2000 to the overland smugglers. And the risk my friends is great, but we must take that risk.’

‘This has to work,’ said Omar, ‘the money is my grandmother’s life savings and I must pay her back, otherwise my dear sweet nana will die a pauper.’

Ahmed gave the head of his younger friend an affectionate pat. ‘Do not worry Little O, your grandmother has made a wise investment, and she will be paid back many times over.’

‘And of course - God willing - all of us will make a safe passage from Alexandria to Lampedusa. Gaba is an experienced sailor, one of the finest - he will ensure we sail in strong sea-worthy vessels.’ said Mostapha.

‘Yes but his boat is old, it has made many crossing. And the fare is cheap and sometimes the cheapest way is not the best way.’ said Mohamed, the only one of the group who still harboured doubts about going against their parents wishes and fleeing their homeland.

Ahmed raised his hand. ‘I will not hear such yellow belly talk Mo. Always, with you it is doom and gloom. Remember you can still back out if you so wish.’

Mohamed shook his head. ‘No I come, for I never back down from anything - and inshallah, God will be on our side!’

‘That’s more like it Mo. This is our destiny. I don’t want to stay here, scratching around in the dirt like a chicken, having not enough LE to feed the hungry mouths of my future children. No, I will, by hook or by crook, join my cousin and live a life of luxury!’

Ahmed stood up and raised his coffee cup. ‘To future success!’

The others stood and raised their cups also. ‘Here, here!’ they said.

The next evening after telling their parents they were going to meet friends and spend a few hours chatting in the public square, the gang went straight to the riverside. This was where Gaba Shehata was waiting, ready to ferry the boys across the northern countryside to Alexandria and the Horn of Africa, where his vessel would rendezvous with another smugglers boat. This boat would take them across the Mediterranean to the tiny Italian island of Lampedusa.

Each boy had prepared a small backpack containing food, clothes, and identity cards. With Gaba Shehata as their guide the boys walked long into the night, covering many kilometres. None of them spoke for fear of being captured abroad and being sent back to Kafr el-Sheikh to face a gang of irate parents.

The journey, on foot, to Alexandria was uneventful. It took the group just under three days. They slept by the roadside and rose each day with the coming of dawn. It was the start of the biggest adventure of their youthful lives and everything was new and filled with promise. Once at Alexandria things moved fast. They arrived in the middle of the night and went straight to Gaba Shehata's fishing boat which was moored in the port of that great city.

'Jump aboard boys - for we sail tonight.' said Gaba.

It was a clear moonlit night when they set sail from Alexandria. Many stars studded the African sky and a cool breeze blew. The gang of would be migrants stood on deck and watched as the shadowy shoreline of their homeland disappeared from view.

'This is it,' said Ahmed, the cool breezes playing in his black hair. 'Let us pray for a safe passage.'

And with that all four boys knelt on the wooden deck and gave praise to Allah.

For the first couple of days it was plain sailing. The boys chatted amongst themselves, cooked simple meals, and often took turns looking at the image of Ahmed's cousin, Ra. The car, the expensive clothes, the beautiful girl.

It was when they rendezvoused with the 2nd boat that the trouble began. It was dead of night when the boat came into sight. Gaba Shehata guided his much smaller vessel alongside the larger smuggler's boat. Ahmed and his friends peered into the darkness. The larger boat was crammed to bursting with other migrants, desperate and hopeful people from many different countries.

Ahmed turned to Gaba. 'Isn't it a little overcrowded?'

'No, this is usual.' said the fisherman.

'Usual?'

'For bottom dollar boat.'

'Bottom dollar boat?'

'Yes. If you want a less crowded boat, you have pay top dollar, but of course that would be three, four, five times the price.'

'Oh I see.'

'Do not worry, they will provide you with life jackets. If the boat sinks you will float. You safe. Just have wait for the Italian navy come rescue you. Now, look, there's the man. Grab his hand and jump aboard.'

'If the boat sinks?' thought Ahmed as a rough hand thrust itself's into his startled face. Gaba pushed him and he grabbed the hand. 'Come on brothers this is the next stage,' he cried as he was yanked aboard the larger boat.

One by one the boys were yanked aboard. There was little or no space on the crowded vessel. Many different accents and languages filled the air, none of which the boys understood. They were handed life jackets and kicked into the hold of the boat, where they sat legs apart, one wedged in front of the other. For the first time on their journey they felt real fear.

'There's far too many people on this boat,' said a shaken Omar.

'Something tells me I should've stayed at home, puffing my hookah,' whispered Mostapha.

'Be brave brothers, it's too late to turn back,' said Mohamed.

Once again Ahmed called upon the almighty. 'Let's us pray together!'

The boys, already on their knees, prayed like they'd never prayed before.

Gaba Shehata started his engine and headed back to Alexandria and Kafr el-Sheikh. As he did some clouds passed and the moon revealed itself. Gaba looked up at the moon. He cut the engine and let the boat drift. The old moon was in the arms of the new moon. Gaba knew what that meant and had done since he was a little boy. Gaba watched the larger vessel disappear into the void. Oh well, it's too late now, he thought. Fate is fate and nothing can be done. With that he re-started his engine and headed for home, just as the wind picked up and the first raindrops fell.

The first the boys knew about the impending storm was when the swell began to roll the boat and the hold rocked violently from side to side. Then the screaming started.

The boys looked to each other, their frightened optics betraying their fear.

'Inflate your life jackets and hold each other hands for support,' said Ahmed.

The boys clasped hands.

'Whatever you do, do not let go of your grip. If the boat sinks the jackets will keep us afloat.'

Water entered the hold in tremendous quantities. Soon the boys were up to their necks in salty brine. The boat sank quickly. In the confusion Ahmed caught sight of a life buoy and clung to it as a last resort. He ordered his friends to do likewise, but the roar of the ocean was deafening. Ahmed was tossed upon the waves like a cork.

Then, everything was calm. The storm passed over quickly, but the damage had been done. Ahmed floated on the surface, face looking up at the moon. He could see bodies floating on the sea, some wearing life jackets. One was a child. But he could not see any of his friends. He called out into the night.

‘Omar, Mo, Mos, can you hear me brothers?’

Silence.

Then, he lost consciousness.

When Ahmed awoke he found himself on the Italian island of Lampedusa. All around - standing, sitting, or laying - were survivors of the crossing. There were very few. Ahmed was in some sort of processing station. Italian soldiers handed out free clothes, food, water, and blankets. Ahmed stood up and stared straight into the sun. Blinded temporarily, he collapsed to the ground like a man shot. A fellow survivor grabbed his arm and spoke softly.

‘Ahmed, brother, is it you?’ said the voice.

Ahmed opened his eyes. ‘Mos, Mostapha, you made it?’

‘Only by the grace of God.’

And what about the others - our brothers - Omar and Mohamed?’

‘Little O is in the hospital. Alive, but very sick.’

‘And Mo?’

‘He sleeps on the bottom of the ocean.’

Ahmed wept openly. ‘Mo was like a brother to me?’

‘He didn’t make it,’ said Mostapha, who was also weeping.

After a few days rest and recuperation, in which time they were reunited with Omar, the friends individual claims for asylum were processed. They were to be transferred by the Italian government to reception centres in mainland Italy where they would then be deported back to Egypt. Of their boat, which sank, 355 people were feared drowned.

Ahmed, Omar, and Mostapha were transferred to Rome. On the way they discussed plans.

‘What will we do Ahmed? If we return home our parents will kill us.’ said Mostapha.

‘Forget what our parents reaction will be. What about Mo?’ said Omar.

Ahmed call for hush. ‘Nothing can change what happened to Mo. If he was alive he would want us to carry on, of this I am certain. And carry on we shall.’

‘So what is our plan, our next step?’ said Mostapha.

‘When we get to Rome, the first opportunity that presents itself, we simply run away.’

‘And then what?’

‘We make contact with overland smugglers. There are plenty of gangs willing, at a price of course, to take us overland to Calais in France. The last leg will be down to us. Here shake my hand brothers.’

The three boys grabbed each other’s hands.

‘England or die!’ said Ahmed.

England or die!’

Once in Rome the boys were in for a shock. Their deportation orders were not enforced by the Italian authorities and they were simply set free. They didn’t even have to run away. On that first night of freedom the boys wandered the ancient streets of the Italian capital in a daze.

‘What does it all mean?’ said Mostapha.

‘Maybe it is a good omen. Either way I’ll call the overland smugglers and see if we can get out of here.’ said Ahmed.

Ahmed made the call and passage was arranged for the following night. It was after midnight when the truck pulled up. Ahmed handed over the money and they clambered aboard. The truck was crammed with other migrants - Eritreans, Arabs from the Sudan, Afghans, Iraqi’s, and Somalians. And despite their differences they were all headed in the same direction - Calais and France - to a refugee camp known as the Jungle. The truck drove through the night without stopping. The migrants had to relieve themselves inside the truck. The temperatures were stifling and pretty soon the cramped interior of the truck began to stink. Once again Mostapha took to reminiscing.

‘Shit, I can’t help it. It has to be said.’

‘What has to be said?’ said Omar.

‘I should’ve stayed at home happily puffing away on my hookah.’

Someone took a dump to their left. The stench was almost unendurable.

‘Oh shut up Mos,’ said Ahmed, as his face turned green and he vomited quietly, but copiously into his friends astonished lap.

The truck ground to a halt just before dawn. Most, if not all the migrants were sick, dehydrated, and malnourished.

‘Are we here?’ questioned a voice.

The doors to the truck were flung open, letting a blinding light in that dazzled the weary migrants jaded optics. They were ordered off the truck. Then the truck drove away, leaving the migrants stranded by the roadside. Lorries and trucks whizzed past. The roadside was blackened by car exhausts. Ahmed, Mostapha and Omar huddled together.

‘Let’s follow the others,’ said Ahmed.

The migrants trudged off in one direction. Traffic on the highway was constant, but no one stopped to ask what they were doing or if they needed any help. It was like they were invisible. Road signs informed them that Calais was over ten miles away.

After walking for miles the rabble finally made it to Calais and the sprawling refugee camp know as the Jungle. Despite their exhaustion they were amazed at the degradation that confronted them. There were people, mostly young men, from all over the world - Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Palestine, Chad, Eritrea, Iraq, Albania, Senegal, Kurdistan, Libya and Ethiopia with the biggest communities being those from East Africa and Afghanistan. There were camps within camps, communities within communities. The new arrivals wandered off to the camps of their fellow countrymen.

Ahmed, Mostapha and Omar wandered into Little Egypt, comforted by the sounds of their mother tongue, and the smell of home cooking. As for everything else it filled them with disgust and trepidation. The ground was filthy, litter was strewn into big smoking piles. Dilapidated tents and caravans lined the muddy thoroughfares.

‘It’s like a vision of hell,’ said Omar.

‘Whoever would’ve thought that a European country could be so squalid!’ said Mostapha.

The boys introduced themselves to the Egyptians. They were welcomed, not with open arms, more with casual indifference. They were given food and drink, and warm blankets.

‘You will be assigned a tent in the morning,’ said an elder. ‘Tonight you sleep under the stars.’

‘But it’s bloody freezing,’ moaned Mostapha.

‘You can always go back home,’ laughed the men.

That night the boys huddled around a fire and listened to other migrants tales. They were tales of woe, death and constant harassment by the powers that be. Some of the men had been in the Jungle for months, unable or unwilling to make the final journey to England.

Life in the Jungle was tough. The authorities raided the camp every week or so, making evictions, arrests, and destroying any attempt to make new homes. And yet it was not an easy place to leave. Wherever they went they suffered persecution. And crossing the Channel was no stroll in the park. Every month security was increased and new routes had to be found on a week to week basis.

‘And how do people get across to England?’ Ahmed asked the men huddled around the fire.

‘Mostly in the backs of lorries, or under trucks. It’s tough but can be done. Of course there are risks.’

‘Such as?’

‘Only last week two of our brothers were electrocuted as they made an attempt to get through the Channel tunnel on foot. And a while back another brother was hit by an express train and lost both legs. Some have tried to get across the Channel in unseaworthy vessels, again a hazardous method.

What they were told did not dampen the boys spirits. True, it was shocking, but there were also tales of those who had made it across safely.

The boys spent the next few weeks recovering from their ordeal. The camp was like a city within a city. There were food shops, places to charge their phones, hairdressers, a disco, and even it was reputed, a bordello. In fact despite the difficulties of keeping clean and disease free, they could exist perfectly happily. However, it wasn’t long before Ahmed began to get itchy feet.

‘This is why some of these men have been here so long. They have grown lazy and frightened to risk their lives. They would rather stay here and live in a tent.’

‘But it’s not that bad Ahmed.’ said Omar. ‘I can understand why they are reluctant to make the - Jump. Most have blown their life savings and do not have a single cent left. And let’s face it the Eritrean nightclub was a bit shit, I mean the music was terrible, but at least Mos got to puff on a hookah again.’

‘Yes, but the men were all drinking strong alcohol. Their minds are befuddled. We’ve got to get out of this place or die here.’

‘Ahmed is right,’ said Mostapha, ‘the shish was shabby to say the least. To me this is a death camp. I say we make the - Jump.’

A few nights later - an opportunity arose for the boys to make a break for England. They followed a Kurdish man into the French countryside under cover of darkness. They were headed to the Eurotunnel a good two hours walk away. Barring their way to the tunnel were five separate fences.

‘We have to climb each one,’ said Ahmed breathlessly.

When they reached the bottom of the first fence, the Kurd pointed out that the fences were protected by electricity. He made a clapping sound with his hands to warn of imminent death if those wires were touched. They scaled the first fence and then the second. It was while scaling the third fence that it happened. The Kurd was over and already scaling the fourth fence. Ahmed scaled the fence, quickly followed by Omar. Once on the ground they looked up. Mostapha was at the top. Then sirens filled the air. It was the police. Mostapha panicked and fell, breaking his fall by holding out an outstretched hand. There was loud popping and fizzing and then Mostapha dropped to the floor like a dead thing. Ahmed and Omar stood over their lifeless friend. Then the sound of more sirens.

‘Run Omar, run. We can do nothing for him.’

The boys disappeared into the sticky black void.

There were more days and nights spent in the jungle. Often Ahmed and Omar wept for their dead brothers, but the tragedies they had endured made the friends even more determined to get to England. Each night Ahmed said the mantra.

‘England or die!’

‘England or die!’ Omar would always reply.

It was a month before another opportunity arose. A Pakistani man guided them through the French countryside until they reached the shoreline. It was dead of night. No moon. On a remote beach were two paddle boards. Ahmed paid the man his money and they were left alone.

‘Are you sure we can make the crossing using these?’ said Omar doubtfully.

‘Why not? We are young, fit and strong, and we have God looking after us. It’s twenty miles and there is a prevailing wind.’

The men donned life jackets and pushed their boards into the sea. The sea was calm. They clambered onto the boards and began paddling. They had been taking paddle board lessons from the Pakistani man all week, and were quite proficient in their use. Soon they were many miles from the French coastline. They worked up a healthy sweat. Every now and then the boys stopped to refuel - taking food and drink from their small backpacks. Nothing, it seemed, could stop them reaching England. They paddled and paddled into the night. The sea was cold, but they kept on going. Then, it appeared up ahead like a ghostly apparition. They were crossing the busy Channel shipping lines.

Ahmed was the first to see it. ‘My God’ he said, ‘we don’t stand a chance.’

It was a tremendous tanker headed in their direction.

‘Little O, there’s a ship up ahead, we’ve got to get out of it’s path or we’ll be sucked under. Make a sharp left and paddle for your life.’

Omar looked up and saw the ship. ‘It’s too close!’

‘Paddle, Omar, paddle!’

The boys paddled. The ship got closer. The boys paddled, madly, blindly, arms flailing. Then the ship was upon them. They looked as it rushed past, endless steel. Then the wake hit and tossed them into the briny depths as if they were nothing more than matchsticks.

Ahmed felt himself being sucked under. He fought hard for his life. He swum upwards and upwards. Eventually he burst through the surface of the water. The ship was away in the distance. He looked around for his friend. He saw one of the boards and swum towards it. He also managed to grab a stray paddle. He pulled himself onto the board, straddled it, and once more looked for his friend. Then he began calling his name.

‘Omar, Little O can you hear me?’

Silence. Just the splashing of waves against his board.

Ahmed stood up, paddle in hand, and knitted his brows.

‘England or die!’ he roared dementedly.

Ahmed paddle for hours. The night faded to grey. He grew weak. He began hallucinating. Images of his three dead friends danced before his eyes. Then everything went black.

When Ahmed came to he had been washed up on a beach. He opened his eyes and looked around. It was cold and grey. Ahmed sat up. Where was he? Surely this couldn't be England?

An ugly, fat, middle-aged woman, accompanied by a diseased looking dog approached.

'Are you alright dear?' the woman asked.

'Where am I?' said Ahmed.

'Dover.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Dover, Kent, England.'

'This is England?'

'Yes, dear.'

'Praise be to Allah,' said Ahmed and then promptly passed out.

News of Ahmed's story spread fast. Nobody could quite believe that anyone, least of all a desperate migrant, could single-handedly paddle board across the English Channel. His face was in all the local papers and he quickly became a minor -celebrity. He was interviewed by a series of news-hungry hacks and even appeared on local television. Then as quickly as he had become known he became unknown and was forgotten by the wider populace.

After a short stay in a local hospital Ahmed was granted refugee status and allowed to remain in the UK for an indefinite period. Once at liberty he headed straight to London to meet his successful cousin, Ra.

When Ahmed arrived in London he was in for a shock. The streets were dirty and the people looked haggard. And there were so many differing nationalities from all around the world, strange, furtive looking people. Ahmed walked the streets wide-eyed. So this shit hole was what he had risked his life for and for what his three friends had died for? He contacted Ra many times but his cousin never answered or returned his calls. What in God's name was going on? Ahmed grew angry. He had an address and headed to it. Presently, he came to a run down block of flats in the middle of a sprawling sink estate. Gangs of kids hung on every corner and for the first time Ahmed realised that he didn't feel safe. He jumped in a lift that stank of urine and pressed the button for the fifteenth floor.

Broken toys, old mattresses, and other filth lined the corridors and walkways. Ahmed found Ra's door and rang the bell.

It took a while, but eventually his cousin answered. Ra didn't look good. He was suffering from a heavy cold and was tired after finishing another twelve hour night shift. Ra shared the cramped two-bedroom doss with nine fellow Egyptian migrants.

Ahmed walked inside.

'Why did you not answer your phone? I make many, many call.'

Ra pulled out a grubby handkerchief and blew his nose. The sound emitted was akin to that of a foghorn. Then he hacked up some flem, the colour of which was lurid green, and spat into a plastic ice-cream tub that was situated on the floor next to a chair. In the tub, floating in three inches of water, were numerous globules of flem. The globules ranged in colour from pale yellow to dark brown.

'What number you call?'

Ahmed showed his cousin the number.

Ra blew his nose again and once more the foghorn sounded. 'That my old number, have new number now.'

Ahmed gazed at the dilapidated surroundings with haunted optics. In his mind's eye he compared it to the bright and breezy rooftop villa that he had shared with his parents and siblings back in Kafr el-Sheikh and for the first time in his great adventure he suffered an acute sense of homesickness.

'Is this where you live?'

'Yeah,' said Ra with a snuffle. 'Not much room, but the rent's cheap.'

Ahmed felt like he was falling through time and space. He flicked through images on his phone, until once again the mirage appeared. There was Ra, smiling. Gold sparkling, sports car, beautiful girl. Ahmed showed the image to Ra.

'Where's the beautiful girl, the sports car, even all the bling?'

Ra looked apologetic. 'That, that was photoshopped.'

'Photoshopped? You mean none of it was real? It was your success that encouraged us to undertake the perilous trip from our homeland!'

'Sorry bruv. What can I say? I couldn't tell the people back home the truth, I'd never live it down. How could I tell my parents that I had blown their life savings, and for what? To live in squalor and work as a shit-kicker. You would've done the same in my unfortunate position.'

Ahmed was by now furious. 'But Ra, you don't understand. You remember, Mostapha, Mohamed and Omar?'

'Yes.'

'They died trying to get here Ra. They are dead!'

'What can I say. Winners and losers Ahmed. Winners and Losers.'

Ahmed rushed over and grabbed his cousin by the neck. 'Lord Allah give me strength! I'll give you winners and bloody losers you shit eater!'

'Take it easy Ahmed! I didn't ask you to follow me. You came of your own accord. Personally, if you ask me, I blame the people smugglers.'

Defeated, Ahmed relaxed his grip on his cousins throat.

'Look,' Ra wheezed, 'if it helps any, you can stay here rent free until you get back on your feet.'

'I can?'

'Yes. And you can work with me on the night shift.'

'The night shift, doing what?'

'Cleaning. I'm a cleaner, office blocks in the city, mostly.'

'Shit,' said Ahmed.