

Notes from The Jungle: 1. Sunset and Alfa



As the sun sets on the Jungle, it brings in its wake a sense of exhaustion.

Not just for you. You have been on your feet for close to 16 hours, but realise that unlike the 6,000 people here, you can soon be in a bar, then on a train back to the UK, miles from this surreal holding-pattern of grim determination and hopelessness; a kind of perverse theme-park of poverty 'trapped between' the world's fifth- and sixth-richest nations.

As darkness falls, it seems the entire settlement is overcome by tiredness.

You are lucky enough not to be here every night, sleeping thousands of miles from home beneath a thin sheet of canvas, in a state which is increasingly hostile to you.

You do not wake up with the knowledge that today will once again not be the day you reach the state you wish to, whose government has held you at arms' length for 11 months and appears to be preparing to do so for the rest of time.

So you cannot tell whether the sheer fatigue which arrives in the sun's wake is a daily occurrence, or cumulative, reflecting the sense of abandonment and despair which has taken hold since last January, when the Jungle contained 500, rather than 6,000 men, women and children.

Whichever is true, it wraps itself around the camp as if to suffocate it, even as people continue to walk from tent to tent, talking, arguing, kicking balls, smoking, reading or searching in vain for quiet spots from which to make a phone-call to a loved one – brother, sister, parent or child.

It is almost too much.

You arrived in Calais early in the morning.

On the short journey from the town centre, your cab driver told you that: 'We do not see them (*the refugees at the Jungle*) in the daytime, but at night...'

You know this is because the night-time is when the town is liveliest, when drunk travellers are most likely to buy tissues or trinkets from children, and when darkness offers the best cover for those who are attempting to cling to trains or trucks through the Channel tunnel to the UK.

But it is the day before Hallowe'en. The idea of things unseen in daylight manifesting only when the sun goes down raised a wry smile.

It does not seem to be entirely true, in any case. As your cab comes closer to the Jungle, you see increasing numbers of people, heads down, wearing backpacks or carrying plastic bags, entering and leaving the camp.

And as you enter it, you realise it is all a matter of perspective, and desire: no-one who wanted to see this could possibly miss it in the daytime.

You walk under a flyover, daubed with English and Arabic graffiti, and spread before you, exploding between your left and right diagonals (*at about 10 and 2 O'Clock*), is a sprawling mass of canvas, blue, green, black and brown, stretching as far as you can see under a cloud-smear'd late Autumn sky.

You have visited refugee camps before – worked at some – and experienced the white, starched uniformity of their thousands of tall, wide tents arranged in rows on desert edges, or in their centres.

This is not like those.

Here at the Jungle, one- and two-person tents, squat, small, cramped, fight one another for space, packed tightly together on what was perhaps once grassland, but is now very close to a quagmire.

You pick your way through this chaotic entrance, and head into the mayhem beyond.

Much has been said of the international refugee crisis which has fuelled the growth of the Jungle (*though the 6,000 people here are a tiny fraction of the 590,000 people to have sought safety in the EU so far this year. The fact that they ARE here, rather than safe in decent accommodation as many many more refugees are already in Germany, Sweden and other states, is in itself an indictment of the French and UK governments*), and the first few moments here destroy many of the more negative claims about it.

Youngsters running, riding (*an initiative from the UK public has delivered bikes to the Jungle – they are extensively used, extremely popular and offer both some freedom of movement and some recreation to a 'community' which is starved of both*) fighting, being told off, immediately dissolve claims that 'only young men' have come to Europe from the world's most devastating conflicts.

One girl, perhaps about four years old, launches a cuddly, spotted leopard toy on a piece of elastic into your chest. 'Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!' she shouts, laughing as she runs away, pulling the leopard back as you try to grab it.

You are talking to an Egyptian, who is explaining why he fled Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's Egyptian tyranny and though you are extremely interested, you immediately regret not paying more attention to the girl.

Who is she? Does she have a family? In a place like the Jungle, moments of release and play must be important. You should play with her... You look over the man's shoulder, in the direction where she ran. She does not seem to have noted your relative lack of interaction with her, running instead to a group of young people, shouting 'Tiger!' and throwing her toy.

You smile, as you walk past her. She does not notice.

Walk far enough in any place, and you will come to an edge. You pick your way through the Afghan 'village', past a library without books, and a mosque and church which both have believers, down a sunken path which is waterlogged on your left, but still dry enough to walk on, on your right, past a group of people in Dismaland red hooded tops – all refugees – constructing a shelter frame from wood.

You turn left, between two banks of tents, and reach a concrete road. At its end, the Jungle's Sudanese community has most tents, but before you get that far, you meet Alfa.

Alfa, a Mauritanian, left his homeland in 2005, travelling to Syria (*at that point, a destination, rather than a point of origin for Arabic-speaking refugees*). As war broke out and then tightened its grip on the Middle Eastern state, Alfa fled, first to Turkey, then to Greece.

'When war started in Syria I couldn't stay. I lived in Turkey for a while, painting and doing other work, but it was hard because so many people were coming through, and Turkey is not always an easy place to live if you are not from there. I crossed the sea to Greece, and I wanted to come to the UK. I thought that life would be good there, and people say you can work, and be accepted.

'But it has been impossible. You come to the Jungle, where you think you could apply to live in the UK, but there is no-one here who even knows how to apply. There are no forms. There is nothing. Now, I am feeling that I might try to stay here in France. I would like to go back to Mauritania, to my home, but that is not possible now. I do not know if it ever will be.'

In a small space he has carved out on the Jungle's easternmost edge, Alfa has created an interesting creative and educational centre.

To the left of the space's 'entrance' is a small hut containing artworks – paintings and collages – Alfa himself has created while he has been here. There are also small shelters between it and a larger tent bearing the designation 'Ecole' – though you do not notice any children here.

At this moment, an argument breaks out between Alfa and some of the men standing close to the 'school', because a group of French media photographers have missed – or perhaps ignored – notices reading 'no photos' and 'no cameras'. 'Alfa.' The men shout. 'Why are they taking pictures?'

'I know them,' he shrugs. 'It is OK.' The men do not agree, and continue to argue, so you quietly mention that you will come back later, and leave them to it.

Through the course of the day, you see police dressed in body armour marching in groups of 16 – 'hardly a community police initiative' one English volunteer worker comments – past youngsters running from tent to tent, English and a few French volunteers working at kitchens (*there is still too little food for all of the 6,000 to eat one meal per day – most people, of course rely on more than one*) and attempting to ensure water provision.

One stops to mention that the toilet facilities (*of which there are far too few to meet the UN's basic hygiene standards: this is a camp in France, the world's sixth-richest state*) and the insufficient water

supply (also at risk from contamination due to insufficient toilets, and problems with the collection of human waste) constitute an epidemic or epidemics waiting to happen.

She pauses. 'There is only so much we can do,' she begins. 'There are so many volunteers here, but we have no support. We are not professionals. We know we can only do what we can do, but we also know it is not enough, and we do not have the support you might get in a major organisation or charity.'

'Sometimes, you do see people break down, start crying. You help them, but we all know that the only thing keeping some people going here is the knowledge that they are helping others and are needed, and a sense of guilt at feeling low, when the people who are stuck here have things so much worse.'

You sympathise, but today can do nothing else.

You walk on, meeting and speaking to Ethiopians using a converted bike to charge mobile phones, Afghans queuing to wash their hair under pallet-mounted cold water taps, women and men carrying water to the tents they have called home for up to 15 months, Kurds with children in the UK, Sudanese, Darfuri, Somali and Eritrean people hoping to contact their brothers, sisters, uncles, cousins in Oxford, London, Birmingham, Sheffield...

In each conversation, when people explain that they want to come to the UK (*'life is good there', 'people will accept us, it is racist in other countries in Europe' 'I have children and a wife there' 'I want the chance to work in safety' 'I speak English' – the latter, manifestly true, is pointed out time after time and it is certainly easier to find work in a state if you already speak the language*) you ask: 'Have you applied? How is your application coming on? When will you find out?'

You are met with blank looks: the most dispiriting response imaginable.

The chaos of life at the Jungle is extreme – even by the standards of refugee camps. Their provisions of food and water are worse than you have ever seen at a refugee camp – including camps in the Sahara desert – even though both France and the UK each have more money than 128 of the world's states combined. The tents in which people are clinging to life are worse, and the hygiene facilities are not even at the standard of a joke.

The only established international organisations to have so far started operating here are medical – *MSF* and *Doctors of the World* – and though the many English and some French volunteers are making the best of an extremely awful situation, and working themselves to the point of exhaustion and beyond, they are just about keeping their heads below; rather than above, water.

It is a horror story, unfolding on your doorstep.

But even these things could be borne – though they should not have to be – if there were any possibility for these men, women and children of ever leaving.

As people answer your questions about their applications, it is as if you can feel the ground opening up – or perhaps more accurately, you can sense walls closing in on them, threatening to crush the last remaining life from them.

'We have no applications,' they say. 'No-one has allowed us to make applications.' 'We have no forms to fill in.' 'There is no-one here to show us or help us apply.'

At every single refugee camp you have ever visited, whatever the context, or the region of the world, one thing has always been constant – the lifeline.

The fact that every single person in that camp has the chance to apply to be accepted as a refugee in a safe country.

The fact that, even if their applications fail, every person knows for certain that there is a potential escape route which will not force them either to return to a conflict in which they are likely to be killed, or to live illegally and risk death from hunger, disease, or from meeting the wrong person at the wrong moment and being too scared to go to the police or the hospital for fear of being deported to a state where they may face torture and death.

In other words, even in the most remote and harshest of refugee camps, there is hope.

Here in the Jungle, there is not even that.

The UK government has refused to engage with the thousands of people here – with the men, women and children who have fled war, terror and oppression and now simply hope to be allowed a temporary life in a safe state.

It has turned its back on those people, hoping the ‘problem’ will simply go away, when what it should be doing is engaging with them, allowing them to apply to live there.

Meanwhile, the French government has taken a more active approach – just not one that anyone with human feeling would have considered. Regarding the extremely visible Jungle as an embarrassment, rumours abound that it is preparing forced evictions from the camp – as if the Jungle, rather than the extreme humanitarian crisis unfolding within it – is the problem.

It is possible to apply for the people here to apply for asylum in France, though not thanks to any effort by the government. People can walk or cycle into Calais, and try to get a lawyer to agree to see them and guide them through the forms.

But there are problems. First, lawyers are often ‘busy’ when faced by people who have only one set of clothes and have been unable to wash them for six months. Second, most of the people at the Jungle want to stay in the UK, not France, while waiting to be able to return home – and have extremely good reasons for that.

But third, and crucially, the French government (*in common with the UK establishment*) sets notoriously high and unreasonable standards for its application process, including that any application written in less than flawless French can be dismissed. No-one here at the camp speaks French like a native. Because, by definition, they are not native to France.

You walk, a little dazed, nodding, smiling, saying hello through a mask of normality, back to Alfa’s area.

As you approach, you see him sat on the ground, head in his hands.

He is visibly shaken, so you sit down beside him, and wait.

‘I have been here for seven months,’ he says. ‘This is now my house. I have nowhere to go, and nothing left I can do. All the people I still know in the world are here, and this place is the only place I feel sure I can remember any more.’

He turns, haggard. ‘This is a hard place,’ he says. ‘There is no respect for people, no humanity. I have seen the police here stop people from helping others who have too little to eat, or who are in pain.’

'It is why my house is what it is. I have opened a space so people can come, and do many things. I have a space for art, and for creative things, because that is something that helps us remember we are people. I have opened the school. It is to teach people French, so they can exist here, if they must. It is not for children. It is for the adults, because only the adults can make the changes that might help their children.'

(It occurs to you at this point that this may have been the reason why the argument earlier about photography took place – to save adults the 'embarrassment' of being seen to attend 'school')

'I cannot tell you why I left Mauritania,' he says. 'Because I would be scared someone might find me. But I hoped that if I came here, I could get to the UK, and be safe, and live for a while, until I could go home. Instead, I am stuck here, and this is not a good place for human beings.'

'After you left, I rode on my bike. I was not cross, but I needed to think about the argument about the photos. I was riding at the side of the road. A car swerved towards me, then away. I assumed it was an accident, so I slowed down and carried on riding.'

'It did it again. Then again, then again. I stopped the bike, and got off. The man in the car stopped and opened the door. He shouted at me and started to walk, then run towards me. He was angry.'

'I realised he wanted to kill me. If I had not run away, he would have killed me.'

'Life is hard here. We cannot do what we want to do. We cannot do anything. And when we are not here, we are people others want to kill.'

He rests his head on his arms, looking straight ahead. You do not have anything sensible to say to this man, who is working to help people at the Jungle, but is – to those outside – just another expendable human 'unit'. A 'number' to be counted, at best.

You stop, briefly, on the walk back up the concrete road to the camp's northern region. On your left, a high green fence, topped with barbed wire, has been erected.

Only five yards beyond it sits a white house with red roof tiles. You pause at first to look at it, but your eyes are drawn instead to a small street sign.

'Rue des Recollets' it reads.



The Recollets were an order of Monks who became missionaries in the era of French expansionism, believing that colonies could only work if French settlers and native populations intermarried, living as equals in what would eventually be fully mixed (albeit Christian) communities, made up of many ingredients, rather than just one race, language or colour.

Later, as you leave the camp, you note nine police riot vans taking up positions at its edges in what seems to you an example of unjustifiable overkill in response to a dispirited, exhausted, and forlorn tent town on the edge of the Channel. The irony is not lost on you.

The Jungle and the people who live there may well require the assistance of any God or gods who exist. Winter is coming, and it is hard to imagine a scenario in which, left almost to their own devices as people here are, there are not hundreds of deaths before Spring 2016.

But even if they received supernatural assistance, they would still deserve the consideration of the two states which surround them.

The term 'Recollets' suggests memory, and it is time the UK and French governments 'remembered' the Jungle they are purposefully putting from their minds, and move swiftly to save the people there from death.