



Caroline Moorehead
Necessary lies

The world of immigration is surrounded by lies: the necessary lies would-be migrants feel compelled to tell in hope of a safe haven; the falsehoods and misinformation of newspaper headlines warning of an impending flood of "bogus" asylum seekers.

On the night of Saturday 14 September 2002, a freak storm hit the southern coast of Sicily. Hailstones the size of tennis balls made dents in parked cars, and locals said later that they had never seen or known anything like it. At about 11pm, while tourists were still dancing in a cafe on the beach at Realmonte, just along the coast from Agrigento, cries were heard coming from the sea. A few minutes later, a number of young Africans pulled themselves up on to the beach. When they could speak, they told the dancers that their boat had sunk on a reef about 100 yards off shore, and the tourists, looking out to sea, saw a boat tipped on its side among the waves, with people clinging to its sides.

Local fishing boats were too small to make much headway against the surf, and by the time the police had been called, and Agrigento had sent out naval boats and a powerful searchlight, the boat had sunk further into the water. During flashes of lightning, onlookers watched horrified as first one and then another of those clinging to its sides slipped under the water. Over the next few hours, 95 of the Africans on board were rescued and brought to shore. Some 30 others drowned. By morning, when the storm had passed, and the beach was again peaceful and sunny, there was not much left for anyone to see, except for fragments of clothing washed up at the water's edge, and bits of a lifejacket, soon taken away by those who collect the rubbish at Realmonte. Capsized boats, the *carrette di mare* or sea chariots as the Italians call them, 10–12 meters long and painted in bright blues and yellows with Arabic writing, are not new along Sicily's coasts, where over the last few years tens of thousands of asylum seekers have arrived in search of new lives. Boats built for a dozen passengers arrive laden with 100 or more and even without a storm many founder.

In the calm days that followed, more bodies kept popping to the surface on Realmonte's beach, bloated and purple, their skin flailed away by the sharp volcanic rock of the reef. One of the bodies was that of a young girl, who the police doctor judged to be no older than 15.

Most of the dead had no names, the survivors being unable, or unwilling, to say who they were. As for the survivors, the *extra comunitari*, as the Italians call the African and Asian migrants who reach their shores, they too, seemed to have no names, or only first names, for when questioned, they would say little

about themselves. Most were happy to talk, but only about the horror of the journey, the lack of food and water, the nightmare moment when the boat hit the reef. But as to who they were, or where they came from, they would say nothing. Those who answered questions, changed their stories the next day. It was only after a while that they began to say that they were Liberians and even then, the Sicilians, who heard them speaking French, suspected that they came not from English-speaking Africa but from the Francophone countries. Among those rescued was a portly, fair-skinned man, with pockets stuffed full of dollar bills. He refused to speak at all, and the Sicilians, who have grown used to *scafisti*, traffickers, concluded that he must have been silenced by the mafia, known to control much of the people-smuggling business coming from Tunisia. Those trafficked into Sicily are known to be carefully coached to give nothing away, and to get rid of all documents, so that they cannot be sent home or their traffickers traced. Passports, identity cards, scraps of letters and photographs are often found along the beaches, washed up by the waves, among the debris that litters the sand.

Over the next few days, the bodies of the drowned were taken to cemeteries up and down the coast, where they were given slots in the tall walls that house the dead. On each was put a placard: "Liberian citizen. Drowned"

The question for the Sicilians was what to do with the living, all of whom applied for asylum. Some were taken into hostels, to await a summons to the ministry for the interior in Rome where they would be interviewed to see whether they were eligible for refugee status, and with it permission to live and work in Italy. Others vanished quietly during the night, and were assumed to have entered Italy's thriving black economy. But there had been something about the violence of the storm and the horror of the shipwreck that had touched the hearts of the people of Realmonte, and two young couples, a brother and sister and a married pair, were offered a flat in the village by the local chapter of the Red Cross, after it became known that the two young women were pregnant. Realmonte felt protective about these two girls, both still teenagers. And when they gave birth, in the Spring, they gave them prams and cots, cooked meals for them and tried to teach them how to care for their babies.

But then, the mood changed. The trouble started when the midwife let it be known that the girl claiming to be with her brother was, in fact, having sex with him. Word quickly spread around the village. Was it possible, the villagers asked themselves, that the two were not in fact brother and sister, as they had claimed? And if not, why had they not said so? They felt there was something distasteful in such a lie. The shipwreck had in fact made ripples all along Sicily's southern shore. Up in San Biagio Platani, a small town set high among summer pastures, a local doctor and his wife invited 15 of the young Africans to settle while they waited their summons to Rome. Five of them were women and when one was found to be pregnant the local people, as in Realmonte, looked after her. Jobs were found for the men. But by Spring, the relationship between the people of San Biagio Platani and their African guests had turned a little sour. As Dr Palumbo saw it, everyone accepted that at first the visitors would be reluctant to say much about themselves. But everyone assumed that their reticence would evaporate once they felt secure and appreciated. But it didn't; if anything, it grew stronger. The Africans began to change their names, then their ages, then any details that they had previously let slip about their journeys. Several of the girls turned out to be pregnant, and when one gave her age first as 18, then 25, then 22, Dr Palumbo was at first amused and then mildly irritated; he begged her to find an age and stick to it, if

only for the sake of convenience.

By late Spring, there was very little goodwill left, either in Realmonte or San Biagio. The Sicilians simply could not understand why people on whom they had lavished such genuine affection did not appear to trust them enough to confide their real stories in return. They felt used. Even a few confidences, as Dr Palumbo says, would have made a difference. One morning, San Biagio woke to find three of the visitors had gone, taking the early bus to Palermo. By April, there were none left. Even the pregnant girls had gone, and not one of them had said good-bye. In Realmonte, the two couples, with their two babies, closed their door and their shutters and avoided their hosts, who by now, aggrieved and uncomprehending, longed to move them on.

It is not easy, for people who have fled violence and persecution, or even poverty and despair, to handle truth. When their story is their only real passport, when they have thrown away their documents and tried to reinvent themselves, it is hard not to embellish the hardships of the past. Refugee life is rife with rumour. Among those who wait to be interviewed for refugee status – be it by UNHCR, which determines refugee status in just over 40 countries, or the immigration authorities of countries who do their own determination – word circulates about how some nationalities are more likely to get asylum than others, about how some stories are more powerful than others, and some more likely to touch the hearts of the interviewers.

The buying and selling of "good" stories, stories to win asylum, has become common practice in refugee circles, among people terrified that their own real story is not powerful enough. How easy then, how natural, to shape the past in such a way that it provides more hope for a better future. Traffickers, transporting clients to the West, are known to recommend identities, to advise nationalities known to be on the list of countries to which people asking asylum cannot be returned without breaching the Refugee Convention clause about "non-refoulement" – the non-return to places of danger and persecution.

In recent years, as numbers of people arriving in the West and claiming asylum began to grow steeply, and pressure mounted on immigration officers to turn away as many applicants as they reasonably could, so the idea of what is truth and what is a lie has acquired a very particular potency in refugee matters. Credibility has become a benchmark on which everything depends. Asylum seekers found not to be telling the truth are automatically rejected, however genuine their claim may be. 'Lack of credibility' – that is to say, the supposition that the person asking for asylum is lying – has become, in most of the West, the main reason for refusal. For their lawyers, convincing their clients that they must tell only the truth, has become of major importance. Just as spotting a lie, however unimportant, has become a challenge for immigration officers, who admit that a falsehood, "something wobbly, however small, like method of travel or date of departure!", enables them to throw out a case. The tragedy comes when the real story, the true story, is stronger than the made-up one and would guarantee refugee status while the false one does not. Not easy for the asylum seekers, certainly; but not easy for the interviewers either, to be forced to be so vigilant for lies in the stories of desperate people.

Untruths surround refugees. In recent years, particularly in Europe, a campaign of hostility towards those who arrive in the West without documents – as virtually everyone seeking asylum is obliged to do – has been gaining ground.

Dishonest anti-immigration campaigners, manipulating both statistics and government figures and playing on the fears and anxieties of a gullible public, have taken to putting out sensational forecasts about a future under siege from an invasion of desperate and greedy migrants. The website of MigrationWatch UK, a self-styled independent think tank, warns that "we can expect at least 200,000 and perhaps 250,000 non-EU immigrants a year! In UNHCR in Geneva, where a battle is currently being waged against the increasingly restrictionist asylum policies of Western countries, the British tabloids and their incessant attacks on refugees are regarded with incredulity and horror.

It was at the turn of the millennium that the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Express* sharpened their campaign against immigrants. Headlines have included "Swan Bake: Asylum seekers steal Queen's birds for barbecues (*Sun*)"; "Official: Asylum tearing UK apart" (*Sun*); and "Widow, 88, told by GP: make way for asylum seekers" (*Mail on Sunday*). As the feeling grew that reporting in the British media gives undue prominence to scaremongering claims from fringe groups, portraying asylum seekers as threatening young men with contacts in the criminal underworld, so in the spring of 2003, Article 19 carried out a research project on media reporting of refugee matters. It concluded that statistics were "frequently unsourced, exaggerated or inadequately explained", that the tabloid press was failing to distinguish between economic migrants and asylum seekers, and that the hostility of media coverage was provoking a sense of alienation and shame among refugees. Recnet research by ICAR, the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK, has found that that this relentless repetition of hostile and inaccurate reporting contributes to increased hostility by the public and in turn to tension and even racial harassment. UNHCR and the National Union of Journalists joined forces to produce a memorandum on good reporting and, in October 2003, the Press Complaints Commission issued guidelines about inaccurate use of language.

Even so, hostile and bigoted reporting continues, with casual disregard for any distinction between asylum seeker, refugee, failed asylum seeker or economic migrant. In most articles, the terms are used randomly, as if synonymous. In the *Daily Mail*, Ross Benson has been running a series of stories about the Roma, warning of an invasion of Gypsies once the European Union is enlarged in May. The Roma, it is widely agreed, remain the most disliked and despised of all European ethnic minorities. In January 2004, the *Sunday Times* took up the theme, suggesting that up to 100,000 Roma were on their way. The next day, the *Sun* added that after three months in the UK, these Roma would be "entitled to health, education, pension and welfare benefits". The *Daily Express* then inflated the figure to 1.6 million: "Gypsies prepare to invade Britain". Though two days later they amended this figure to 40,000, they predicted an "economic disaster" just the same. Even *The Economist* spoke of the "coming hordes". On 22 January, the *Mail* front page covered a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, saying that Britain, which was taking one in five of the Western world's asylum seekers, had "failed to turn the asylum tide. The article, it later turned out, was based on figures from 2002, and ignored the fact that the UK is currently eighth in the immigration league tables relative to size of population, well behind Austria, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Ireland. In any case, under EU agreements, old EU members may keep their labour markets closed to new entrants for a transition period of seven years, and research has already shown that the desire to move to the West from the countries joining in May may not be all that high. Lies, inaccuracies, exaggerations, untruths: this is the climate in which the current asylum world lives, in which policy is made not so much on

evidence as in response to media and public perception, and in which those seeking asylum, buffeted by the chaotic, contradictory and discriminatory asylum procedures now operating across the Western world, scramble for a toehold using any method they can. Not long ago, Kofi Annan, secretary general of the United Nations, told the European Parliament that Europe's anti-immigration rhetoric was "de-humanising" people. "This silent human rights crisis" he went on, "shames our world."

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