

Notes from the Jungle 2. Miri



You meet Miri in a tea-shop (*in fact, a tent, just as every other 'location' at the Jungle is a tent: the restaurants, the medical centre, the women's centre, the homes, the mosque and the church – all are tents, nothing more*). The tea is good, though a cardomam seed within it worries him momentarily.

'I want to be an engineer,' he says. 'Or a mechanic.' He laughs. 'Or a doctor.'

Miri is 16 years old and has not been to school since he was 14. He speaks German, Albanian, and a little Italian, as well as speaking English well enough to tell you about his life and explain how concerned he is that there is a cardomam seed in his tea.

Though these skills are not necessarily central to forging a successful medical career, they are certainly indications that Miri is sharp, and if he could only finish his education, he could probably succeed at most things he chose to work at.

'I would like to return to school,' he adds.

The sad fact is, he almost certainly never will.

Miri grew up in Albania's capital city, Tirana.

He is an only child who never knew his father. His mother could not afford to send him to school and feed the two of them, and when Miri attempted to work, he too could not earn enough money to keep the two alive.

Instead, he left school and went to Germany, where the money was better. But as a young boy he feared for his survival.

'When people had a drink,' he said. 'They would punch whoever was nearby and different. It was often me. I was a long way from home, I had nowhere to live and I was working even though I wanted to be at school, learning with people my age. I tried for two years but it was too much, to be hit by people as well as never seeing my mother and working when I should be learning. Instead, I came here so I could go to England.'

When you met him, on 30th October 2015, things did not look good for Miri.

He had been at the Jungle for 17 days, and the previous day, he had been hit by a car.

'I was walking on the road,' he said. 'Someone had asked me to go to a shop outside of the Jungle. I was on the road, but there was not a pavement. I walked by the edge, but the car hit me even so. It was travelling at 20 or 30km per hour. It was quite fast. It must have seen me so I do not know why it hit me but it did.'

'I was very lucky because just before it hit me I stepped a little to the right. I heard a car behind me so I tried to move out of the way. So the car knocked me over but did not hit me in the back. I do not know what would happen if it hit me in the back.'

In truth, the car accident could have been worse for Miri: he has a bandaged hand - he says it is only a small wound - and apart from that has aches and bruises on his knees, one shoulder and his head.

But gesturing towards himself, he indicates a potentially greater problem. 'The accident tore my trousers here,' he said. 'And my coat is also torn. I am cold, and these are my only clothes. They do not keep me warm because the wind blows and it blows inside them. I have my hat,' (he is wearing a dark green benny hat) 'But I am cold. It is not good to be cold all day and night.'

Miri hopes to get to the UK, but like every single other person at the Jungle, has little idea how to do so legally. 'I have a friend in Oxford,' he says. 'No, I do not think he is helping me. I will have to do it myself. I haven't seen any forms to fill in. I might hold on to a train. How long is the train to London? Half an hour?'

When he is told it is an hour, he grimaces. 'Oh. Well where can I find a form to apply to live in England? Do you have one?'

You do not, and in fact this is one of the most serious – indeed vital – problems with the Jungle.

Not only is it a small space filled with 6,000 desperate people about to enter their first European winter with nothing to protect them but a thin sheet of material, it is also a place where in the absence of any large international ngo (*with the honourable exception of Medecins Sans Frontieres and Doctors of the World*), the French and UK governments have refused to provide even the forms necessary to apply for refugee status.

Whatever your opinion on the merits or otherwise of the people at the Jungle, the fact is that when people ask 'why do they not apply for asylum?' the answer is 'because the UK and French governments are preventing them from doing so'.

Almost everyone you spoke to expressed a desire to enter the UK legally – it is the UK which is systematically denying them the possibility to do so.

Perhaps this should be considered the next time desperate people attempt to board trains or cling to lorries heading to England.

And on this evening, there is one more problem for Miri.

'I have bought dinner for this evening,' he says. 'And now I have nothing left.'

You ask whether his friends can send him some money, but he has no-one who can. His mother? 'She cannot feed herself well,' he says. 'That is why I am not at school, and going to the UK to work.'

It is a devastating moment.

Miri is a boy. His one set of clothes does not keep him warm, he is trapped in a refugee camp, has no friends, no family and now no money.

You say goodbye, clasping his hand and demanding he looks after himself (but how?), and that he returns to school (but where?) and stagger away, unsure whether you will be able to fully control yourself.

You stand at the edge of the road, waiting for a car to take you away.

Footnote

All of the above is true, except that as is often the case, 'you' is in this case 'me'.

The night I met Miri, I returned to the UK.

On my own social media account, I posted:

'Today, at The Jungle, the refugee camp at Calais, I met Miri.

'Miri has not been to school in two years.

'Yesterday, he was hit by a car. He is OK, but his clothes are torn, he lives in a tent, and in two days' time it will be November.

'He is already feeling the cold.

'Miri is Albanian, and as a result stands absolutely no chance of being allowed into the UK.

'He is 16, stuck in a refugee camp in Calais, alone, surrounded by bigger, older, men, and tonight, his money ran out.

*'Welcome to the Jungle, for f***'s f****ing sake...'*