

# Lessons in love and anger: Rima and two weeks in May

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*Early March 2009*

I'm in California when Robert rings and says that Positive Action have called to ask if we will take in a destitute 16-year-old Eritrean girl. Ahead are days of public speaking and a long transatlantic flight. 'Yes. It's what we do.'

I've been back home barely two hours when the phone rings again. 'Can she come tonight? We really don't know for how long.' Twenty-five minutes later she is in the house. Rima.

There follow several months of legal complexity and endless frustration with the Home Office, and not just on our part. The judge at her destitution tribunal in London was clearly angry with the 'respondent' (Home Secretary) for her failure to supply any evidence or any representation in court.

We learn much about the utter desperation of refugees from Eritrea – a country with more refugees than any country other than Iraq at present, a tiny fraction of whom have made their way to the UK. Our house guest shows us YouTube postings of her arrival by shipwreck into Europe. Gradually we learn more of her story, gently, fragment by fragment. Families in the neighbourhood and at church take an interest, invite her to spend time with them and befriend her. She misses her family back home so much. She misses her dad, who was taken away by soldiers, who came back for her before she escaped. We learn how little she actually understands in English, and how few of the crucial aspects of her life are understood through the complexity of the bureaucratic systems which frustrate more than they serve ...

*Friday, May 8th 2009*

11am: The colleague opposite me is talking about performance indicators for postgraduate study in the arts and humanities and how we would ensure appropriate audit. Another day in the University of Glasgow and the birth of another form, with another tick box to ensure accountability. I'm a little on edge and distracted. Rima has to report to the UK border agency in Brand Street, Govan for the first time and Robert has gone with her. There is a slight pause at 11am between items on the agenda for colleagues to refill their coffee. I check my phone for messages:

*Received: 10.46.08-05-2009. Message from Robert. click. 'Rima in Dungavel. Italy in a week unless solicitor can stop it.'*

All the clichés are true. Time and space slow down. There is a sudden shaking in my hands. The sound of colleagues talking about submission rates fades and I feel surrounded by silence. My fingers are heavy. I can't get the phone to close. My fingers are trembling. I drop the phone. Pause. Breathe in. I turn to the colleague on my right – a gentle man – and make some stumbling apology about needing to phone home. In my feet, the blood from my face. Robert picks up. 'It went about as badly as is possible.'

'I'm coming home.'

*Who will share this heavy load? Who will bear our sorrow?*

At home there are what the press teaches us to call 'emotional scenes'. I'm trying to get practical, trying to hear the story, trying to understand,

trying to concentrate, moving into rapid action. Moving into tears. 'We have to take her things up to Dungavel.' Robert's face drawn. There is more to come later, more to be told of the questioning at Brand Street. The moment when the key turned in the lock behind her and he felt he'd betrayed her, handed her over to the authorities. The only box on the forms for what we do, as hospitality, it seems, is trafficking.

Italy may not immediately sound so bad. But Italy is where she lost a finger, was entirely reliant on charity. Italy is where she lived in a massive, mixed, derelict squat under curfew. Italy is where she had to walk two hours a day to a feeding station for her breakfast, and then for her lunch, and then for her supper. Italy is where, with infection taking its toll, she was given money by the community to leave and make her way to the UK where she would, they believed, have better care. When she hears that she will be returned to Italy she sobs uncontrollably. Italy, at present, according to Amnesty International, is unable to keep to the terms of the Dublin II Regulation. Italy is where Berlusconi has stated his aim of 'cleansing Italy of its multi-ethnic population' and is now turning boats from Africa back and refusing to allow them to land. Italy is where government coalition partners are demanding Italian-only buses.

Robert is in shock at the questions he has been asked and from his experience at the Home Office. I proceed to pack her belongings into her tiny suitcase. She doesn't have much and quite a bit of what she has she has been given in the last couple of months. Pictures drawn for her by young children at church, Easter eggs and cards. We begin initial phone calls and emails, starting with Family Group and our own near friends, neighbours, family. I'm shaking as I pack. I've visited Dungavel for years as a befriender and had recently

ceased visiting to attend more fully to the hospitality we were offering at home. Dungavel is a prison. It is no place for a 16-year-old girl.

We speak to her lawyer. I go back and teach my Friday afternoon classes and by the time I get home she is in Dungavel. We borrow a car and drive the hour south of Glasgow to Dungavel with her belongings. Much of what we have taken up – the Easter eggs, the nail varnish and hair oil, her belt and scarves, we cannot leave for her. They are bagged up in HM prison bags for us to collect on our way home. At last we are able to enter the visits room and she meets us, sobbing. We all are. Apparently she'd been told in the UK Border Agency cell, in Brand Street, that she didn't need to worry because 'Dungavel is like a big cinema.'

*Saturday* – after a sleepless night – we begin to piece together the possibilities of a campaign.

*Sunday* we ask for prayer.

We get used to the Dungavel road. As luck would have it I am on annual leave for the week so on *Monday morning* I begin contacting our MSPs, MP and her solicitor, and all those we know in the asylum campaign networks.

Out goes the first request for action and prayer. The response is incredible. Letters and emails begin to pour in to the politicians, responses come, creative ideas – the resourcefulness of good people is alive and escaping and full of hope. We watch in wonder as our worlds connect and we learn more of love and more of anger day by day. Driving up the Dungavel road every evening that week in the car I listen again and again to the words of singer-songwriter Tim Spark's (of Camas) album, *Nikko Fir*, and his track based on the words of Isaiah 58:

*Give shelter to the homeless;  
feed the hungry  
and you shall rise like the dawn.*

What does it mean, I wonder, I still wonder, to rise like the dawn?

By *Thursday* we have an application in for a Judicial Review with release. By *Friday* we have an advocate. In between times we learn via the networks into the Home Office that she is to be moved on the 19th and deported on the 21st.

*Friday night*: Text from Rima in Dungavel: 22:53. 'Hi alishn this crazy people talk to me to get ready on 20 min to move and I refes them. good night love u by.'

And that was the last message we received from her before her SIM card was taken too and she no longer had any means of contacting us. *Saturday* was a crazed day of searching Scotland for a lawyer to prevent the movement south and out of the reach of the Scottish Judicial Review. We were thwarted. On *Sunday* she was moved to Yarl's Wood, near Bedford, and then served her removal papers.

*Sunday evening*: I'm on hold, for ages. In the background the music playing on the Yarl's Wood switchboard is a song on repeat with the words *Don't be afraid that I'm leaving. Be strong on the surface*. The song is interrupted: 'I'm sorry. She is probably having her hair done, or her nails,' says the voice.

A new track *Summer is over. The Innocent have never laughed. Drenched in my pain ... here comes the rain*. Over and over and over again. Another interruption: 'We are having trouble locating her. She has a lot of freedom of movement so has probably made new friends. No, we can't take messages. Do you want to hold?' Another song *Baby, keep my head above the water. Help me swim for my life*. The line disconnects and I don't know what to do with my frustration or anger, other than cry. That night Robert and I sit together quietly, hardly speaking. There is



nothing to say. 'I'm afraid,' he says. 'I'm really afraid.'

**Monday:** Another night, another day on the phones and with the campaign. This time the press are involved, a photographer comes to the house, a new lawyer is instructed in London, money transferred, everything is now speeding up in a race against time to beat the deportation deadline set for Thursday. All our communications are now by text – with the press, with the lawyers, round the campaign, and for those who are praying. More letters are written, more urgently, with love, with anger.

The door bell rings; it is one of my students with a casserole. 'It was the only thing I could think of left to do,' she says.

Karen Reeves, a fellow member living near Bedford, volunteers to visit Rima in Yarl's Wood. The right person in the right place. She has to register her visit 24 hours in advance.

*Who will share this heavy load, who will bear our sorrow?  
The Lord has promised us peace and freedom.  
Who will help this promise to come true?*

**Tuesday:** We have strong contacts to Italy and the various church and community organisations that look after asylum-seekers. We are beginning to see the tracings of an immense network of love and advocacy, of compassion and action that is always there, but only now present to us, in our very particular need. Friends, family, colleagues, neighbours, members of the Community and of our church – all are creatively, intelligently, remarkably doing amazing things to keep hope alive. Rima has sent us her deportation papers. We know the flight number and the time of her deportation on Thursday. I organise a small, quiet vigil for Wednesday night. I eventually get through to Rima on the phone. Tears.

**Wednesday:** The story is in the press. Replies are now pouring in from MPs and MSPs, government ministers and all the others who have been contacted by the campaigners (now in the hundreds). There is no news from England or the lawyer. 4pm Robert phones. 'I think we have done all we can. We just need to wait now.' So we wait. We hold our breath.

Text from Robert: 17.34. 'Flight Stopped. JR with release.' ●

## CONVERSAZIONI

### Guido Monte (Swans – May 18, 2009)<sup>1</sup> Selva Oscura

mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,

I got lost in a dark wood

*la vieillerie poétique avait une bonne part dans mon alchimie du verbe.*

*Je m'habituai à l'hallucination simple*

*Je me crois en enfer, donc j'y suis*

*I think I am in hell, therefore I am*

### Alison Swinfen (A reply, May 18th, 2009) Fortress Europe

I know I am

in hell

when they come  
for the young girl  
given in to my  
care

*Als die Nazis die Kommunisten holten,  
habe ich geschwiegen;  
ich war ja kein Kommunist.<sup>2</sup>*

I know I am  
in hell  
when they  
lie.

*Als sie die Sozialdemokraten  
einsperrten,  
habe ich geschwiegen;  
ich war ja kein Sozialdemokrat.*

Mensonge  
Mensonge

I know I am  
in hell  
when they take her  
in the night  
by force.

*Als sie die Gewerkschafter holten,  
habe ich nicht protestiert;  
ich war ja kein Gewerkschafter.*

I know that this  
is hell  
the longing  
to hold her  
sobbing body  
in my arms

*Als sie die Juden holten,  
habe ich geschwiegen;  
ich war ja kein Jude.*

I do not  
need to think to  
know I am in hell  
There is no need for  
therefore

*Als sie mich holten,  
gab es keinen mehr, der protestierte.*

*Noi siamo venuti al loco ov'io t'ho detto  
che tu vedrai le genti dolorose  
c'hanno perduto il ben dell' intelletto.<sup>3</sup>*

*the woeful people  
who have lost  
the good of  
the intellect.*

This is true  
and  
this is hell.

1. Guido Monte is an Italian multilingual poet. Lines in roman type from Dante, lines in italic by Arthur Rimbaud; the two fragments in English translated by Vitalba Scibilia.

2. Martin Niemöller, Protestant pastor and social activist (14 January, 1892 – 6 March, 1984)

3. Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Canto III