He's my brother

Christina Lamb and *AA Gill* join the 500,000 migrants seeking a new home in Europe

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This year, more than half a million people fleeing war and economic hardship have made the terrifying journey to Europe. They come from Afghanistan and Iraq, Syria and all over Africa, united by their dream of a new and better life.

As we see an endless stream of reports about the refugee crisis, it is easy to forget that these migrants are not just statistics, or a problem to be solved, but real people with names, families, ambitions and feelings. *AA Gill* joined the refugees on Kos and travelled with them over land to Hungary. *Christina Lamb* sailed with the Phoenix, a privately funded boat, to help rescue hundreds more from the grey, choppy Mediterranean waters off Libya. These are the untold stories of the crisis.

The road is long

MIGRANT CRISIS SPECIAL

MIGRANT CRISIS

This was never supposed to happen again

Families split up, soldiers cramming frightened and dehumanised others into trains or herding them through checkpoints. There is something about this moment that conjures a ghostly remembrance

AA Gill joins the latest arrivals on their long walk through the Balkans. Photographs by Andrew Testa

SWAMPED Refugees queue at a police station on Kos to receive a two-week amnesty from arrest, before travelling on from Greece

Kos welcomes migrants. The plane from Gatwick is full of them. The British, back to enjoy the fruits of their professional provincial labours, a second home in the sun for folk who think Spain too cabbie-common but can't afford the Caribbean. Kos is just pretty enough. The beaches are thin and coarse, there's English breakfast and pizza and cheap beer. It's safe, it's lazy and its main commodity, which it doesn't own, the sun, is dependably sultry and shiny. You can see Turkey from the beach. It's just there. The lights of Bodrum flicker in the heat, its khaki hills rising out of the pale, bored, flat water. A fit swimmer could butterfly and backstroke it in a few hours. You wouldn't know it had claimed so many hopeful, thrashing, gasping lives, but that's the thing with the sea, it never looks guilty.

The refugees are arriving in their hundreds every night. The beach is littered with discarded life vests and scuppered rubber dinghies. The pasty, paunchy English, part-time economic migrants, pick their way through the tangled trash of desperation, spilt bags, discarded flip-flops and nappies, and gingerly sag into their sunloungers.

Beside them, the refugees sink onto stained mattresses and beds of flattened cardboard, or cheap festival tents put up along the promenade. Children curl and splay exhausted, or run to play in the sea that they just survived, their parents hunched by sadness and relief. Finally, they're in Europe.

The British tourists wear shorts, T-shirts and trainers. The Syrian refugees wear shorts, T-shirts and trainers. They regard each other without irony. We have paid £50 to get here. It has cost them £900 each. Here on the beach, the myth of evil gangs of traffickers is also abandoned. The facilitators of this crossing are simply opportunistic, just poor people exploiting a pressing need, charging a fortune for a rubber boat. Trips are set up like illegal raves on Facebook. Even the French honorary consul in Bodrum was doing it. A musclebound blond boy, his VW Camper parked nearby, kitesurfs through the floating detritus of exodus, skipping over the spume of abandoned lives. It's an image of such vain, vaunting solipsism that it defies satire.

The exploitation of the refugees doesn't stop at the shore, where locals scuttle down to nick the outboard motors and oars. Many of the incomers, particularly families, rent cheaper hotel rooms; well, they were cheaper, but prices have doubled for Syrians.

I listen to a BBC reporter say that these are middle-class migrants. The British press continues to call them that, which may seem like semantics, but makes a world of legal difference. They suffer for a name. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is unequivocal. These are refugees, and to say they're middle-class is laughable. Nothing is as dystopianly egalitarian and classless as a huddle of refugees.

Many of them were professional, land-owning, business-running. These were the last people to leave, those with the most reason to stay: professors and engineers, opticians, shopkeepers. When they go, it means the infrastructure has irretrievably collapsed. They're not here to better themselves — the best they can expect is to be a German cab driver or caretaker or shelf-stacker. They go when there is no light left at the end of the tunnel, because the tunnel has been blown up. Offices and shops here have found that they can demand a euro to charge the mobile phones of the homeless. The mobile phone is the one indispensable must-have of the diaspora.

Greece has its own troubles. Refugees are an added burden, but they are also an opportunity, a resource. The UNHCR has asked local cafes if, for a down payment of €1,000, they'll let the Syrians use their washrooms and perhaps offer them water; I am told that they've refused. But many people here are actively helping. They hand out food and drink. There are the hastily made-up little NGOs from all over the world, turning up with cars full of eBay clobber. A smiling Dutch family hands out T-shirts with cheery fashion advice. A local physics teacher and his wife have set up a committee to distribute food and organise sanitation.

ANDREW TESTA FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

She fears that they're being watched by Golden Dawn, the ultra-right-wing political party, which has a following here. There have been attacks on sleeping refugees. Provocative boys on the back of scooters shout abuse and offer punches and graffiti. The physics teacher says that the mayor and the union of hotel owners are tacitly sympathetic to the right, resisting any infrastructure that might offer the refugees comfort or safety. Temporary camps could, all too easily, become permanent, and the less done to offer succour and encouragement, the better.

Out of town, in a foreclosed, deserted hotel, refugees are being evicted; they're handed fruit and tinned food by a furious pair of French *faire bien*-ers who are trying to impose the democracy of a queue. The air is filled with the smell of peeled oranges. Inside, it's quiet and sad; the walls are covered with children's drawings of families. There's a birthday cake with balloons and candles drawn by a grown-up, in lieu of the real thing, and a simple statement carefully, ornately, written in English: "I miss you."

The refugees themselves are gentle, quiet and mostly relieved to have made the crossing, to be safe. Yet everyone is also bereft, missing a brother, a son, aunts, parents, grandparents, whole generations. Their stories have the simple, monosyllabic banality of grief. They are polite, sad and hopeful. They smile when you say hello, and

are content to repeat the mantra of barrel bombs and crumbled homes, of the viciousness of torture and loss.

They'll show you fresh scars, but not a single person begs or asks me for anything but advice. But then all I have to offer is good wishes. The first thing they have to do is register with the police. This is not, underlined not, a registration as a refugee — it is a simple piece of paper that says the authorities in Kos won't exercise their right to arrest and charge the refugees as illegal immigrants for a fortnight. When they have this, they can buy a ticket for the ferry and go to Athens.

Refugees queue behind the police station. It's very hot. A British woman with rather mad hair, wearing an odd collection of holiday clothes, says: "Are you in charge here?" I tell her I'm not. "Why is there no shade for these people? I put up that tarpaulin." She points to a limp groundsheet tied to a tree. "The police won't do anything; it's monstrous. I'm going to chain myself to the railings right here. You're a journalist. Write about that. I'm protesting at the way they treat animals. It's quite disgraceful. I want to get a man arrested for being terribly cruel to a shar pei. I've got photographs."

The police try to organise the refugees into groups. They are loud, abusive, furious and irrational. Everyone talks in English, which is no one's first language. The chief of police is a fat, incandescent bully who stomps around screaming, shoving and jabbing at the refugees. They, in turn, do their best to placate him, like small grandparents calming a huge, hysterical toddler.

I have noticed that, right across Europe, the refugees bring out either the very best in civilians or the very worst in people in uniform. There is a barely contained racism, aimed particularly at black Africans. The powerless and enfeebled state of individual refugees incites or triggers a disgusted ⋙→

HUMAN TRAFFIC Having made it from Greece to Macedonia, the migrants are crammed like cattle onto a train at Gevgelija. Serbia awaits

MIGRANT CRISIS

Almost a fifth of the 550,000 refugees who have so far made the perilous journey into Europe by sea in 2015 are children. The ordeal is far from over for these weary toddlers, trapped in Serbia near the closed Horgos border crossing with Hungary

Many men are piggybacking children across Europe. Every unnecessary ounce is a stone within a mile and, at the end of the day, a ton

BRAVE FACE *Above:* a young girl reflects on her journey on the train to Serbia — knowing that more danger and uncertainty awaits
COLD COMFORT *Below:* with the route into Hungary blocked by a razor-wire fence, shattered migrants sleep rough in Serbia

POWER STATION *Above:* refugees charge tablets with electricity provided by TV news crews, after clashes with Hungarian police
LOST SOULS *Below:* with the Hungarian border sealed, the way forward is unclear for this brother and sister in Serbia

MIGRANT CRISIS

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HOLDING ON Dawn breaks, and another exhausting day begins at a temporary camp in Serbia. The Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban, closed the border on September 15 — making it clear that refugees are not welcome

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NO ENTRY Hungarian police block the way at the Horgos crossing. Officers have used teargas and rubber bullets to disperse migrants

PASS OUT The shattered travellers snatch a few fitful hours of sleep on uncomfortable hard ground by the closed Horgos crossing

intimidation and bullying in policemen, while the obvious power and collective purpose of the crowd frightens them. It's not a combination that is open to rational argument or calm sense, let alone kindness.

A man comes over and asks me to come with him. He's worried about his friend, who has threatened to kill himself. I collect a UNHCR worker and we're led to a young chap I recognise; I saw him the day before in tears. I buy him an orange juice in a cafe and ask him to tell me his story. His friend has to translate. They're Iraqis from Baghdad. The boy is beautiful, with large tearful eyes and hands that flutter to his face. The words tumble out in gasps. I had to stop him so the translator could catch up. "He has — how do you say? — got too many female hormones. In our community the men abuse him very badly, all the time. Whenever he goes out they — how do you say? — the men f*** him and beat him. It's very bad. His family, mother, father, uncles, cousins all sold things so he could get the money to escape. Now he's here, alone."

"He's not travelled with you?"

"No, we just saw him. I'm with my family."

The UNCHR says it will make sure he gets his papers. "Will you look after him?" I ask the man. He says yes, but his eyes flicker away. The boy smiles at me, shakes my hand and walks off with a delicate, swaying gait. He's 22, alone and frail. This isn't how anyone should have to come out.

There are noticeably quite a lot of gay men here, fey and camp, displaying small and exuberant flourishes of aesthetic pride: a scarf, glasses, a bit of a hairdo trying not to draw attention but unmistakeable. I'm told the owner of the cafe we're sitting in is a Golden Dawn organiser. I ask the woman who seems to be in charge what she thinks about the refugees filling her town and till. "Why are you asking me?" she says, with smiling anger.

"I'm asking lots of people."

"Well, go and talk to them, then. I have nothing to say, nothing."

We are standing on the little hill where Hippocrates codified medicine 2,400 years ago under the shade of his plane tree, where the Hippocratic oath was first declaimed: "I will take care that they suffer no hurt or damage..." That night I stand at the door of the docks where the policemen rant and the refugees who have managed to buy tickets file onto the ferry to Athens and the mainland. I see the gay Iraqi boy; he smiles and gives me a shy wave. He's on his own, on his way.

For most of us, it's simple. We couldn't stand face to face with our neighbours and say: "I feel no obligation to help"

Idomeni station is on the border between Greece and Macedonia. The Greeks, even sensible, liberal, charity-working Greeks, can't say "Macedonia": it physically sticks in their throats. They have quarrelled over the territory for more than 2,000 years, so they call it FYROM, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The border runs through sparse farmland. We walk up the railway track. Each side is decorated with plastic bags, bottles, soiled sleeping bags and raggedy shoes. The refugees leave swathes of discarded stuff behind them. They have to carry everything; many men are piggybacking children across Europe. Every unnecessary ounce is a stone within a mile and, at the end of a day, a ton. The refugees are again screamed at, then pressed into groups of 50 so they can be walked across to the unmentionable Macedonia. They wait to be singled out.

Here is a young man holding hands with a girl. They are in love. Another boy stands beside them. They are Syrian. He has the confident look of a young intellectual. She looks at him adoringly. She says he's a playwright and a poet and a writer of short stories, all as yet unpublished or preformed. He is barely in his twenties, his girlfriend is 17, the boy beside him is 15. He is her best friend and she wouldn't leave him behind. The poet smiles at him. The lad looks shy. At 15 he counts as an unaccompanied minor. The UNHCR could make special provision ⋙→

for him, but they decide he is better off in this makeshift troubadour family. I walk away and I turn to see them standing on the railway line, a tight triangle straight out of a school production of Romeo and Juliet with a little Mercutio. At the station there's a broad, confident chap with a couple of his mates. He asks me to sit down for a cup of coffee in a thick Yorkshire accent. They've driven from God's own county to deliver well-meaning, but mostly unnecessary, sleeping bags and more water. He calls himself a philanthropist and shows me a photograph of his Rolls-Royce. He tells Andrew, the photographer, that Andrew's wife can't be a proper Muslim (she's from Kosovo) because she's married a *kafir* (non-believer). Interestingly, in our trudge across the Balkans, in all of the provocation, the only instance of religious intolerance I hear is from a Pakistani Yorkshireman.

Macedonia is a tense and rugged country, bitter and surrounded by ancient vendettas. It is roughly two-thirds Orthodox Christian and one-third Albanian Muslim, and in 2001 they fought a miserably cruel little conflict against each other. The camp here is basic: tents, a line of stinking vile portable loos. Across fields alongside the railway line, evening creeps up like a premonition. It grows sinister in the darkness. Again, refugees with exhausted, fractious children and with a growing sense of powerless panic are being pushed and bellowed at by Macedonian special-forces troops with handguns and truncheons.

They are lit by searchlights, bleaching the colour from everything. They look grainy and black-and-white. The train pulls in. It's an ancient, battered, European, defeated thing. The pale yellow light seeps in through the stained and smeared windows, bathing wide-eyed faces. The refugees are marshalled into lines. They have bought tickets for €25 each. Last week they were €6.

The soldiers load the carriages with vile, goading contempt and ferocity. They seem to take pleasure in the lottery of escape. The carriage is filled to crushing until people shout from inside that there is no room, that they can't breathe. The soldiers shout back that it's their fault for sitting in the corridors. One sergeant leans in and grabs a politely remonstrating boy and pulls him roughly out of the train. His family cry in terror. His mother screams with a terrible agony. The loading goes on; the soldiers strut, smirk and joke with each other. There is something about this moment, in this filthy field, with the clutching of children and luggage, that conjures a ghostly remembrance.

Not mine, but ours, the continent's. This was never supposed to happen again. Never. Soldiers cramming frightened and beaten, humiliated and dehumanised others into trains, clutching their mortal goods, to be driven off into the night. The train pulls away, its dirty windows showing bleak, frightened faces. They roll past like newsreel. We're left in the dark and silent field with just the rubbish and their shoes and the distant barking of dogs.

We drive across the border, a cursory glance of passports, and meet the refugees again on the Serbian side of Hungary. The trail is easy to follow: a broad swathe of rubbish, corn taken from fields and roasted on little fires on verges. Straggling groups walking up motorways, exhausted fathers with sleeping toddlers on their shoulders.

At the road crossing, the mood has changed. The Hungarians have built a razor-wire fence that leapfrogs the refugees down their border. They've blocked the railway with a goods wagon and they stand behind it, grim-faced, heavily armed and armoured. The hope and the relief is all gone now, replaced with a stoic determination, salted with despair. There is a spilling-over of anger and the Hungarians spray water cannon and teargas through the wire like demented cleaning ladies trying to remove stubborn stains. The refugees shout their frustration, children and mothers cry, young men chant: "Thank you, Serbia, thank you, Serbia." It is possibly the most unlikely slogan ever heard at a European demonstration. The news reporters, blinking back chemical tears, draw hysterical allusions to the Cold War, the Ottoman invasion of Europe, to Nazis and communists. And the plain truth that, in 1956, the world took in thousands of Hungarian refugees fleeing their own failed and bloodied revolution.

Within a day the border is deserted. It's just the rubbish and the lost shoes and a five-mile queue of lorries. The refugees have moved on. They are like water, they find the point of least resistance. The iPhones tell them that that is Croatia, where they'll get shoved onto buses again to Austria, a step closer to somewhere where they can find a bed, be safe and consider nurturing a small new life.

In Budapest's laughably grand station, which is all front and no platform, the thousands of refugees have moved on, leaving piles of mattresses and touching notes stuck to walls and pillars, scribbled in interrupted school English, thanking the locals for their help. The tide has ebbed to find another shore. The truth of this exodus is that those who steeple their fingers and shake their heads and claim to have clear and sensible, firm but fair, arm's-length solutions to all of this have not met a refugee. It is only possible to put up the no-vacancy sign if you don't see who's knocking at the door. For most of us it's simple. We couldn't stand face-to-face with our neighbours and say: "I feel no obligation to help." None of you would sit opposite a stricken, bereft, lonely, 22-year-old gay man and say: "Sorry, son, you're on your own." Or not take in a young poet and his delicate Juliet and their awkward, gooseberry friend. The one thing the refugees and the Europeans both agree on is that Europe is a place of freedom, fairness and safety. It turns out that one of us is mistaken and the other is lying.

On the banks of the Danube, outside their grandiloquent gothic parliament, there is a small memorial. Jews were lined up here and shot so they would fall and be washed away by the great European river. They weren't killed by German Nazis, but by fascist Hungarians. But first they were told to take off their shoes. And here they are, made in bronze. People come for remembrance and leave stones in them. Hard stones in lost shoes ■

To support UNHCR's work for refugees, visit unhcr.org.uk/Europe

WARNING SIGNS Bronze sculptures of shoes belonging to Jews murdered on the banks of the Danube by Hungarian fascists in the Second World War. Fascism is rising again

CROSSING BOUNDARIES
See more moving images from AA Gill's journey across the Balkans with the refugees at *thesundaytimes.co.uk/migrationbyland*