

A REPORTER AT LARGE APRIL 10, 2017 ISSUE

# THE DESPERATE JOURNEY OF A TRAFFICKED GIRL

*Every year, thousands of teen-agers from one city in Nigeria risk death and endure forced labor and sex work on the long route to Europe.*

By Ben Taub



*Girls from Benin City who set out voluntarily, like Blessing, can become caught in a network of forced labor and sex work.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX MAJOLI / MAGNUM FOR THE NEW YORKER

**I**t was close to midnight on the coast of Libya, a few miles west of Tripoli. At the water's edge, armed Libyan smugglers pumped air into thirty-foot rubber dinghies. Some three thousand refugees and migrants, mostly sub-Saharan Africans, silent and barefoot, stood nearby in rows of ten. Oil platforms glowed in the Mediterranean.

The Libyans ordered male migrants to carry the inflated boats into the water, thirty on each side. They waded in and held the boats steady as a smuggler directed other migrants to board, packing them as tightly as possible. People in the center would suffer chemical burns if the fuel leaked and mixed with water. Those straddling the sides could easily fall into the sea. Officially, at least five thousand and ninety-eight migrants died in the Mediterranean last year, but Libya's coastline is more than a thousand miles long, and nobody knows how many boats sink without ever being seen. Several of the migrants had written phone numbers on their clothes, so that someone could call their families if their bodies washed ashore.

The smugglers knelt in the sand and prayed, then stood up and ordered the migrants to push off. One pointed to the sky. "Look at this star!" he said. "Follow it." Each boat left with only enough fuel to reach international waters.

In one dinghy, carrying a hundred and fifty people, a Nigerian teen-ager named Blessing started to cry. She had travelled six months to get to this point, and her face was gaunt and her ribs were showing. She wondered if God had visited her mother in dreams and shown her that she was alive. The boat hit swells and people started vomiting. By dawn, Blessing had fainted. The boat was taking on water.

In recent years, tens of millions of Africans have fled areas afflicted with famine, drought, persecution, and violence. Ninety-four per cent of them remain on the continent, but each year hundreds of thousands try to make it to Europe. The Mediterranean route has also become a kind of pressure-release valve for countries affected by corruption and extreme inequality. “If not for Italy, I promise, there would be civil war in Nigeria,” a migrant told me. Last year, after Nigeria’s currency collapsed, more Nigerians crossed the sea than people of any other nationality.

The flood of migrants is not a new phenomenon, but for years the European Union had some success in slowing it. The E.U. built a series of fences in Morocco and started paying coastal African nations to keep migrants from reaching European waters. Many migrants spent years living in border countries, repeatedly trying and failing to cross. Muammar Qaddafi saw an opportunity. In 2010, he demanded that Europe pay him five billion euros per year; otherwise, he said, Libya could send so many migrants that “tomorrow Europe might no longer be European.”

The following year, as NATO forces bombed Libya, Qaddafi’s troops rounded up tens of thousands of black and South Asian guest workers in Tripoli, crammed them into fishing trawlers, and launched them in the direction of Italy. Then Qaddafi was killed, Libya descended into chaos, and its shores became impossible to police. Europe’s strategy had failed; by 2013, smuggling networks connected most major population centers in the northern half of Africa to Tripoli’s coast.

As African migrants head toward the Mediterranean, they unwittingly follow the ancient caravan routes of the trans-Saharan slave trade. For eight hundred years, black slaves and concubines were transported through the same remote desert villages. Now that the old slave routes are ungovernable and awash in weapons, tens of thousands of human beings who set out voluntarily find themselves trafficked, traded between owners, and forced to work as laborers or prostitutes. The men who enter debt bondage come from all over Africa, but the overwhelming majority of females fit a strikingly narrow profile: they are teen-age girls from around Benin City, the capital of Edo State, in southern Nigeria—girls like Blessing.

I visited Nigeria last fall, during the coronation of the new Oba, the traditional ruler of the Edo people, who will preside over spiritual matters until his death. The Oba chose the name Ewuare II, in tribute to a predecessor who assumed the throne around 1440. During the reign of Ewuare I, Benin City became the center of a powerful kingdom, which was eventually surrounded by more than nine thousand miles of moats and mud walls. Portuguese merchants traded with the Edo, and the Oba sent an ambassador to Lisbon. European accounts of Benin City, written during the next several hundred years, describe a kingdom rich in palm oil, ivory, and bronze statues, but also one that engaged in slavery and

human sacrifice. The Edo, like other groups in the region, practiced traditional rituals involving local gods, which the Europeans called juju, a name that spread across West Africa; as Christian missionaries converted most of southern Nigeria, juju persisted as a set of parallel beliefs.

By the late eighteen-hundreds, the British had colonized much of Nigeria, but the Oba engaged them in a trade war and refused to allow them to annex his kingdom. In 1897, after the Edo slaughtered a British delegation, colonial forces, pledging to end slavery and ritual sacrifice, ransacked the city and burned it to the ground.

Today, Nigeria is Africa's richest country, but the money that is set aside for public infrastructure is often embezzled or stolen by government officials. Benin City has daily power outages and few paved roads. As Nigeria's economy has grown—spurred by oil extraction, agriculture, and foreign investment—so has the percentage of its citizens who live in total poverty. Some wealthy businessmen travel with paramilitary escorts; police officers demand bribes at gunpoint, and crippled beggars crawl through traffic near the Oba's palace, tapping on car windows and pleading for leftover food.

One day, I went to the Uwelu spare-parts market, where adolescent boys lift car engines into wheelbarrows, and bare-chested vendors haggle over parts salvaged from foreign scrap yards. A dirt path at the western end of the market leads to a shack where I saw a middle-aged woman dressed in purple selling chips, candy, soda, and beer. I asked if she was Blessing's mother, Doris. She nodded and laughed, then started to cry.

Blessing's family used to own a house and a small plot of land. Her father was a bricklayer, but he died in a car accident when Blessing was a little girl. The family was close to penniless, and Doris was left to raise her four children alone.

Blessing's older brother, Godwin, began repairing cars in Uwelu. Her sister Joy went to live with an aunt. When Blessing was thirteen or fourteen, she dropped out of school and started an apprenticeship with a tailor, but he wanted money to train her, and after six months he let her go. She was despondent, and believed that she had no future.

Through friends, Blessing learned of a travel broker in Lagos, who said that he could get her a passport, a visa, and a plane ticket to Europe. Once Blessing found work there, he promised, she would earn enough to support the entire family. "She tell me that she want to go," Doris said to me. "She say, 'Mummy, we suffering. No food. Nothing.'" Doris sold the house and the land, and gave all the money to the broker, who promptly disappeared.

*"You think I just roll out of bed majestic?"*

Doris and the children moved into a small apartment without plumbing or electricity and hung a portrait of the father above a broken couch. Blessing, who was tall and slender, with large eyes and

prominent cheekbones, helped her mother sell provisions. In the evenings, she took the money they had earned to another market, where everything is a few cents cheaper, to restock the shop. They ate with whatever money was left, which meant that sometimes they didn't eat.

Blessing blamed herself for her family's troubles. Godwin told me that, in February of last year, "Blessing just left without telling anybody."

The migration of young women out of Benin City began in the nineteen-eighties, when Edo women—fed up with repression, domestic chores, and a lack of economic opportunities—travelled to Europe by airplane, with fake documents. Many ended up doing sex work on the streets of major cities—London, Paris, Madrid, Athens, Rome. By the end of the decade, according to a report commissioned by the United Nations, "the fear of AIDS rendered drug-addicted Italian girls unattractive on the prostitution market"; Nigerians from Edo State largely filled the demand. The money wasn't great, by European standards, but, before long, parents in Benin City were replacing ramshackle houses of mud and wood with walled-off properties. Lists of expensive assets—cars, furniture, generators—purchased with remittances from Europe were included in obituaries, and envious neighbors took note. Pentecostal ministers, preaching a gospel of prosperity, extolled the benefits of migration.

Women were sending back word of well-compensated employment as hairdressers, dressmakers, housekeepers, nannies, and maids, but the actual nature of their work in Italy remained hidden, and so parents urged their daughters to take out loans to travel to Europe and lift the family out of poverty. In time, sex workers became madams; from Italy, they employed recruiters, transporters, and document forgers in Nigeria.

By the mid-nineties, most Edo women who went to Europe in this way "were probably aware that they would have to engage in prostitution to repay their debts," according to the U.N. report. "They were, however, unaware of the conditions of violent and aggressive exploitation that they would be subjected to." Between 1994 and 1998, at least a hundred and sixteen Nigerian sex workers were murdered in Italy.

In 2003, Nigeria passed its first law prohibiting human trafficking. But it was too late. The U.N. report, published the same year, concluded that the industry was "so ingrained in Edo State, especially in Benin City and its immediate environs, that it is estimated that virtually every Benin family has one member or the other involved." Today, tens of thousands of Edo women have done sex work in Europe, and some streets in Benin City are named for madams. The city is filled with women and girls who have come back, but some who can't find work end up making the journey again.

Many of the original traffickers came from Upper Sakpoba Road, in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, where children hawk yams and sex workers earn less than two dollars per client. Nuns working for an organization called the Committee for the Support and Dignity of Women travel to local schools and markets, explaining to girls the brutality of the industry. But a nun told me that women in

the market on Upper Sakpoba Road warn them off. “Many of them say we should not stop this trafficking, because their daughters are making money,” she said. “The families are involved. Everybody is involved.”

“I was a victim before, when I was very young,” one woman told me. “I was living with my auntie in Benin City,” she said. “She asked me if I would like to travel to Italy.” For the next six years, she travelled through Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Algeria, and Morocco, working as a prostitute, sending money to her aunt, and believing that she would soon be brought to Europe. After she was abandoned in an oasis city in the Sahara, she made her way back to Nigeria. Today, she makes a living trafficking others.

**I**n Benin City, important agreements are often sealed with an oath, administered by a juju priest. The legal system can be dodged or corrupted, the thinking goes, but there is no escaping the consequences of violating a promise made before the old gods. Many sex traffickers have used this tradition to guarantee the obedience of their victims. Madams in Italy have their surrogates in Nigeria take the girls to a local shrine, where the juju priest performs a bonding ritual, typically involving the girl’s fingernails, pubic hair, or blood, which the priest retains until she has repaid her debt to her trafficker.

One afternoon, I met an elderly Edo juju priestess who maintains a special relationship with the god who lives in the Ogba River. She wore a white sheet and a red parrot feather, and carried a wand decorated with charms, to detect any “demon priest” who challenged her spiritually. When I asked her to explain juju contracts, she said that all parties must obey them, “because the solution is from the gods.”

“You say that when you get there you will not run,” Sophia, a young woman who had come back from Europe, told me. In exchange for the madam covering travel expenses, the girl agrees to work for her until she has paid back the cost of the journey; the madam keeps her documents, and tells her that any attempt to flee will cause the juju, now inhabiting her body, to attack her. “If you don’t pay, you will die,” Sophia said. “If you speak with the police, you will die. If you tell the truth, you will die.”

The traffickers are no less convinced of juju’s efficacy. Last year, Italian police heard a madam, on a wiretapped call, tell an associate that one of her victims had broken her juju oath, and would die. As a guarantee, often “the madam films girls naked, swearing to her the oath of loyalty,” Sophia said. “She says if you run she is going to leak it on Facebook.” This had happened to one of Sophia’s friends, and, to prove it, she pulled up the video on her phone.

**B**efore Blessing disappeared, she met with a Yoruba trafficker without telling her family, but she balked when she discovered that the woman wanted her to become a sex worker. Soon afterward, her friend Faith introduced her to an Igbo woman with European connections—she was elegant, well dressed, and kind. The woman promised Blessing and Faith that she could take them to Italy; she would pay for their journey, and find them jobs, and then they would pay her back. Blessing dreamed of

completing her education, of buying back the home her mother had lost. She climbed into a van, along with Faith, the woman, and several other girls.

They began a perilous journey north. Avoiding territory controlled by the terrorist group Boko Haram, they crossed an unguarded part of Nigeria's border with Niger. The fertile red soil of the tropics became drier, finer, and soon there were only withered shrubs in the sand. After several days and a thousand miles, they reached Agadez, an old caravan city at the southern edge of the Sahara.

In Agadez, locals pick dust out of their hair and eyes and ears and toenails, and sweep it out of their homes, but by the time they have finished it is as if they had never begun. Men wrap their heads and faces in nine-foot scarves, called *chèches*, and dress in flowing robes. Everyone wears sandals; even in the winter, the temperature can approach a hundred degrees.

Agadez has always been a transit point, a maze of mud-brick enclosures in which to eat and rest and exchange cargo before setting off for the next outpost. Its oldest walls were built some eight hundred years ago, and by 1449 it had become the center of a Tuareg kingdom ruled by the Sultan of Aïr, named for the local mountains. Traders stopped in Agadez while crossing the desert in miles-long caravans carrying salt, gold, ivory, and slaves. The Tuareg developed a reputation for guiding merchants through the desert, then robbing them.

Most of Niger's population is concentrated in the south, in a semiarid band known as the Sahel, which runs across Africa. Beyond that, to the north, eighty per cent of Nigérien territory is desert, much of which is uninhabitable. Though the Tuareg make up just a tenth of Niger's population, they control vast swaths of empty land. They have rebelled against the government several times, and, together with Toubou tribesmen, they have hoped to establish an independent Saharan state, spanning parts of Mali, Niger, Algeria, Chad, and Libya. The Tuareg and the Toubou signed a territorial agreement in 1875, but recently it has begun to fray. The two groups are currently engaged in bloody fighting across the border, in southern Libya.

All manner of contraband passes through Agadez—counterfeit goods, hashish, cocaine, heroin. Stolen Libyan oil is sold by the roadside in liquor bottles. After the fall of Qaddafi, Tuaregs and Toubous raided abandoned weapons depots in southern Libya and sold whatever they didn't keep to insurgent groups in neighboring countries. By 2014, however, the value of the migration trade had surpassed that of any other business in the city.

Blessing's van pulled into a walled-off lot containing a building known as a "connection house," where dozens of migrants were guarded by men holding daggers and swords. There was nothing to do but wait. From other migrants, Blessing picked up the vocabulary of her surroundings: the boss was a "connection man"; the light-skinned Tuaregs were known as Arabos; the darker-skinned Toubous were referred to as

Black Libyans. The woman still hadn't given Blessing and Faith her name; she just said to call her Madam, and she never let them venture outside.

The compound was situated in a migrant ghetto, a shabby cluster of connection houses on the outskirts of the city. Niger belongs to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a visa-free zone, so its western and southern borders are open to some three hundred and fifty million citizens of fourteen other countries. Most of the migrants had travelled more than a thousand miles by bus, and arrived in Agadez with the phone number of their connection man—usually a migrant turned businessman, of their same nationality or colonial heritage. Nigerians, Gambians, Ghanaians, and Liberians stuck together, because they spoke English; Malians, Senegalese, and Guineans could do business with any connection man who spoke French. For those who arrived without contacts, recruiters at the bus station offered transport across the desert. Migrants gathered at A.T.M.s and phone shops near the station. Once a deal was struck, the recruiters drove the migrants to the ghettos on motorcycles, and the connection men paid them a small commission.

Most women from Nigeria stayed inside the migrant ghettos. They didn't need to work, because their travel had been paid for by traffickers in Europe. The connection houses were hot and crowded, but the women were fed and protected until it was time to cross the desert. Other Nigerian girls, who were on their own, had to do sex work in order to feed themselves and to finance the next stage of the journey. In Agadez, sex workers typically earn around three dollars per client, much of which goes to local madams, in exchange for room and board. One Nigerian teen-ager told me that it took her eighteen months and hundreds of clients to earn enough money to leave.

Most Nigerian brothels in Agadez are in the Nasarawa slum, a sewage-filled neighborhood a short walk from the grand mosque, the tallest mud-brick structure in the world. One afternoon, a young woman from Lagos sat outside a brothel holding the infant son of her friend Adenike, a seventeen-year-old girl, who was with a client. A few minutes later, a tall Toubou man emerged, adjusting his chèche. Adenike followed, wiping her hands on her spandex shorts. She picked up her baby, but soon another client arrived, so she passed the infant to another Nigerian girl, who looked no older than thirteen and was also doing sex work, and led the man past a hanging blanket and into her room.

Each Monday, Tuareg and Toubou drivers went to the migrant ghettos, collected cash from the connection men, and loaded some five thousand sub-Saharanans into the beds of Toyota Hilux pickup trucks, roughly thirty per vehicle. They set off with a Nigérien military convoy, which would accompany them part of the way to Libya, a journey of several days. Some migrants brought small backpacks containing food and cell phones; others had nothing. One driver, a young Toubou named Oumar, told me that he had made the trip twenty-five times. When I asked him if he had to give bribes along the way, he listed amounts and checkpoints: seventy thousand West African francs (about a hundred and fifteen dollars) to the police before they got to the desert; ten thousand to the gendarmes at Tourayat; twenty thousand split between the police and the republican guard at Séguédine; another forty

thousand at Dao Timmi for the military and the transit police; and, finally, at Madama, the last checkpoint before Libya, ten thousand to the military.

*From Agadez, migrants reach the Ténéré desert. "It's like the sea," a Nigerian girl said. "It don't have a start, it don't have an end."*

According to an internal report by Niger's national police, obtained by Reuters, there were at least seventy connection houses in Agadez, each protected by a crooked police officer. In a separate investigation, Niger's anti-corruption agency found that, because funds from the military budget were stolen in the capital, bribes paid by smugglers at desert checkpoints were essential to the basic functioning of the security forces. Without them, soldiers wouldn't have enough money to buy fuel, parts for their vehicles, or food.

Shortly before I arrived in Agadez, Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, came to Niger on a tour of African countries, hoping to reduce the flow of migrants, and promising development funds in return. "The well-being of Africa is in Germany's interest," she said. After her visit, everything changed. Security forces raided the ghettos, and arrested their former patrons. Military and police officers were replaced at all desert checkpoints between Agadez and the Libyan border. Niger's President, Mahamadou Issoufou, announced that he and Merkel had agreed "to curb irregular migration."

Mohamed Anacko, a Tuareg leader who serves as the president of the Agadez Regional Council, which oversees more than two hundred and fifty thousand square miles of territory, saw the situation differently. "Niger has a knife at its throat," he told me. The city's only functioning economy was the movement of people and goods. "Each smuggler supports a hundred families," he said. If the crackdown continued, "these families won't eat anymore."

To address the crisis, Anacko called a Regional Council meeting and invited a dozen of the biggest smugglers in the Sahara—half were Tuareg, half Toubou, and all had fought in recent rebellions. Wearing chèches and tribal robes, they sat at two long tables in an airless meeting space at the Regional Council's headquarters. More than four hundred smugglers had asked the council to represent them. Anacko promised to convey their grievances to the state, and to demand the release of their colleagues.

After Anacko's opening remarks, a middle-aged Tuareg who went by the name Alber stood up and partly unwound his white turban, uncovering his mouth. "We are not criminals—we are transporters!" he shouted. "How are we going to eat? Take tourists? There are never any tourists! Never! We cannot live!" He pointed at me. "What do you want us to become? Thieves? We don't want to be thieves! We don't want to steal! What do you want us to do?"

Alber sat down, fuming. Across the table, a tall, handsome Toubou named Sidi stood up, furrowed his brow, and calmly argued that if the European Union really wanted to halt migration it should engage the



smugglers, not pay off their government to arrest them. Another speaker reminded the group that they had rebelled in the past. Why should they stop smuggling without being offered other means to survive?

*"It's been nice, but I really have to be getting back to my own virtual reality."*

The next day, I met with Alber at his home, a mud-brick building in a neighborhood that was the site of frequent raids. He welcomed me inside and offered water from a large communal bowl. The room was dark. Three other men lounged on a couch, all of them heads of powerful smuggling families.

"I know more than seventy people who have been arrested," Alber said. "But I don't know the law. Nobody knows the specifics of the law." Although an anti-migration law was passed in early 2015, it had never been seriously enforced; apparently, the Nigérien government had made little effort to inform the smugglers of its implications. Less than twenty per cent of Niger's adult population is literate. Besides, Alber continued, "you can't tell me not to take someone from Agadez to Madama. We're in the same country. It's like a taxi."

Another smuggler, Ibrahim Moussa, spoke up. "Everyone calls them migrants, but we don't agree," he said. "They're people of the ECOWAS. They're at home in Agadez. We go just as far as the border. After that, they're migrants." (Later, however, Moussa and Alber offered to connect me with contacts in Libya.)

"Nobody would go into the desert if we had good options here," Moussa added. "The desert is hell. You are always close to death." He sighed. "The European Union—it's because they're living well that they want Niger to stop migration. Why can't we live, too?"

There was further trouble. Boko Haram, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and other terrorist groups are leading insurgencies in the countries surrounding Niger, and suspected jihadis had recently killed twenty-two Nigérien soldiers near Agadez. A few days after that, an American aid worker was kidnapped and taken to Mali, and a notorious Toubou narco-trafficker was assassinated in public. There was also talk of the fighting between the Tuareg and the Toubou in Libya spilling across the desert and taking root in Agadez. Nobody knew whether to attribute the gunfire at night to a drug war, a tribal conflict, a personal vendetta, a migration raid, or an Islamist attack.

Every smuggler I met expressed concern that the crackdown in Agadez would leave local young men vulnerable to recruitment by jihadi groups. Previously, Moussa said, "every time we see something suspicious, we tell the state." Tips from the desert, passed through the Nigérien military chain of command, can provide information to American and French counterterrorism operations in the region. (The United States is currently building a drone base in West Africa half a mile from Alber's house.) But now, Alber said, "If I see a convoy of terrorists, will I tell the state? I will not, because I will be afraid of being arrested."

“The desert is vast,” Moussa added. “Without us, the state would see nothing.”

“Have you seen the Air mountains?” Anacko asked me, in his office. “No Islamists can enter—none—because the population doesn’t want them. The people want peace. But if there is no more economic development, and the people are going to prison whenever they work with migrants, it’s certain: there will be jihadis in the mountains. I’m sure of it! And the day that the terrorists have a base in the Air the Sahel is finished.” He continued, “The Americans and the Europeans won’t be able to dislodge the terrorists from the mountains. It will be like Afghanistan. They will have created this, and the Islamic State will have been right. We’ll all become the Islamic State in the end.”

The crackdown had another immediate effect: more dead migrants. To avoid checkpoints, smugglers were taking unfamiliar routes and abandoning their passengers when they spotted what appeared to be a military convoy on the horizon.

“When you go to the Sahara desert, you will meet many skeletons,” a man from Benin City named Monday told me. During his trip north, the truck carrying him and twenty-seven other migrants had been attacked by bandits; a bullet had grazed his head, removing a tuft of hair. The truck had turned over and the driver had run away, leaving the migrants behind. Everybody scattered, except for Monday and another Nigerian, named Destiny, who used to work at the Uwelu market. They remained at the site of the wreckage. “After three days, one boy came back,” Destiny recalled. “He said the others died in the desert. He drank his piss. After that, he gave up. He died in front of us.” Nigérien troops found Monday and Destiny, and took them to Dirkou, an ancient salt-trading village now filled with abandoned migrants. Some steal food from locals and beg truckers to bring them to Libya; others are transported in military trucks back to Agadez, where they are deposited at the local U.N. migration facility.

“I know it’s a death game, but I don’t care,” Alimamy, a migrant from Sierra Leone, told me in Agadez. He had nearly died during his first attempt to cross the Sahara; now his money was gone, his smuggler was in jail, and he was looking for a way to try again. “If I make it to Italy, life will be O.K.,” he said. Back in Sierra Leone, “we are already dead while we’re alive.”

The crackdown had also trapped the sex workers in the Nasarawa slum. “When the road is safe, I can go,” a young woman from Benin City told me. She had just earned enough money to cross the desert when the route closed. “I will just have patience,” she said.

After the raids, it became impossible to pick up migrants at the connection houses and drive them into the desert. But there were other methods. Oumar, the Toubou smuggler, left Agadez in a Toyota Hilux with a Nokia G.P.S. unit, two hundred litres of water, and extra fuel. He got through the checkpoint at a narrow pass without any trouble. Fifty miles on, past the black volcanic boulders of the Air mountains, he and six other smugglers gathered and waited for their cargo to arrive. Huge trucks routinely transport workers and supplies from Agadez to gold and uranium mines in the desert. The

workers, sometimes more than a hundred per truck, sit on top and cling to ropes. This time, however, when a truck pulled up, the men, their faces hidden in chèches, were not miners. The men climbed down. Oumar and the other smugglers put them in their vehicles and set off toward Libya, leaving behind an enormous cloud of dust.

**VIDEO:**

*A view from a smuggler's truck,  
driving through the Ténéré.*

After several hours in the mountains, Oumar reached the gates of the desert, the beginning of the Ténéré, an expanse of sand roughly the size of California. “It’s like the sea,” a seventeen-year-old Nigerian girl told me. “It don’t have a start, it don’t have an end.” Some years pass without a drop of rainfall. “Nothing lives there, not even insects,” Oumar said. “Sometimes you see birds, but if you give them water they die.”

Oumar stopped and let air out of his tires, for better traction in the soft sand. Navigating the Ténéré is always difficult; dunes form and re-form with the winds, so the horizon changes shape between journeys. Last summer, when a tire on one of the cars in Oumar’s convoy burst, the vehicle flipped, and seven migrants died. Another time, he watched a truck tumble down a dune—a frequent occurrence in the Ténéré. Everybody died, including the driver, and Oumar buried them under a thin layer of sand. On each trip, Oumar sees more desiccated corpses, covered and uncovered by the shifting sands. Migrants often fall out of trucks, and the drivers don’t always stop. When I asked him if he was afraid of dying in the Ténéré, he shook his head and clicked his tongue. “*C’est normal*,” he said.

*“Poor thing! Shouldn’t have tried eating that apple.”*

Oumar’s convoy evaded the military for four days and several hundred miles, but the checkpoint at Dao Timmi, situated at a gap between mountains in the Djado Plateau region, is unavoidable. Since the crackdown, the guards there have almost doubled their prices. Oumar paid, and continued roughly a hundred and fifty miles to Madama, the last checkpoint before the Libyan border. There, the soldiers now charge what he used to pay for the entire journey.

At the Libyan border, a black line of asphalt marks the beginning of a long, smooth highway heading north. But any relief belies the lawlessness and the cruelty to come. Last fall, at a checkpoint, a migrant from Sierra Leone named Abdul looked on as a Libyan man harassed a teen-age girl from Nigeria. “There was some argument, so the man just cocked his gun and shot the girl in her back,” Abdul told me. “We took the lady to the Hilux.” The Libyans shouted “*Haya!*”—meaning they should get out of there. The girl was still alive, but the driver took a six-hour detour into the desert, to a sprawling migrant graveyard, where small rocks arranged in circles marked each of the hundreds of bodies in it. Passports and identity cards had been placed with some of the rocks. “Most of the names that I see were Nigerian names,” Abdul continued. “Mostly girls.” By then, the teen-ager had died.

Before leaving Agadez, migrants are typically given the phone number of a connection man in southern Libya. For some, that means disembarking in Qatrun, three Toubou checkpoints and two hundred miles past the border; for others, it means paying an extra thirty thousand West African francs (about fifty dollars) to reach Sebha, a Saharan caravan city another hundred and eighty miles north. Oumar always leaves Qatrun shortly after two o'clock in the morning, because Sebha is the site of unpredictable conflict among militias, proxy forces, and jihadis, and the safest time to get there is just before dawn.

In Sebha, Oumar pulled into the driveway of a small house, and the passengers gave him the phone numbers of their connection men. He called each one to collect his migrants. Those who travel on credit are considered the property of the connection men who pay for their journey. "If you enter Sebha and you didn't already pay your money to the connection man, you will suffer," a Ghanaian political refugee named Stephen told me. "Morning time, they will beat you! Afternoon! They will beat you! In the night, they will beat you! Dawn! They will beat you!" Stephen buried his head in his hands, and said, under his breath, "Sebha is not a good place, Sebha is not a good place, Sebha is not a good place."

The connection houses in Sebha are especially dangerous for women and girls. One night, according to Bright, a seventeen-year-old boy from Benin City, a group of Libyans carrying swords started collecting women. "Some of the girls are pregnant—you see them. They are pregnant from the journey, not from home," he said. "Raped." A recent report commissioned by the U.N. estimated that nearly half the female refugees and migrants who pass through Libya are sexually assaulted, including children—often many times along the route. A twenty-one-year-old Nigerian named John told me that he had witnessed female migrants being murdered for refusing the advances of their Libyan captors.

Libya's connection houses are usually owned by locals but partly run by West Africans. "Some of the Ghanaians treat us worse than the Libyans," a young Ghanaian told me. Migrants are imprisoned, beaten with pipes, tortured with electricity, and then forced to call their relatives to get more money. Now that the negotiations are about who lives and who dies, the price of the journey often doubles.

"I was in prison for one month and two days," a twenty-one-year-old Gambian named Ousmane recalled. The facility was run by Libyans, and, to clarify the stakes and to make room for more detainees, "every Friday they would kill five people," he said. "Even if you pay, sometimes they don't set you free—they say they will throw you out, but they just kill you instead." Ousmane told the guards that he had no family to pay for him. "One Friday, they finally called my name," he said. Because Ousmane was one of the youngest detainees, an older migrant, who also couldn't pay, asked the Libyans to kill him in Ousmane's place. Before they took the man outside, he told Ousmane, "When you go to the Gambia, go to my village and tell them I am dead."

A few nights later, Ousmane escaped. He made his way back to Agadez and told his story to the U.N. migration agency, which helped him return to Gambia. In January, according to the newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*, the German Embassy in Niger sent a cable to Berlin corroborating these weekly executions, and

comparing the conditions in Libya's migrant connection houses to those of Nazi concentration camps. Sometimes the sick are buried alive.

Last spring, Blessing, Faith, and the madam left Agadez, crossed the desert, and made it to Brak, just north of Sebha, where they stayed in a private home. Their journey through the desert had been a blur of waiting, heat, thirst, discomfort, beatings, dead bodies, and fear. The madam continued to promise the girls education and lucrative work in Italy. It is unclear whether she was ever in a position to decide their fate; women who accompany girls across the desert are often only employees of traffickers in Italy. One day in Brak, the madam sold Blessing and Faith to the owner of a connection house, to work as prostitutes.

"It's not what you told me!" Blessing said. "You told me that I'm going to Italy, but now you say you want to drop me here?" She started sobbing. She hadn't sworn a juju oath, but the madam threatened to kill her.

In Benin City, Doris, Blessing's mother, received a phone call from a Nigerian woman with an Italian number. It had been three months since her daughter had disappeared, and the caller told her that unless she paid four hundred and eighty thousand naira (about fifteen hundred dollars) Blessing would be forced to work as a prostitute. "I say to the woman that I cannot get it," Doris told me.

That Sunday, at the weekly traders' meeting in the Uwelu market, Doris explained Blessing's plight and asked for help. Although Doris's shop was already running on loans, the group approved her request, charging twenty-per-cent interest. Godwin, Blessing's brother, dropped off the cash at a MoneyGram exchange service, using the details given by the woman on the phone. After that, there was no further word.

Blessing was delivered to another connection house in Brak. A few days later, armed men put her and several other migrants into the back of a truck, covered them with a blanket, and stacked watermelons on top, to conceal them from rival traffickers. The truck set off north, toward Tripoli. Faith stayed in Brak, because her family didn't pay.

The drive to Tripoli from Brak takes all day and is plagued with bandits, known among migrants as the "Asma boys." Like the connection men in Sebha, they rob black Africans, beat them, hold them captive, demand ransoms, and murder, sell, or enslave those who disobey orders or are unable to pay. Packed on top of one another in the trucks, and concealed under tarps and other cargo, the passengers can hardly breathe. Nevertheless, a teen-age Nigerian girl explained to me, "we can't make noise, so that the Asma boys don't catch us." Sometimes, after unloading the cargo in Tripoli, the smugglers discover that the passengers have suffocated.

Blessing was taken to a large detention center, a concrete room in an abandoned warehouse somewhere near Tripoli. For months, she stayed inside with more than a hundred people, huddled next to other Nigerian girls for safety. Arbitrary beatings and rapes were common. Sometimes the migrants were given only seawater to drink. People routinely died from starvation and disease.

*“What do the instructions say?”*

August 22nd came—Blessing’s birthday. But by then she had lost track of time. She cried every day, unaware of who controlled her fate and when she would be brought to the sea. When she sneezed, she wondered if it was a sign from God that her mother was thinking about her.

Outside the detention center, militias patrolled the streets in pickup trucks mounted with anti-aircraft guns. Libya is in the midst of a civil war; Tripoli is being fought over by two rival governments and a host of militias. Nevertheless, the European Union, desperate to quell the flood of migrants, has sent delegations to Tripoli to train and equip the coast guard. Militias, while purporting to police migration, sell migrants to smugglers and invite local Libyan builders to come to the detention centers and collect workers. “We have no choice,” a Nigerian man who cleaned houses, stacked cinder blocks, and worked on farms told me. “We can’t fight with them, because they have guns.”

“If you are sick and you go to them, they tell you, ‘Fuck you, black! Fuck you!’” Evans, a twenty-four-year-old Ghanaian, said. “As soon as they see you, they will cover their nose.” A Nigerian migrant who lived in Tripoli for four years told me that he was stabbed in the chest by a shop owner because, after paying for his items, he had asked for change. A Ghanaian said that a Libyan cut off his friend’s finger in order to steal his ring.

Migrants stuck in Libya have started recording warnings to their friends back home, and urging them to circulate the messages through WhatsApp. “Anyone who has family in Libya should pray for them,” a message sent to Ghanaians said. “They have bombed and killed our black siblings—Ghanaians—any black person.” Another message listed names of missing migrants. There was also a series of photographs and videos depicting migrants walking in a line with their hands behind their heads, like hostages, and scenes from a number of massacres. Some of the corpses had been beheaded. “Take a look for yourself,” another Ghanaian message urged. “If you have family in Libya and haven’t heard from them, you should be sad for them.”

Late one night last September, the guards at Blessing’s detention center roused the migrants and ordered them into a tractor-trailer. The truck dropped them at a beach west of Tripoli. Armed smugglers crammed them into a dinghy, prayed in the sand, and sent them out to sea.

For the previous several days, the Dignity I, a boat operated by Médecins Sans Frontières, had been patrolling a stretch of the Libyan coast—eight hours east, eight hours west, just beyond territorial waters—searching for migrants but finding none. The wind had been blowing from the north, sending

six-foot waves crashing on Libya's shores and making it impossible to leave. But now the air was warm and still, the water barely rippling, and so the rescuers expected thousands to come at once.

Shortly after 8 A.M., the first mate spotted Blessing's dinghy, a speck on the southern horizon. Crew members lowered a small rescue vessel into the water, and I climbed aboard with them.

The rescue vessel eased alongside the dinghy, and we shuttled migrants back to the Dignity I in groups of around fifteen. As the rescue boat bobbed next to the larger ship, Nicholas Papachrysostomou, an M.S.F. field coordinator, helped Blessing stand up. She was nauseated and weak. Her feet were pruned; they had been soaking for hours in a puddle at the bottom of the dinghy. Two crew members hoisted her aboard by her shoulders. She stood on the deck with her arms crossed—sobbing, shivering, heaving, praising God.

When everyone was safely transferred to the Dignity I, a crew member tossed Papachrysostomou a can of black spray paint, which he used to tag the empty dinghy with its geographic coordinates and the word "Rescued." (European naval ships used to focus exclusively on rescuing migrants; now they run an "anti-smuggling" operation, in which they assist with rescues, arrest migrants who drive the boats, and destroy abandoned dinghies, so that they can't be reused.) As we towed the dinghy farther out to sea, three Libyan men in a speedboat approached. One lifted four silver fish out of a bucket. "Trade! Trade!" he said, in Arabic, extending his arms toward us. The men had spent the past half hour watching the rescue from around a hundred feet away, and wanted to take the dinghy's motor back to Libya, to resell. Some Libyans steal the motors while the migrants are still aboard. Papachrysostomou waved them off. As we sped away to help another boat in distress, the Libyans circled back and took the motor.

**M**ore than eleven thousand Nigerian women were rescued in the Mediterranean last year, according to the International Organization for Migration, eighty per cent of whom had been trafficked for sexual exploitation. "You now have girls who are thirteen, fourteen, fifteen," an I.O.M. anti-trafficking agent told me. "The market is requesting younger and younger." Italy is merely the entry point; from there, women are traded and sold to madams all over Europe.

By the time we got back to the Dignity I, a nurse had logged each migrant's nationality and age. Blessing had told the nurse that she was eighteen, but, suspecting that to be a lie, the nurse had tied a blue string around her wrist, signifying that Médecins Sans Frontières considered her to be an unaccompanied minor. Most of the Nigerian girls had a blue string. Madams coach the girls to say they are older, so that they are sent to Italy's main reception centers, where migrants can move about freely. Otherwise, they end up in restrictive shelters for unaccompanied minors.

While the moment of rescue marks the end of most migrants' debts to their smugglers, for the Nigerian girls it is only the beginning. "You're delivering them to hell," an M.S.F. staffer told me. M.S.F.'s focus is on saving lives, not on policing international waters, and it does not share suspicions about trafficking

cases with the European authorities. “The moment you begin entering this part of the investigation, you are no longer a rescue boat,” Papachrysostomou said. “We need to maintain distances from just about everybody”—governments, smugglers, and traffickers alike.

This approach makes some staffers uneasy. One told me that they had been briefed by M.S.F. on the fact that criminal networks have co-opted sea rescues as a reliable means of transporting young African women to Europe’s prostitution market. That morning, the smugglers had given one of the migrants in a departing boat a satellite phone and the phone number of the Maritime Rescue Coördination Center, in Rome, which sends real-time alerts to ships in the Mediterranean. “Sometimes I feel as if we are the smugglers’ delivery service,” another M.S.F. staffer said. But at least twenty-three hundred people were saved from eighteen rubber dinghies on the day that Blessing was picked up, and, without the work of M.S.F. and several other N.G.O.s, many of them would have drowned.

The Dignity I headed for the port of Messina, on the eastern coast of Sicily, a journey of two and a half days. There were three hundred and fifty-five migrants on board. The youngest was three weeks old. Few had space to lie down, and it was difficult to walk among the bodies without stepping on limbs and torsos.

*This winter, Blessing was placed in a shelter for underage migrants. “In Italy, we’re very good at the process of emergency reception,” an official said. “They arrive. We give them something to eat. We put them in a reception center. But after that? There is no solution.”*

Late that afternoon, Sara Creta, an Italian M.S.F. staffer, and I met with Blessing and another girl, Cynthia, who had grown up on a farm and then sold snacks on the streets of Benin City. Blessing and Cynthia had met on the dinghy, several hours earlier, and were now sitting with some other Nigerian girls. All of them looked underage, though they insisted that they were eighteen. Blessing smiled and spoke in nervous fragments while she massaged Cynthia’s swollen feet. She said that she had been kidnapped, but withheld the details. As Blessing spoke, Cynthia wept.

Creta tried to comfort the girls. “When you arrive in Italy, you are not obliged to do anything you don’t want to do,” she said. “In Italy, you are free. O.K.? Just follow your heart.” Blessing picked at her skin for a few seconds, then said, “I don’t have the opportunity.”

Three older Nigerian women appeared to be eavesdropping on the conversation. One of them—heavyset, with a sickle-shaped scar on her chin—interrogated me about my role on the ship, pursing her lips and raising her eyebrows when I told her that I was a reporter. She refused to respond to my questions, except to say, “I did not pay for my own journey.” She and the other two women spent most of the next two days perched on the ship’s railing, monitoring the younger women.

In Messina, the migrants disembarked in groups of ten. The Italian authorities gave them flip-flops, took photographs for immigration records, conducted medical exams, and registered them with Frontex, the E.U. border agency. Humanitarian workers introduced themselves to some of the girls whom they



suspected of being under eighteen, but none of them accepted help. One Nigerian girl, who, on the Dignity I, had confessed that she was fourteen years old, later claimed that she was twenty-three.

The U.N. refugee agency had sent a representative, who carried flyers outlining the migrants' legal rights, but they were printed in Tigrinya, the language of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. Many people who might have been eligible for asylum told me that they had never heard of it. The Egyptians and the Moroccans were pulled out of line and directed to sit under a blue awning, where they remained for the rest of the afternoon, likely unaware that Italy has repatriation agreements with their home countries. Most of them would be taken to Sicily's expulsion center, in Caltanissetta, and flown home.

The other migrants were led to a line of buses. The drivers wore masks, to guard against the smell. Blessing and Cynthia waved to me before boarding. The woman with the sickle-shaped scar got on the same bus.

**M**any migrants were temporarily kept at Palanebiolo, a makeshift camp in a former baseball stadium on the outskirts of Messina, before being distributed among other centers throughout Italy. A huge concrete wall surrounds the complex; rusted rebar pokes through it, and lizards dart in and out of the cracks. A couple of days after being taken to Palanebiolo, a group of West African men who had been rescued by the Dignity I sat on a cinder-block ledge outside. They had no money or possessions, and complained that the food was lousy and the tents let in rainwater. They had received no medical attention—not even antiparasitic cream to treat scabies, which all of them had. Some were still wearing the same ragged clothes from their voyage, stiff with dried vomit and seawater.

In Italy, it is widely known that many contracts to provide services for the migrants are connected to the Mafia. The government allots reception centers thirty-five euros per migrant per day, but the conditions at Palanebiolo and elsewhere indicate that the money is not being spent on those who stay there. A few years ago, in a wiretapped call, Italian investigators heard a Mafia boss tell an associate, "Do you have any idea how much we earn off the migrants? The drug trade is less profitable." Migrants are entitled to daily cash allowances of two euros and fifty cents; at Palanebiolo, they were given phone cards instead, which they sold on the streets nearby at a thirty-per-cent discount, so they could buy food, secondhand clothes, and, eventually, mobile phones.

I wasn't allowed into Palanebiolo, but I found Cynthia outside. She told me that Blessing was still living there but had gone out for the morning with a Nigerian man who worked at the camp. A few hours later, Blessing and the man returned together. "He took me in a train!" she told me. She was still reeling from the novelty of what she had seen in the city center. "The white people—I saw many white people," she said.

The girls told me their real ages—Cynthia was sixteen, Blessing was barely seventeen. They also claimed that they had told the truth to the Frontex agents, at disembarkation, but I was skeptical; Palanebiolo

was supposed to house only adults. Together, we walked down the hill to have lunch. Near a busy intersection, we asked directions from a tall, bearded Nigerian man, named Destiny, who had crossed the Mediterranean in 2011 and now worked at a supermarket in Messina. His arms and neck were covered in religious tattoos; Cynthia thought he was handsome and invited him to join us. We walked to a nearby café, but as soon as we entered a waitress shooed us out, saying that the café was closed. Several tables were occupied by Italians enjoying coffee and pastries. We stood outside, deliberating other options, until the waitress poked her head out the door and told us to leave the property.

We headed back up the hill, to Palanebiolo. Blessing moved with slow, labored steps. Her joints ached and were still swollen from her time in detention in Libya. Destiny asked me where I was staying. “Oh, Palermo,” he said. “My favorite city.” He winked, and, switching to Italian so that the girls couldn’t understand, added, “That’s where I go to fuck the young black girls for thirty euros.”

Sex work is not a crime in Italy, but it attracts the attention of the police, so trafficking networks try to get residency permits for every girl they send to work on the streets. Having lied to Frontex about their ages, underage victims are eventually issued official Italian government documents claiming that they are eighteen or older; these shield them from police inquiries. Italian police wiretaps show that Nigerian trafficking networks have infiltrated reception centers, employing low-level staffers to monitor the girls and bribing corrupt officials to accelerate the paperwork. An anti-trafficking agent from the International Organization for Migration explained that, at centers like Palanebiolo, “the only thing the girl has to do is make a call and tell the madam she has arrived—which city, which camp. They know what to do, because they have their guys all over.”

In Palermo’s underground brothels, trafficked Nigerians sleep with as many as fifteen clients a day; the more clients, the sooner they can purchase their freedom. When people spit on them, the women go to the bushes to retrieve hidden handbags, take out their hand mirrors, and, by the dim yellow glow of the street lamps on Via Crispi, fix their makeup. Then they get back to work.

“There’s an extraordinary level of implicit racism here, and it’s evident in the fact that there are no underage Italian girls working the streets,” Father Enzo Volpe, a priest who runs a center for migrant children and trafficking victims, told me. “Society dictates that it’s bad to sleep with a girl of thirteen or fourteen years. But if she’s African? Nobody gives a fuck. They don’t think of her as a person.”

*“It’s not going to throw itself.”*

**MARCH 21, 2011**

Twice a week, Father Enzo loads a van with water and snacks and, in the company of a young friar and a frail old nun, sets off to provide comfort and assistance to girls on the streets. His first stop, one Thursday night last fall, close to midnight, was Parco della Favorita, a nine-hundred-acre park at the base of Mt. Pellegrino, known as much for prostitution as for its views of the Tyrrhenian Sea. Father Enzo parked the van near a clearing. Four Nigerian women emerged from the woods, where they had

made a small fire with twigs and plastic chip bags. “*Buona sera, Vanessa,*” Father Enzo said. “Good evening. God bless you.”

Everyone gathered in a circle, prayed, and sang church songs that the girls had learned in Nigeria. A car approached, and out of it came Jasmine, who looked to be around fifteen years old. “It’s my birthday,” she said. Someone asked how old she was. She paused, then said, “*Ventidue*”—twenty-two. The nun had brought a birthday cake. “If we come and pray with them and give them medical information, it’s fine,” Father Enzo told me. “But, if you go and ask questions about how the network works, they say nothing. They disappear.”

Two weeks after disembarking in Messina, most of the migrants from the Dignity I had either run away from Palanebiolo or been transferred to other camps. Blessing and Cynthia stayed, and began to venture into the city. One Sunday morning, an Italian woman noticed the girls at church, and took them for a coffee—their first ever. Another woman gave them secondhand clothes. I bought them anti-inflammatory medication and treatments for scabies and lice.

The girls soon learned how to count to ten in Italian. They also picked up Italian words for various things they encountered: Tomato. Butterfly. Stomach ache. Cynthia shouted “*Ciao!*” at every passing motorist, pedestrian, and dog, and was delighted when it elicited a friendly, if puzzled, response. “She is a village girl,” Blessing teased. “I like greeting everybody!” Cynthia replied. A car pulled up to the intersection where the girls were sitting. “*Ciao!*” Blessing called to the driver. The driver stared straight ahead and rolled up her window.

The girls marvelled at a double-decker bus, and spent an hour sitting next to an electric gate at an apartment complex, watching it open and close for arriving cars. Blessing picked up a supermarket catalogue that she found on the road, and the girls pointed at items, trying to identify them from the pictures and the Italian names. Cynthia started reading a page in mock Italian. “*Sapudali,*” she said. “*Shekatabratabrotochikamano.*”

A number of passing cars caught Blessing’s eye, but she was especially impressed by the design of a small, gray Nissan Qashqai S.U.V. “Wow, I love this ride!” she said. “It is one of the best kinds in town.” She started blowing kisses at it, and spoke of it for the rest of the day. “It is the best car,” Cynthia agreed. “Everything is the best.”

“In Italy, we’re very good at the process of emergency reception—the humanitarian aspect,” Salvatore Vella, a prosecutor in the Sicilian city of Agrigento, told me. “They arrive. We give them something to eat. We put them in a reception center. But after that? There is no solution. What do we do with these people?” Vella looked out the window. “Let’s be honest: these reception centers, they have open doors, and we hope that they leave. Where to? I don’t know,” he said. “If they go to France, for us

that's fine. If they go to Switzerland, great. If they stay here, they work on the black market—they disappear.”

Most of Palermo's migrants live in Ballarò, a crowded old neighborhood of winding cobblestoned alleyways and hanging laundry which is the site of illegal horse races and Palermo's largest open-air market. At dusk, young men whistle at passersby and tell them the price of hashish. On Sundays, at around five o'clock in the morning, thrifty locals browse *il mercato delle cose rubate*, “the market of stolen goods,” where you can find televisions, toilet seats, chandeliers, ovens, sunglasses, leather jackets, cabinets, jewelry, iPhones, seven-piece dining sets.

One night in Ballarò, I met with a former drug dealer from Mali at an outdoor bar that smelled like sweat, weed, and vomit. Sex workers walked past in red fish-nets and six-inch stilettos. On the corner, two men grilled meat over a trash fire. Italians and Africans exchanged cash and drugs, unbothered by the presence of witnesses. “This is the power of the Nigerian mafia,” the Malian said. “It gives work to those people who don't have papers.”

At street level, Ballarò looks to be largely under the control of Nigerian gangs. The most powerful group, called Black Axe, has roots in Benin City and cells throughout Italy, and has carried out knife and machete attacks against other migrants. But, although the Nigerian gangs are armed and loosely organized, none of them ultimately work alone. “If I want to deal, I have to talk to the Sicilian boss,” the Malian explained. He said that, unless a dealer gives the Cosa Nostra its cut of the business, “O.K., you can make it work for two days, but if they understand that you are doing something”—he whistled and started sawing at his neck with a finger—“they eliminate you.” Last year, after a street brawl near Ballarò, an Italian mobster shot a Gambian migrant in the back of the head.

Italian officials and local criminals agree that the Cosa Nostra profits at both ends: Nigerian bosses buy drugs in bulk from the Mafia, then pay an additional *pizzo*—protection money—for the right to deal. For generations, Ballarò has been under the control of the D'Ambrogio family, whose patriarch, Alessandro, is currently in prison. In public, African dealers are afraid to utter his name louder than a whisper, though the family's business in Palermo is widely known: it owns at least nine funeral parlors.

It is impossible to say how many Nigerians work in Ballarò's brothels, but many of them are abused by clients, and severely beaten, branded, or stabbed by their madams. “I never went outside,” a former prostitute named Angela told me. Her madam, an Edo woman named Osasu, picked up girls from the camps before they got their residency permits, and kept sixteen of them captive. Angela was locked inside for two months and forced to have sex with eight men each day, while Osasu collected her earnings. When Angela became severely ill after a miscarriage—she had been raped in Agadez, several months earlier—Osasu kicked her out. An elderly Italian woman took her to the police station. The authorities listened to her story, then repatriated her to Benin City. To this day, she told me, “I don't even know what city I was in.”

According to Vella, the Sicilian prosecutor, violence against Nigerian prostitutes is rarely investigated, because “the tendency, here in Italy, has been to not look at criminal organizations as long as they’re committing crimes only against non-Italians.” One consequence, he said, is that Nigerian gangs have spent at least fifteen years “collecting vast sums of money, arming themselves,” and exploiting underage girls with impunity. (Vella has led groundbreaking investigations into Nigerian crime, resulting in the convictions of several traffickers.)

*“This is a teaching hospital.”*

APRIL 25, 2011

A security official in Palermo told me that his team, which is focussed on Nigerian crime but employs no Nigerians, considers Ballarò to be practically impenetrable. With virtually no on-the-ground access, Vella explained, roughly eighty per cent of the investigative work on Nigerian crime involves wiretapping phone calls that the police cannot understand. “We have thousands of people living here who speak languages that, fifteen years ago, we didn’t even know existed,” Vella said. “The person I select to listen to wiretaps is usually an ex-prostitute or a girl who works in a bar. I need to trust her, but I don’t even know her.” These obstacles are further compounded by security threats. “During a trial, I have to call up the interpreter to testify,” he continued. Her name and birthplace are written into the public record, and the trafficking networks are so well established that, “with a Skype call or a text message, they have the ability to order their associates to go into a small village in Nigeria and burn down houses with people inside them.”

Most girls don’t know the extent of their debt until they arrive in Italy, when they are told that they owe as much as eighty thousand euros. Some madams extend the debts by charging the girls for room, board, and condoms, at exorbitant rates. One night in Palermo, I spoke with three Nigerian women who were working the streets near Piazza Rivoluzione. One of them had grown up on Upper Sakpoba Road, before coming to Italy “as a little girl,” she said, and being repeatedly raped. She despised the work but couldn’t leave it, because, after five years in Palermo, she still owed her madam thousands of euros.

**F**or the authorities, one of the most confounding aspects of the sex trade is that Nigerian trafficking victims almost never denounce their captors. Most fear deportation, and also the consequences of breaking the juju oath. “I hear this juju killed many girls,” Blessing told me. “This spell is effective.”

A few weeks after reaching Italy, some of the Nigerian girls from the Dignity I had got phones, and one of them circulated a WhatsApp message that warned of a juju priest living in Naples, named Chidi, who used “evil powder” to manipulate women. “He has killed and destroy many girls in Europe,” it said. The message also included Chidi’s phone number, and instructed recipients to save it so that they would know not to answer if the devil called.

One afternoon, a former sex worker from Nigeria introduced me to an elderly Ghanaian woman, a retired wigmaker who is known in Ballarò as the Prophetess Odasani. In the past decade, Odasani has

helped many Nigerian women escape prostitution by challenging juju on a spiritual level. Dressed in shining blue robes, she took me to the base of Mt. Pellegrino, where she picked up a wooden staff and started walking up the mountain. We soon reached a small clearing, a space she calls Nowhere for Satan Camp. For the next half hour, Odasani sang and prayed and spoke in tongues.

“They have bad spirits inside them—that’s why they do prostitution,” Odasani said. To free girls from their juju curses, she performs a kind of exorcism. “I ask the spirit, What is your name? And the spirit answer.” When she asks why it is inhabiting the person, she said, the spirit explains the debt bondage, at which point “I say, O.K., in the name of the Lord, depart from the person. Depart! Depart from my daughter!” Eventually, the juju leaves the girl’s body, “and then she is free.”

“The madam still asks for money,” Odasani said. “I tell the girl to tell the madam that she will pay a little bit”—but by doing housework and cooking, not prostitution. “And if she continues to do these bad things to you I will pray to Jesus Christ to attack her spiritually.”

**A**fter two months in Italy, Blessing, Cynthia, and a sixteen-year-old girl named Juliet were the only migrants from the Dignity I who were still at Palanebiolo. Blessing told me that several girls from the boat had left the camp in the company of their traffickers.

Blessing wanted to leave the camp, too. “I am tired of pasta,” she said, clicking her tongue in frustration. “I miss Nigeria, where people know how to cook.” She missed her mother, and was annoyed that she hadn’t yet had an opportunity to pursue an education in Italy. Minors are supposed to be enrolled in schools, but, I had since learned, the girls had been left in Palanebiolo because all the restrictive centers for underage migrants in Sicily were full. (This winter, Palanebiolo was shut down, and the girls were transferred to a shelter for minors.)

In Benin City, Blessing’s schoolbooks are still piled on a shelf in her former bedroom, but Doris sold her mattress to buy food. The room is occupied by Blessing’s younger sister, Hope, who is now fifteen and has dropped out of school to help Doris at the shop. In order for the family to keep the apartment, Godwin helps with the rent, which is thirty dollars per month. The debt Doris took on to free Blessing in Libya continues to mount.

“I don’t know how my mummy, she will recover that money. But I can’t go and sell myself, even though I need money for them,” Blessing said. “I better go to school. I promised myself, and I promised my mum.” Blessing dreams of building her mother a house that’s surrounded by a wall so high that thieves break their legs when they try to scale it. The compound will have an electric gate. “My mum, I will spoil her,” she said. “The reason I’m here now is my mummy. The reason I am alive today is my mum. The reason that I will not do prostitution is my mummy.” Tears streamed down her face. “I am my mummy’s breath of life.”

Blessing, Juliet, and a Nigerian girl named Gift walked down the hill singing church songs and drawing smiles from locals. The sky was gloomy, and soon it started to drizzle. But they kept walking, farther from the camp than they had ever been. Eventually, they reached a pebble beach, a few miles north of the port of Messina.

The rain stopped, and for a moment two bright rainbows shone over the short stretch of water separating Sicily from the mainland.

“It comes from the sea,” Blessing said of the double rainbow. “Look at it now. It is going down.”

“Yes, it comes from the sea,” Gift said.

“And then it go into the sky.”

“Yeah.”

A cloud shifted. “It is finished now,” Blessing said. Gift nodded. “It has gone back to the sea.”

The girls prayed. Then Blessing stepped into the water, spread her arms wide, and shouted, “I passed through the desert! I passed through this sea! If this river did not take my life, no man or woman can take my life from me!” ♦

*Reporting for this piece was facilitated by a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.*

*Ben Taub is a contributing writer for newyorker.com.*

*This article appears in other versions of the April 10, 2017, issue, with the headline “We Have No Choice.”*

**MORE: WOMEN AFRICA IMMIGRANTS NIGERIANS MIGRANTS**

---