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TEN BORDERS

One refugee's epic escape from Syria.

BY NICHOLAS SCHMIDLE

Ghaith, a law student, fled Syria with a backpack containing four shirts, a pair of pants, and a black scarf knitted by his wife.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MOISES SAMAN / MAGNUM FOR THE NEW YORKER

In 2012, the Syrian civil war reached the suburbs of Damascus. Army tanks rolled over anti-government protesters in Ghouta; artillery shells fell on Darayya. One morning that May, a car bomb exploded in the town of Jdeidet Artouz, southwest of the capital. The blast jolted Ghaith, a twenty-two-year-old law student, out of bed. He lived in a two-bedroom apartment with his mother; his father had died when he was an infant, and his siblings—four sisters and a brother, all older—had left the house after getting married. Ghaith stepped to the window and pulled back the curtain. Across the street, a sedan was spewing flames. Body parts littered the road.



The victim was Ghaith's neighbor, an Alawite man whom rebels had apparently targeted for assassination. In the weeks that followed, the government crackdown intensified. One of Ghaith's nieces, a teen-ager, was imprisoned for posting a comment on Facebook that condemned a barrel-bomb attack by the Syrian Air Force on civilians in Homs. Government agents snatched two of Ghaith's friends off the street and took them away. That August, the Army moved into Jdeidet Artouz and massacred dozens of people.

Ghaith studied criminal law at the University of Damascus, and hoped to become a judge. But simply commuting to class had become an ordeal. At one point, the bus he took travelled on a road that formed the boundary between regime territory and rebel territory. Rival sniper bullets frequently pinged the sides of the bus. "We ducked our heads as we drove through," Ghaith recalls.

That fall, his brother, Ghalib, a barber with three young children, fled Syria, with the permission of his wife. Ghalib went first to Turkey, by air, then to Greece, by sea, and, eventually, to Sweden, by truck, hidden inside a wooden crate. In Gothenburg, he took a

job at an auto-repair shop. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians were attempting similar escapes. The wealthiest went directly to Europe, but most headed for Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey, where they often got stuck in refugee camps. Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, did not seem particularly troubled by the exodus; after several of his advisers defected, he characterized their departure as a "self-cleaning process of the state."

To support his mother, Ghaith had two part-time jobs: stocking shelves at a supermarket and making kebabs and falafel at a restaurant. In 2013, he married his high-school sweetheart. (At Ghaith's request, her name has been withheld.) With these relationships and responsibilities, leaving seemed out of the question. Once he graduated, however, he would become eligible for conscription, and Ghaith—who was just over five feet tall, with a jockey's physique—questioned his aptitude for combat. Speaking through a translator, he told me recently, "The thing that frightened me most was that I would become a victim of the civil war—or, even worse, a killer in it."

His wife and his mother insisted that he follow his brother to Europe.

At first, Ghaith contemplated trying to secure a visa to a European country. But the rising violence in Syria had led most European countries to close their embassies in Damascus. Syrians could travel to Turkey or to Lebanon without a visa, but the European consulates there were inundated with immigration requests and issuing very few visas.

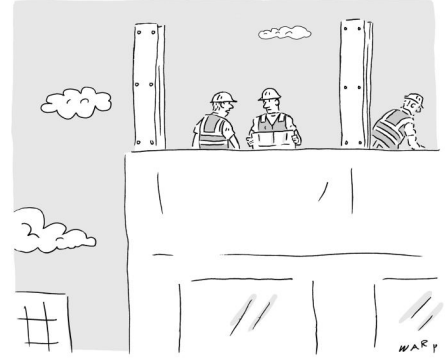
Ghaith's other option was to apply for asylum. The European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights guarantees that no asylum seeker can be "removed, expelled, or extradited" to a country where he might face "degrading treatment or punishment." By this logic, any Syrian who made it to Europe would be eligible to stay there. But the matter wasn't that simple. In 1990, the E.U. had passed a law, now known as the Dublin Regulation, requiring asylum seekers to be registered, and fingerprinted, in the first E.U. state they entered. The measure, which was designed to discourage refugees from roaming Europe before choosing where to settle, posed a formidable challenge for asylum seekers, who often desired to live in one of the prosperous nations of Northern Europe, and thus had to find ways to traverse the countries in between without being noticed by the authorities. "Wherever you get stamped, you have to stay," Ghaith told me. Some refugees, upon reaching Italy, would burn their fingertips in order to make their prints temporarily indecipherable.

In May, 2014, Ghaith got a Facebook message from his brother. "You might be able to leave in about twenty days," Ghalib wrote from Sweden. "Don't tell anyone until it's all arranged. But prepare yourself so you'll be ready if it goes through." Ghaith replied, "Will do. May you always be there, brother."

Ghalib instructed him to drive to the Lebanese town of Bar Elias, ten miles west of the Syrian border, where a smuggler would give Ghaith a fake passport and a plane ticket to Oslo. The night before his departure, Ghaith's mother prepared him a farewell meal that included *kabsa*, an aromatic dish made from chicken and rice and tomatoes. He recalls his mother telling him, "I would rather you go than die from the pain of losing you here, like Umm Khaled"—a relative whose husband and four sons had been executed when the Army first swept into Jdeidet Artouz.

"I'm tired—let's call it tall enough."

The next day, Ghaith said goodbye to his mother and his wife. He told his wife, "We won't be apart long. I won't change or forget you." He was determined to give her a better life. "I do everything for her," he told me.



Ghaith had three thousand dollars in cash, mainly in hundred-dollar bills. He hid the money in pockets that he made by cutting open the stitching on the tongues of his shoes.

His uncle drove him to Bar Elias. Ghaith met the smuggler at a restaurant, and paid him five hundred dollars for the plane ticket and the fake passport. He was to pay the remaining twenty-five hundred dollars upon reaching Sweden. Examining the passport, Ghaith was impressed by his resemblance to the nineteen-year-old Italian in the photograph. The smuggler warned him to project confidence at the airport, saying, "Any hesitation will pinpoint that there's something wrong."

Ghaith arrived at the international terminal in Beirut three hours early. When he presented his passport at immigration control, the officer's actions seemed fluid and routine: he glanced at the photograph, flipped to the back, and lifted his arm to stamp the page. Suddenly, Ghaith recalls, the officer's arm "froze in midair." He stared at the Italian in the picture, then at Ghaith. "This passport is not yours," he said.

Ghaith pretended not to understand Arabic, so the officer switched to English and asked for Ghaith's Italian I.D. card. Ghaith went on feigning incomprehension. But then an Italian-speaking immigration officer showed up, and Ghaith failed to make out a word. "I couldn't do a thing—I surrendered," he told me. The officers discovered Ghaith's Syrian passport in his backpack and arrested him.

He was taken to an interrogation room, where a plainclothes security official "wanted to know who gave me the passport, and I told him what I knew, but that wasn't much," Ghaith said. "When he saw my university I.D. card, he said, 'Look at you. You're studying

law? You think you know what the *law* is? Look what you're doing!" Ghaith was slapped repeatedly across the face, then sent to jail, where he was strip-searched. "You reach a point when you become numb," he recalls. "I was standing there naked. I felt like I was not a human anymore."

He and about fifty other foreigners shared a dark cell, sleeping on the floor. They had to defecate in buckets. Ghaith didn't know where he was, or who was in charge. In 2013, the Lebanese Center for Human Rights revealed the existence of a fetid, overcrowded detention facility for foreign nationals in a former underground parking garage in Beirut. Nadim Houry, a Human Rights Watch researcher, said that some refugees had been kept there for "weeks, months, and even years" while awaiting deportation. One day, Ghaith watched, horrified, as a pregnant prisoner fell to the floor, blood pooling around her. "I don't know what happened to her," he said.

Ghaith was relatively fortunate: he was released after six days. But he had to wait two months at a friend's house, outside Beirut, before a judge returned his Syrian passport. Stapled inside the document was a court order banning him from entering Lebanon again. On July 9, 2014, he returned to Syria. Assad had just won reelection, receiving more than eighty-eight per cent of the vote—a dubious tally for a society in revolt. He assured the Syrian people that he remained firmly in control, likening his election victory to "a bullet directed toward the chests of the terrorists." Soon afterward, ISIS posted footage of Syrian soldiers being marched to their deaths.

Ghaith saw the war as "a battle between two losing sides." He told me, "Each side thinks that you're either with them or against them. My family was not with any side. We just wanted to get by." Every day in Jdeidet Artouz seemed worse than the last, so every night, Ghaith said, he and his wife would "mourn the day that just passed." He felt imperilled whenever he left the house. The Assad regime had set up dozens of checkpoints in the area, and Ghaith was frequently stopped and asked why he hadn't started his military service yet. When he explained that he was a student, officers responded angrily. "Nothing hurts this country more than young men who are students," one said.

While Ghaith tried to devise a new plan to get out, traffickers were raising their prices, charging at least four thousand dollars to smuggle a Syrian into Italy—fifteen hundred more than Ghaith's remaining savings. He found another part-time job, handling auto-insurance claims, and picked up weekend shifts at the restaurant. "Every dollar I made was another dollar closer to me leaving," he said.

One friend after another was fleeing. A law-school classmate made it to Sweden. One of his friends who had been detained was released from prison; cigarette burns covered his back, and several teeth had been yanked out with pliers. He, too, left for Europe. Ghaith's other imprisoned friend died in detention. When Ghaith looked around, he felt alone.

“All my friends were either dead or gone,” he said. Time was running out. That December, he would graduate from law school, and his name would be submitted to the military.

Ghaith borrowed fifteen hundred dollars from his uncle, stitched bills into his shoes again, and on November 29, 2014, he flew to Istanbul. In a backpack, he had four shirts, a pair of pants, and a black woollen scarf that his wife had knitted for him.

MAP BY OLIVIER KUGLER

He took the metro to Aksaray, a neighborhood on the European side of the city, which was recently described, in a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation report, as Istanbul’s “human-smuggling hub.” He had learned about a hostel there by reading posts on the page of a private Facebook group called Asylum and Immigration Without Smugglers. It functioned rather like TripAdvisor: members, many of them Syrian refugees, shared candid information about refugee-friendly hostels, untrustworthy smugglers, and the latest sea conditions.



The impact of social media on the Syrian refugee crisis has been profound. In a 2012 paper, Rianne Dekker and Godfried Engbersen, professors at Erasmus University, in Rotterdam, write that social media has not only helped in “lowering the threshold for migration,” by allowing people to remain connected with distant family members; it has also democratized the process, by facilitating “a form of silent resistance against restrictive immigration regimes.”

The Asylum and Immigration Without Smugglers group was created in June, 2013, by a thirty-one-year-old Syrian known as Abu Amar. At the time, Abu Amar, a former kitchen contractor, was living in Turkey with his wife and two children, trying to reach Germany in order to receive medical care for an injury: in Syria, shrapnel from an explosion had pierced his spinal cord, paralyzing him below the waist. He had attempted to reach Europe by sea, from Egypt, but he had been arrested before setting off and was deported to Turkey. “I didn’t have much to do, because of the injury,” he told me. He heard stories of people being abused by smugglers. “My heart was aching,” he explained. “So I started studying the history of immigration, especially among Afghans and Iraqis, looking at maps to analyze what these smugglers were doing.” He found routes that saved time and money, launched the Facebook group, and began posting annotated maps.

Smugglers threatened to kill Abu Amar, and, in an act of sabotage, nude photographs were repeatedly posted to the group's page, causing Facebook to shut it down. He has since created a new iteration of it, and for Arabic-speaking refugees Abu Amar has become an essential guide. At one point this summer, Asylum and Immigration Without Smugglers had more than sixty thousand members. Joel Millman, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration, told me that when Syrians arrive in Italy or Greece "they just melt away at the pier—they get on Facebook, and they know where to go."

Ghaith checked into the Aksaray hostel, where he slept on a bunk bed in a room with seven other men. His roommates confirmed something that he'd read online: smugglers were now charging about five thousand dollars. "I didn't have that much," Ghaith said. He considered using his money to bring his wife to Istanbul, but decided against it. "I really like studying, and Turkey doesn't have good educational opportunities," he said. He felt mired. "You're thinking all the time, What should I do? How should I do it? You spend twenty-four hours a day thinking."

On Facebook, Ghaith searched for information about upcoming voyages. He found a post offering a discounted trip on a boat bound for Italy, run by a smuggler known as Abu Emad. It departed soon from Mersin, a city on Turkey's southern coast, across from Cyprus. Ghaith travelled fourteen hours by bus to Mersin, and, the next morning, he followed instructions from the Facebook post and went to an insurance office, where he deposited four thousand dollars into an account, accessible by a four-digit code. Once he reached Italy, he would release the code to Abu Emad, and the payment would be complete.

The insurance office was crowded with other refugees, and Ghaith befriended one of them, Osama, a twenty-three-year-old Palestinian journalist from the Gaza Strip. They shared a hotel room as they waited for the boat journey to begin. Osama told me that Ghaith was admired by their fellow-refugees for his witty impersonations of Abu Emad and his associates, adding, "He could mimic their voices perfectly."

After several days, Turkish smugglers herded Ghaith and the others onto buses. Ghaith had read online about this division of labor: Arabs like Abu Emad acted as salesmen and brokers, while toughs from Turkey or the former Soviet republics did the actual smuggling. "Abu Emad had the face of a chess player," Osama told me. "He was just the middleman."

The Turks drove the refugees to a dockside warehouse where fishermen stored their catch. Ghaith was standing beside a giant refrigerator, waiting for the Turks to load them onto a boat, when several police officers burst in. Why, they demanded, had two hundred

foreigners gathered in a chilled warehouse? Osama, who spoke passable Turkish, told the officers that they were orange pickers from Syria, looking for work. The officer asked why some of them were wearing life jackets. “This was what gave us away,” Ghaith said.

Ghaith sensed that the police were more interested in catching Abu Emad than in dealing with refugees. Nevertheless, Osama told me, they didn’t want to be detained, because “there were rumors of a new law by which Syrian refugees in Turkey would be forced to establish residency there”—effectively extending the Dublin Regulation’s reach. Osama told Ghaith that it was unwise to have their fingerprints on file in Turkey. Sneaking behind the mass of refugees, Osama stuck a hat between his teeth, bit down, and rubbed a lit cigarette against the swirls of his fingertips. Ghaith balked. He told me, “I studied law—I told Osama that Turkey was not a signatory to Dublin.” In the end, Osama’s precaution was unnecessary: the police simply ordered the refugees to disperse.

Ghaith hitched a ride to the center of Mersin in the back of a produce truck, among piles of oregano, mint, and parsley. He returned to the insurance office and ended his arrangement with Abu Emad. He met up with Osama, and they, along with six others, split a hotel room without proper heat. Ghaith and Osama celebrated New Year’s Eve in the hotel’s basement, playing Ping-Pong.



A few weeks later, Ghaith heard about a trip being brokered by another smuggler in Mersin, known as Abu Safar, who claimed to have a two-hundred-foot ship that could transport hundreds of refugees across rough seas. Abu Safar planned to anchor his ship just beyond Turkish territorial waters, to evade the coast guard, and then load the refugees in shifts. Ghaith and Osama liked this strategy, and linked their accounts at the insurance office with Abu Safar.

Two weeks later, the operation got under way when the first skiff safely carried about a hundred refugees out to the waiting ship. The second skiff began to sink, however, and the captain of the ship entered Turkish waters to save it. He rescued the passengers, but the coast guard seized his ship. Ghaith was due to be on the third skiff; when he heard what had happened, he hurried to the insurance office and withdrew his money.

The Turkish coast guard began aggressively patrolling the waters off Mersin, so Ghaith and Osama considered other options. An increasingly popular route involved a boat trip to Greece, followed by a long hike through the Balkans and into Central Europe. “I was excited to go,” Ghaith told me. But his brother cautioned him that trekking through

Europe might be even more dangerous than going by sea. “It was winter, and there was a lot of snow,” Ghaith said. “He had heard about people who had died.” Osama, undaunted, decided to risk it, leaving Ghaith behind.

In February, Ghaith learned of another boat journey. The broker this time, a Syrian named Jamil, ran a mini-market at an upscale shopping center in Mersin. He wore aviator glasses and smelled of strong cologne. He said that he owned a yacht that could take people to Italy in less than thirty-six hours; such trips often took more than a week. Ghaith asked Jamil how his ship would evade the coast guard. “He bragged that he had ‘special relationships’ with them,” Ghaith said. The passengers had to pay Jamil up front. One of Ghaith’s sisters, who had lived in Saudi Arabia since 2010, wired him a thousand dollars, which he added to his four thousand to cover the cost of the ticket.

One can choose to become a refugee, but to be smuggled is to be at the mercy of others. Jamil kept in touch with Ghaith and the other passengers through the mobile messaging service WhatsApp. Although Jamil, whose user name was Godfather, assured them that they would be departing soon, time dragged on. One passenger from Syria, Bahaa, a nineteen-year-old engineering student from the University of Homs, had been waiting several months for Jamil to set off. He recently let me read his chat logs with the smuggler.

December 30th: “Is there anything today?” (“*Inshallah*,” Jamil replied.)

January 3rd: “Shall we get ready to go or not?” (No reply.)

March 17th: “When? I have no more patience.” (“I’ll get back to you.”)

When a Syrian doctor demanded his money back, Jamil struck him several times in the face with a metal cane. “I saw him after the beating,” Ghaith said. “He was wearing sunglasses and his eye was badly swollen.” Ghaith considered asking for his money back, too, but he changed his mind after that. “Jamil told me, ‘If you leave, you’re going to lose fifteen hundred dollars, as a penalty,’” he said. “I couldn’t afford that, and he also hinted that I’d be beaten up, just like the doctor was. I was losing all hope. My money was gone, and I was tied down with Jamil.”

In mid-February, Osama called Ghaith to let him know that he had made it to Austria. They didn’t talk for long. “Ghaith was in bad shape,” Osama told me. “He was very frustrated. So many of his attempts had failed, and then he saw others like me making it.”

Ghaith contacted his brother’s wife, Noor, on WhatsApp, and broke down. “I swear, I’m done,” he said. “That is it. My whole life is gone.” He said that he woke up every night “in a cold sweat,” and noted, “All I ate today was plain bread.” When Noor told him, “Don’t get too frustrated,” Ghaith replied, “I’m losing my mind. I want this to end.” He

told her, “I’m about to die,” and demanded, “Why did you ever tell me to come? I was having the best days of my life, getting married and planning to graduate. Now I am like a homeless person.”

“God is generous,” Noor said. “All will be well soon, *Inshallah*.”

Ghalib, his brother, felt responsible for Ghaith’s misfortune. “I gave him bad advice,” he told me.

In late May, Jamil announced on WhatsApp that the boat was finally ready. A hundred and fifty-four passengers boarded buses and spent a week hopping from one hotel to another along the coast. Eventually, they were dropped off late one night at a gas station near Alanya, a tourist town on the Turkish Riviera, two hundred and twenty miles west of Mersin.

“Can I ask your advice about something you’d rather not know about me?”

Ghaith got out and followed the other passengers into the woods behind the station. There was a river up ahead, he was told. It was almost pitch black, and he struggled to keep up with the rest of the group. One of the other refugees was Bilal, a thirty-year-old Iraqi who had fled Baghdad after Shia militiamen tortured him with an electric drill. Bilal told me that, in the woods, “dogs were howling like wolves.” Bats swooped amid the trees. A man cupped his hand over the mouth of his son, who was crying. People began to run in fear, and Ghaith sprinted to the front. Were they being chased by the police? What if the boat’s captain decided that too many people had come, and took only some of them? Ghaith thought of his life in Syria. “We’d be on our way to work and hear sniper fire, and we’d run to get safe,” he said. “We used to run wherever we went. That night, we were doing the same thing—running for our lives.”



Ghaith headed down an embankment, toward the river. In the hazy moonlight, he saw a boat at the end of a narrow dock. It was a white trawler, thirty-eight feet long, with a knee-high railing around the bow—hardly a yacht. But, Ghaith told me, “No one cared. We just wanted to leave. We just wanted to get on some boat and go.”

While boarding, Ghaith carried a toddler, Fayez, who turned back to his mother, Reem, and asked her where they were going. Reem was an English teacher from Al-Hasakah, Syria, who had fled the country after several large explosions went off near Fayez’s

preschool. Reem's husband, a dentist, had recently flown from Damascus to Düsseldorf, on a student visa. "Finally, we are going to see Baba in Germany," Reem said, smiling. She was several weeks pregnant.

Reem told me that she was "astonished" when she got on the boat, adding, "It was *very* small for a trip to Italy." There was little air circulation inside the cabin, and it was soon sweltering. She and Fayez had put on life jackets but removed them to cool off. In the inky predawn light, the boat ventured into the Mediterranean.

Shortly after sunrise, the captain announced that they had entered international waters. Passengers cheered the news, but the swells grew perilously high, and the captain fought to keep the trawler steady. Ghaith, like many others, was overcome with nausea; he vomited into ziplock bags, then tossed them into the sea.

Reem's seasickness was particularly acute, likely because of her pregnancy. She recalls, "I thought I might vomit out my stomach." Another passenger splashed water on Reem's face, in an attempt to keep her from fainting. At one point, Reem dragged herself onto the deck to get some fresh air, leaving Fayez in the cabin. "I was too weak to care for my own son when he needed me most," she told me. "I can't forgive myself for that."

The captain was afraid that the boat might capsize. He called Jamil on a satellite phone, and broadcast their conversation over the ship's intercom. "If we go to Italy, we will die!" the captain shouted. But Jamil insisted that they press on, saying, "These people are desperate. They are willing to cross the sea on a piece of wood."

They maintained course, until, a few hours later, somewhere north of Cyprus, the captain defied Jamil and turned the ship around. Ghaith felt relieved, though the seas were no calmer on the way back. Water slopped over the gunwales and a gaseous odor filled the cabin. Passengers quietly recited the *shahada*—"There is no God but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of God"—as a final declaration of faith. Ghaith heard splintering wood, and feared that the ship was breaking apart. Finally, shortly after midnight, he saw the lights of the Turkish Riviera on the horizon. As the boat neared the shore, the captain jumped overboard to avoid arrest, leaving the vessel to careen into the shallows, its propellers jamming on rocks. There was only one door to the cabin, and, according to Ghaith, the passengers stampeded toward it, with "everyone crying and screaming." Some people lost their balance and ended up with bloody faces or broken bones. "It felt like the apocalypse," Ghaith recalls. Someone shattered a window, and he climbed through it, leaped into the surf, and swam to shore.

He gathered with others on the beach. No one had died, Ghaith realized with relief. Fayez wandered around in circles, bewildered. "Where's Baba?" he kept asking Reem.

Police officers arrived and stretched crime-scene tape around a swath of the beach. Ghaith and the other passengers were given shelter at a nearby indoor basketball court. An ambulance rushed Reem to a hospital, where she was treated for dehydration. The authorities passed out boxes of donated clothes to the other refugees. Ghaith picked out a green sweater and white shorts. His phone had been soaked, so he borrowed one to call his wife. Normally, they texted throughout the day, but they had been out of contact for more than seventy-two hours. “She just kept repeating, ‘Thank God for your safety, thank God for your safety,’” he said.

Ghaith, Reem, and some of the others made their way back to Mersin, and pooled their money to rent a cheap apartment. Ghaith slept on the floor. Once again, they were stuck, and the boredom was excruciating. Ghaith busied himself each day by using an app, Fabulo, to study Swedish. “I was going to crawl on my hands and knees to get to Sweden, no matter what,” he said. He took Fayez to play at a local park.

Jamil dangled the possibility of another trip, but refused to return anyone’s money. Bilal, the Iraqi, told me, “I was scheming how I could kill Jamil.” In mid-June, Bilal learned that yet another smuggler from Mersin, known as Abu Omar, was running rubber dinghies from Izmir, on Turkey’s western coast, to Lesbos, a Greek island fifteen miles away. The crossing took only a few hours. Abu Omar offered to take Bilal and his friends for nine hundred dollars each. “Everyone else was asking twelve hundred or more,” Ghaith said. His sister in Saudi Arabia wired him twenty-five hundred dollars. The refugees left for Izmir that night.

The next day, at around noon, they met Abu Omar at the Sinbad Café, near Basmane Square, in central Izmir. The square was full of Syrians and Iraqis toting orange life jackets. While drinking coffee, Ghaith smoked cigarettes—a habit that he’d picked up in Turkey. Everyone in his group paid Abu Omar in cash, and they finalized plans to leave that night. Ghaith, who had around four hundred dollars left, bought boots and a life jacket.



At eight o’clock, Turkish smugglers hustled them onto a bus; along the way, they collected another group of refugees, many of whom had to squat in the aisles. “We were sitting on top of each other,” Bahaa, the engineering student from Syria, said. The smugglers behaved like jail wardens, Bahaa added, “throwing us around, left and right.” Abu Omar was not on the bus.

After several hours, they stopped in a forest. One of the Turks led Ghaith and the others to a beach, where three smugglers used hand pumps to inflate a twenty-five-foot black raft. An outboard motor was attached. A smuggler asked, in broken Arabic, if anyone knew how to steer. Nobody did. Bahaa—young and adventurous—volunteered to helm the raft.

The Turk pointed to the horizon. “See those lights?” he said. “Go toward them.” He then directed everyone to switch off their phones—the coast guard picked up transmission signals—and gave Bahaa a pocketknife. Destroy the raft when you get to Greece, he told Bahaa. Ghaith recalls, “We heard stories that if you arrived and your raft was still in good condition the Greek coast guard would fill your motor with gas and turn you back to Turkey.”

Ghaith took a seat along the gunwale, and the raft pattered away. The sea was calm, and no one spoke for the first few hours. “We just kept our eyes on the lights,” Ghaith said. As they drew closer to Lesbos, Ghaith could make out, in the early-morning light, mountains studded with olive trees.

The refugees cut the motor and the raft floated to shore. Ghaith helped Reem and Fayeze scramble over slippery rocks. Bahaa slashed the raft with the pocketknife, then helped pitch the motor into the water. Ghaith joyfully snapped selfies, the Aegean glimmering in the background. He looked much like a tourist: Ghaith, who prided himself on his appearance, was wearing a clean red polo shirt, and before leaving Turkey he had trimmed his hair and beard. He called his wife, who burst into tears.

Ghaith and his friends set out on foot for the nearest police station. In Greece, refugees who registered with the police were given a six-month permit that essentially circumvented the Dublin Regulation, forestalling deportation but also not requiring settlement in the country. They walked for hours under the oppressive morning sun. When they got to the station, Reem asked an officer if they could register. He shouted, “Go back to Turkey! Why did you come to our country? Why do you Muslims want to come to Europe? Christians don’t like you.” The closest immigration center, he told them, was more than forty miles to the south, over steep hills.

In Greece, it was illegal for anyone to transport refugees who lacked permits, but a Dutch couple witnessing the confrontation quietly offered to drive Reem and Fayeze part of the way. The others continued on foot. Some motorists stopped to hand out bottles of water. An elderly woman gave them apricots that she had picked from a tree in her yard. In a few days, Greece, which had amassed an enormous national debt, would hold a referendum on whether to adopt stringent new austerity measures. Ghaith recalls, “They were going through their own crisis, and they were still kind to us.”

Sometime past midnight, Ghaith reached the immigration center. It was closed, so he went to a former swimming facility next door, which had been converted into a shelter. He slept on the tiled floor, using his backpack as a pillow. “That was the best feeling in the world,” he said. “For the first time in years, I knew that I could sleep without waking up with sweats, from fear. No bombs could fall on my head, no one would try to take me.” He went on, “In Europe, it’s better to sleep for two hours than it is to sleep for fifty hours in Syria. Because, in Syria, in each one of those hours you’ll have hundreds of nightmares.”

The next morning, Ghaith and scores of other refugees were taken by bus to Moria, a hillside town with a beautiful Roman aqueduct. They were dropped off at a refugee center that resembled a prison: high fences, watchtowers, concertina wire. Ghaith and his companions slept outside the first night; then, after downpours turned the ground to mud, they found space in a canvas tent.

On the fourth day, Ghaith received his temporary-residency permit, and the next evening he was on an overnight ferry to Athens. He and Bahaa stood on the deck, watching the sun set on the terra-cotta roofs of Mytilene, Lesbos’s capital. Ghaith congratulated himself for having made it this far. But he knew that the hardest part of his journey—getting to Sweden without being arrested or stamped—still lay ahead. Bahaa recalls, “That’s when the trip really began.”

The ferry docked in Athens the next morning. Reem’s mother had arranged for a smuggler known as Abu Haider to meet them at the port. Reem and Fayez planned to fly to Düsseldorf, using fake passports. Abu Haider offered to provide the same service to the others, for thirty-five hundred euros a person. Ghaith, Bahaa, and Bilal didn’t have that much money, but they went with Reem and Fayez to an apartment that Reem’s mother had rented for her, and rested for the day. That night, they parted ways. “It was like saying goodbye to family,” Ghaith said. “We weren’t sure if we were going to see them ever again.”



Ghaith and his friends bought sleeping bags, then travelled to Thessaloniki by bus. At a coffee shop near the city’s train station, they charged their phones while Ghaith waited for Ghalib to wire him fifteen hundred euros, through Western Union. They planned to head north, into Macedonia. Uncertain what they might find, they all pitched in to buy chocolate bars, canned tuna, and flatbread.

Shortly after 6 P.M., they got on a northbound train destined for Belgrade. Instead of taking seats, Ghaith and his friends squeezed into a bathroom to hide; one of them had heard that the Greek authorities were throwing refugees off trains, whether or not they had tickets. After Ghaith took a group selfie, they switched off their phones, locked the door, turned off the light, and kept quiet whenever someone fidgeted with the doorknob.

Thirty minutes into the journey, a man holding a child began beating on the locked door. In frustration, he called a conductor, who sensed that people were inside and demanded that the door be opened. Ghaith and his friends stumbled out, their faces slick with perspiration. To their surprise, the conductor let them stay on the train. They played *Trex*, a card game, with two British women for the next hour.

They hopped off in Evzonoï, two miles south of Macedonia, and hiked toward Gevgelija, a small casino town just north of the border. When they got to a beam bridge that crossed the Kanska River into Gevgelija, they found a dozen police officers holding back a crowd of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Africa. The officers began marching the refugees, in a column, back to Greece. Bahaa proposed making a run for it. “With this many people, they’ll never let us in,” he told Ghaith, before sprinting off into the woods. Ghaith and two others followed him. Bilal did not break away in time, and was left behind.

After the four men were sure that they had shaken the police, they returned to the bridge and hustled across. They got into Gevgelija around midnight, and near the train station they noticed several African refugees sleeping on the sidewalk. “We didn’t know where to sleep, so we just opened our sleeping bags there,” Bahaa told me. The next thing he knew, he said, “I woke up to a policeman hitting me with a metal rod.” He scooped up his sleeping bag and ran off. Though he got away—as did Ghaith and the others—Bahaa left his shoes behind.

In a dimly lit park, Ghaith and Bahaa climbed back into their sleeping bags. It wasn’t long before Bahaa felt a baton cracking again on his shoulders. It was the same officer as before, and he pounded Bahaa for several minutes. Joel Millman, of the International Organization for Migration, told me that in southeastern Europe the goal of the police was usually not to arrest refugees but to intimidate and harass them. If the Macedonians started arresting everyone, refugees “would overwhelm the jails,” he said, adding, “What would it cost to house them all? It’s astronomical.”

The Macedonian police collected Ghaith and his friends in a paddy wagon and took them back to the Greek border. Hiding in the woods, the refugees weighed their options. From a text message, Ghaith learned that Reem and Fayeze were still stuck in Athens; relatives of theirs, however, had just flown to Germany using fake documents provided by Abu Haider. Ghaith, feeling that a land journey was hopeless, proposed returning to Athens, finding Abu Haider, and flying to an E.U. country on a fake passport.

“We don’t have enough money to go back that way,” Bahaa insisted. “We have to keep trying on foot.” Bahaa prevailed, but the men were too afraid of the Gevgelija police to enter town again. On WhatsApp, Ghaith contacted Abu Amar, the host of the Facebook group. Abu Amar had turned his phone into a hotline for refugees; he was up late every night, guiding Syrians across borders and sending them annotated maps. His Facebook group continued dispensing advice. One post read, “The sea today and tomorrow is fatally dangerous. Don’t underestimate the situation. We have enough victims.” Three days later: “The storm is practically over. The best island to leave for today is Mytilene.”

Abu Amar recently told me, “Sometimes I get a call when I am just about to go to sleep: ‘We are stuck in the middle of the forest—can you help us?’ I go to sleep between 5 and 6 A.M., sleep until about 2 P.M. Very few people reach out to me then.” He had established his own channel on Zello, a walkie-talkie app, becoming a real-time Harriet Tubman. “I’ve been told that if you go into any coffee shop in Syria these days people are talking about me and asking for my number,” he said. (Not long ago, he made his own journey, travelling to Greece on a rubber raft, and then flying to Germany. He now lives outside Hamburg.)

“Keep in mind, this all counts as screen time.”

In a text message, Ghaith explained his dilemma to Abu Amar, who sent a map directing him and his companions to a nearby hill. They could easily skirt Gevgelija, Abu Amar said, without drawing attention from the authorities. The refugees climbed to the top of the hill, ducked in the bushes, ate from a blackberry patch, and rested until nightfall. “People don’t cross borders during daylight,” Bahaa explained to me.



They descended the hill around 8 P.M. and started following the railroad tracks that extended north from Gevgelija, through thick forest. They walked silently through the night. Wild dogs called in the distance. Ghaith strained to listen for police, bandits, or oncoming trains. Two months earlier, a train northbound from Gevgelija had killed fourteen refugees from Somalia and Afghanistan. “They didn’t hear it coming,” Ghaith said.

At dawn, they saw a convenience store near the tracks, and stopped. Ghaith was delighted to be somewhere with modern plumbing: he had refused to relieve himself in the woods. In his youth, he had never gone camping—he told me that he didn’t see the appeal of “sleeping in the middle of nowhere.” At the store, they bought bottled water, a

loaf of bread, and Nutella. In the bathroom, Bahaa cleaned his feet, which were blistered and bloody from trudging through brambles in flip-flops. They unrolled their sleeping bags in a grassy area outside the store and fell asleep for a few hours.

They resumed following the tracks, and in midafternoon they reached a village five stops north of Gevgelija. In a text, Abu Amar advised them to take the next train going north. They boarded with dozens of other refugees. When the train halted for a few minutes in Skopje, Macedonia's capital, human-rights activists were roaming the platform with baskets full of water bottles, bananas, apples, vitamin packs, and croissants. Ghaith leaned out the train window, catching items as they were lobbed up to him.

They disembarked at the last stop before the Serbian border and took directions from a Macedonian police officer about how to sneak across. Local authorities, it seemed, were happy to lend assistance to refugees who were leaving the country.

It was terrible weather for trekking—"raining and muddy and very cold," Bahaa recalls. Ghaith was out of contact with his wife; he was trying to preserve his phone's battery life, in case he needed to use G.P.S. At dusk, they joined a group of Afghans, until one of them turned to Ghaith and said, "If you want to keep walking with us, you'll have to pay." Ghaith and his friends split off.

Bahaa led the group through the woods. When he glimpsed a flashlight through the trees, he told the others to lie flat on the ground. He waited until the beam panned away, then popped up.

"Stop!" a Serbian guard yelled. The refugees froze. "You can't cross there!" he told them. Then, unexpectedly, he pointed in another direction, urging them onward into Serbia.

Ghaith and Bahaa made it to Preševo, one of the southernmost towns in Serbia, around 10 P.M. They were pleasantly surprised when a resident greeted them with "*Salaam aleikum*." Bahaa asked the man if any restaurants were still open, and was given directions to a burger joint around the corner. At the counter, Bahaa recalls, "I ordered some sandwiches, and asked them, 'Is this halal meat?' And they said, 'Of course. This is a Muslim town.'" That night, in Preševo's main mosque, Ghaith and Bahaa offered a token donation of one euro, then pulled out their sleeping bags and crashed on the floor.

The next day, they got on a bus to Belgrade, where they reunited with Bilal, the Iraqi, who had made it to Serbia independently. The refugees were immediately bombarded by taxi-drivers shouting the names of Hungarian towns just over the border. Ghaith was excited, but he also knew that the next stage of the journey posed a big risk. Unlike Serbia and Macedonia, Hungary was an E.U. member, and was covered by the Dublin Regulation. Ghaith dreaded the idea of being forced to settle in Hungary. "I knew we needed to be careful not to get stamped," he said.

At the Belgrade train station, a man asked them if they needed a place to stay. They followed him to an apartment that had two mattresses on the floor, and each traveller paid fifteen euros for the night. Ghaith took a shower to wash off the mud caked behind his ears. A short time later, a young couple—friends of the apartment’s owner—stopped by, in a silver Peugeot coupe. Alejandro, as he was known, was tall, with shaggy hair and sunglasses; his girlfriend, who went by Tina, spoke English and wore coral-colored lipstick.

Alejandro said that he knew a Roma man who had been shuttling Syrians into Austria for the past two years, through Hungary. Tina told the refugees that the trip cost thirteen hundred euros per person, and that they could pay upon arriving in Vienna. At 8 P.M., Alejandro picked up the refugees at the train station and headed north on a motorway, toward the Hungarian border. But, Tina noted in a recent message, there were “a lot of police officers” on the road. Alejandro got spooked and turned back.

“Up here! Beef jerky, trail mix, energy bars!”

SEPTEMBER 27, 2010

Tina, who has a day job in a furniture store, told me that “smuggling is dangerous.” At one point this summer, she was moving fifty people a week across borders, and making as much as fifty euros per refugee. Though the work was illegal, she considered it honorable. “We help them to go on to some better place, to have a better life,” she told me. She was from Bosnia, and Alejandro was from Kosovo; both of their families had been displaced by war, and they empathized with the refugees.



Three days later, on June 29th, Ghaith and the others set out again with Alejandro. This time, there were few police along the road. Not far from the Hungarian border, Alejandro handed the refugees over to his Roma friend, who led them for two hours through a forest. Weaving through the trees, Ghaith felt his stomach clench in fear of being caught. The Hungarian government had become increasingly hostile to refugees: it had recently announced a plan to construct a thirteen-foot-high wall at the Serbian border.

At some point in their trek through the woods, Ghaith and his friends crossed into Hungary. They reached a road, and a third smuggler, Miki, loaded them into a van. Ghaith, Bahaa, and Bilal crouched on the floor, so that they couldn’t be seen through the windows. It wasn’t particularly comfortable, but, as Tina put it, “they could breathe.” Soon, Miki was speeding on a highway toward Vienna while the refugees slept. “We were almost done,” Ghaith recalls.

The sky was a clear blue when they got to Vienna, the next morning. Miki parked in a garage, unloaded the refugees, collected their money, and left. Ghaith and his friends sat in an elegantly landscaped park and picnicked on dates and tuna fish.

That afternoon, Bahaa tried to ask passersby how they could get to Germany, but people shrugged and kept walking. “They didn’t want to get in trouble,” he said. The men bought tickets for a train to Salzburg, and sat separately, to be inconspicuous; to Ghaith’s relief, no one asked to see his immigration papers.

At the Salzburg station, a taxi-driver asked the men if they needed transportation. Bahaa negotiated with him, ultimately agreeing to pay the driver eight hundred euros to take them to Munich. Two hours later, they pulled up in front of an apartment outside the city. The cousin of one of Ghaith’s friends lived there, and was willing to let them use the apartment as a way station. Within hours, the refugees began dispersing. Bilal left for Düsseldorf, to stay with family members of Reem. Bahaa booked a ticket for a train to Dortmund, where his brothers were living. Ghaith embraced him and said goodbye. “We’ll keep in touch,” he promised.

Ghaith then called his brother, Ghalib. “Don’t you miss me?” Ghaith joked. “I’m here. What should I do?”

Ghalib asked Ghaith if he was teasing him, and Ghaith sent him a dropped pin on Viber, the messaging app, confirming that he was indeed in Germany. The next day, Ghalib flew to Munich from Sweden.

Ghaith waited for him at the apartment. When he opened the door, Ghalib kissed Ghaith’s neck and wept, then collapsed onto a couch and covered his eyes. They hadn’t seen each other in three years. “It was the most beautiful moment in my life,” Ghalib told me recently. “I knew the amount of suffering that Ghaith had been through.” He added, “I felt that I had gotten him into trouble, and he’s my brother. I felt like a mountain has been lifted off my shoulder.”

But there was something more. “When I hugged him, I could smell our home, and I could smell our mother,” Ghalib said, quavering with emotion. “I was hugging the old Syria.”

On a sunny Sunday in late August, Ghaith and his friend Taher, who was also from Jdeidet Artouz, decided to go to a Swedish beach. Ghaith had on denim shorts and a turquoise polo shirt, and his hair was trimmed close around his temples—thanks to a fresh clipper cut from Ghalib. We got on a bus to Askimsbadet, on the North Sea, six miles south of Gothenburg. Ghaith had been living in Sweden since July 4th. He had travelled by train from Munich to Copenhagen and then to Malmö, crossing into Sweden on the Øresund Bridge. Nobody ever asked to see his passport.

He went to the front of the bus to pay our fare, intending to use an A.T.M. card that had been provided by the Swedish government. He was receiving a monthly allowance of approximately two hundred dollars. “Sweden is good to us,” he told me. The bus driver, sensing that Ghaith was a refugee, waived the fare.

When Ghaith arrived in Sweden, an immigration officer recorded his fingerprints, ran the data through an E.U. database, and confirmed that he had not previously been processed in Europe. “You are now under the custody of Sweden,” she told him. “Sweden will take care of you.” Ghaith subsequently attended an orientation session to learn, as he put it, “what Sweden owes to me and what I owe to Sweden.” Given the dire nature of the situation in Syria, he is almost certainly assured of being granted residency. “They were promising me the same things that any Swedish citizen would get,” Ghaith said. He was planning to enroll in a free daily language course. In Europe, Sweden is providing Syrian asylum seekers with the most direct route to permanent residency, though other European countries offer comparable financial assistance, and, in August, Germany began allowing Syrians to bypass the Dublin Regulation.

On the bus, Ghaith scrolled through music files on his phone. The Swedish national anthem started up, loud enough to turn heads. “I listen to it each morning,” Ghaith said, proudly.

“This is humiliating. Couldn’t you drop me a block from school?”

MAY 15, 2000

His wife remained in Syria. Did he feel guilty enjoying days at the beach? “She’s coming, too,” he said, though he acknowledged that it would take time. Sweden provides a family-reunification program, but only for asylum seekers with residency status. The program had recently brought Ghalib’s wife and children to Sweden. Ghaith told me that his wife is currently using an app on her phone to study Swedish, and can eventually join him—though first she will have to cross the Syrian border into a country, such as Jordan, that has a Swedish consulate, and apply for residency.



The refugees who had gone to Germany sounded less enamored of their new lives. Bilal told me that he couldn’t find work and felt “out of luck.” Bahaa was collecting a monthly stipend, and, though he wasn’t supposed to be working yet, he was doing shifts at a supermarket and being paid under the table. “I just want to get back to my engineering studies,” he said. Reem and her son eventually made it out of Athens, using fake Italian I.D. cards, and reunited with her husband in a town near Düsseldorf. She said that her husband is eager to resume his dentistry practice, but there are several barriers: he first

needs to become certified in Germany, and, in addition, he has to complete the lengthy culture-and-language program required to establish long-term residency. “We are ready to work,” she said. “I don’t want to just sit around.” She is due to give birth any day now.

At Askimsbadet, Ghaith and his friend followed blanket-toting beachgoers to the shore, where Syrian and Somali families picnicked among hundreds of blond heads. Kites fluttered in the air.

An hour later, six more of Ghaith’s friends—all Syrian refugees whom he knew from law school or from Jdeidet Artouz—showed up carrying a grill, a bag of charcoal, and a three-foot hookah. They stripped to their underwear and prepared to go swimming. These were friends for life, Ghaith said, though he otherwise cared little for Syria anymore. Once his wife arrived, they would have children and he would raise them as Swedes. He didn’t care if his kids spoke Arabic. He added, in broken English, “I worship Sweden.”

During the next several weeks, his mood fluctuated. He was excited when he picked up a few shifts on a crew that was building a new pizzeria in Gothenburg. But he was deeply disturbed when he saw the widely circulated photograph of Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler who had drowned at sea and washed up on a Turkish beach. “That picture should shake humanity,” he told me. On Facebook, he reposted the image, writing, in Arabic, “The best thing about your death, my dear, is that your shoe is in our faces.” He called his wife and they talked about the photograph; they agreed that if they had a son they would name him Aylan.

Around the same time, Austrian authorities found an abandoned poultry truck with seventy-one dead refugees inside. Ghaith said that he couldn’t help but feel lucky: “I made it, while thousands of others didn’t. Some died on the way, some died in Syria. Every day, you hear about people drowning. Just think about how much every Syrian is suffering inside Syria to endure the suffering of this trip.” He paused. “In Greece, someone asked me, ‘Why take the chance?’ I said, ‘In Syria, there’s a hundred-per-cent chance that you’re going to die. If the chance of making it to Europe is even one per cent, then that means there is a one-per-cent chance of your leading an actual life.’” ♦



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