# Borderlands

## *Volunteering among Europe's Displaced*

By

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The following pages about my experiences volunteering with NGOs assisting displaced people represent only a moment in time. A lot has changed since 2021 and 2022. The NGOs I volunteered with have closed some projects and opened new ones. They must constantly juggle the competing demands of respecting budgetary constraints and meeting the needs of asylum seekers. They must adapt and do the best with what they have.

As for the displaced people themselves, the situation has only gotten worse. Pushbacks continue in the Aegean, more people have drowned in the English Channel, and the violence inflicted in the borderlands goes unpunished. Opinions towards displaced people in Cyprus have become more hostile. Europe has struck more externalization deals with countries, such as Tunisia and Mauritania, to stop people from trying to reach European territory. These arrangements have resulted in human rights abuses and great suffering. Until the underlying causes of displacement are addressed and curtailed, people will continue to seek safety elsewhere, and their right to do must be respected. No amount of deterrence will stop them.

I have changed the names of the people with whom I interacted, both volunteers and the displaced, to protect their anonymity. I have not included the names of the NGOs I volunteered with so as not to conflate my position and perspective with theirs. The opinions expressed herein are mine alone.

# Introduction

This book is about the ongoing refugee crisis occurring at Europe's borders. It is not a crisis of numbers but of policy and parochialism. It is a crisis of inaction and xenophobia—of callousness. European leaders refuse to understand the most brutal containment practices in the world will not prevent a man, woman, or child from fleeing a burning house. And that stubbornness breeds the violence, both physical and psychological, inflicted on people fleeing burning houses at Europe's outposts.

From the summer of 2021 to the end of 2022, I volunteered with several NGOs working at different refugee hotspots across the continent: Serbia, France, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, and Cyprus. We provided humanitarian aid to displaced persons trying to make the increasingly perilous journey from their home countries to Western Europe. I saw firsthand how Brussels has made it policy to make finding sanctuary in Europe increasingly difficult, dangerous, and sometimes even deadly. I heard stories from people who had experienced violence at the hands of border patrol officers and who had lost friends and loved ones on their journey to Europe. And I understood how Europe's increasing shift to the right and its steadfast determination to prevent any irregular migration across its borders have made a mockery of the human rights legislation European leaders claim to hold sacrosanct. In this book, I share these stories and reflections.

My aims here are modest: I only bear witness to what I saw. I do not present any solutions to displacement because we already know how to prevent it: End war, poverty, and persecution. Stop

climate change. Protect human rights. If these propositions seem overly idealistic, I wonder how we in the West have become so comfortable with watching the suffering of others, as if we somehow play no part in the war and poverty engulfing other parts of the world. We do play a part. We are accountable, and we have a responsibility to confront and challenge these injustices.

This book is a consciousness-raising activity. My audience is a Western one. I want them to know that human rights have ceased to exist in the borderlands—on Europe's edge. My goal with these words is to spur action among those in the West who have grown indifferent to the suffering of others. Empathy is not enough. We must rethink what it means to belong to a community in a globalized world. We must fight our fear of difference. We must learn to accept the other within our midst not only because it is the ethical and moral thing to do but also because it might be us, one day, knocking on another's door and asking for shelter.

In the long history of humanity, movement has been the norm, not the exception. Among the settled and comfortable of the West, the anti-migrant cheerleaders, exists a curious myopia about the past and future. Is their privileged position making them forget their forbearers moved or were forced to move? Do they not realize their children or maybe their children's children or maybe even their generations further down the road will have to move, too? Do they think their present will exist into infinity? Do they believe their future family will not have to seek the hospitality and protection of other, foreign communities? And how would they like them to be treated? Nothing lasts; all empires eventually crumble. Everything is only ice.

I am not a refugee. War, poverty, persecution, or environmental destruction have never displaced me. I have never sought safety and security from another country. I have never knocked on another's door asking for help.

I am not a refugee. I am its opposite.

I have lived most of my adult life comfortably in Canada, a peaceful and prosperous nation, and for those years I did not, my Canadian passport allowed me easy access to other countries to study, work, or simply visit. Through my twenties and into my thirties, I danced and fluttered from country to country. Travel was easy and painless. I collected passport stamps as one would baseball cards or comic books. For border guards, my Canadian passport humanized me more than my words, thoughts, or actions. I had to prove nothing to them other than my birthplace. My passport spoke for me. It gave me access to the world and the privilege to move. The more I travelled, however, the more I saw how border guards were not always so welcoming to others with more suspicious documentation. Border guards had more questions for them. I became more aware of how the world of movement was a profoundly unequal one. I was called "courageous" or "adventurous" for embarking on a months-long trip, yet people travelling overland through Central America, Mexico, and into the United States (US) for the chance of a more dignified life were called "rapists" or "criminals" and those travelling across the Aegean or Mediterranean and into Europe to escape war and persecution were called "terrorists."

The inability of nation-states to effectively respond to refugees lies not, entirely, in their selfishness but in their inability to perceive,

and thus protect, human life outside their legal systems. If human rights are innate and exist beyond the borders of any state, then refugees by their very nature should trigger a comprehensive and unassailable protective system. But because human rights have become tied to citizenship through the nation-state, mass displacement reveals the fiction of any notion of universal human rights. In the modern conception of sovereignty, in which states are responsible for their citizens on a particular territory, human beings do not exist outside their citizenship. To strip a person of their citizenship—that is, to cast them as a refugee—is to render them rightsless. Instead of an aberration, or people simply out of place, the reality of mass displacement severs the linkage between human beings and citizens. Most frightening for nation-states is displacement allows us to imagine future political communities that do not take the nation-state as their foundation.

Unsurprisingly then, hysteria typically accompanies discussions about asylum seekers, refugees, and what to do with them among Western countries. Every day, politicians bemoan the increasing fragility of borders and devise increasingly punitive measures to deter their coming. Every day, citizens speak about asylum seekers and refugees in terms of "floods" or “tsunamis,” an uncontrollable and destructive force, and advocate for further restrictions on their movement. Every day, psychological and physical violence is committed against the displaced in the name of protecting nation-states and their borders. Every day, legal avenues for asylum seekers to reach the West evaporate.

Judging by this alarmist rhetoric, and the draconian policies it has spawned, one might assume that the world’s 90 million displaced people were together knocking on the door of the West and

demanding entry. Yet a glance at UNHCR statistics shows that 74 per cent of these 90 million are hosted by low-income countries and that 69 per cent are hosted by a country neighbouring their country of origin. Instead of opening more legal pathways to asylum or providing more opportunities for resettlement, Western countries have instead expended much money and resources containing the displaced in their area of origin, trapping them in a state of limbo in which they are kept alive but also kept from living. Western governments make deals with authoritarian regimes to keep the displaced locked away and out of sight. Humanitarian responses to displacement, which were once temporary, have extended into perpetuity. The emergency has become the norm. Some refugee camps have transformed into cities in which generations of families now live and die. Many refugee situations have become protracted and have lasted decades. NGOs offer short-term relief but no permanent solutions. In their host countries, refugees themselves are often denied the legal right to work or attend school; to survive, they must navigate the informal sector, where chances of exploitation are rife. Opportunities for personal development are scarce; talent and creativity are wasted. In exile, dreams often go unfilled. People are forced to wait and then wait more for a solution that may never come. But waiting is exhausting. Through their containment policies, Western countries have criminalized any decision other than to wait. If refugees refuse to sacrifice decades of their lives waiting in camps, their movement is criminalized, and whatever violence befalls them during their journey is said to be their fault.

But most refugees stay in their home region, eke out an existence, and hope they can either return home or be resettled in another country. This book is not about them. This book is about a small

minority with the means and connections to journey to Europe to restart their life in a place of relative security. This book is about what happens when they arrive at Europe's borders.

# 1
# Belgrade

September and October 2021

War has shaped Serbia. In the 1990s, violence and conflict whittled Yugoslavia down to a mere sliver of its former size and power. Borders were created, and others were redrawn. In February 1999, representatives from Kosovo and Serbia, as well as from the US, the European Union (EU), and Russia, met at the Chateau de Rambouillet near Paris in an attempt to end the Kosovo War. The Rambouillet Agreement maintained the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia while granting Kosovo significant autonomy. Milošević rejected the deal, refusing to accept the presence of international forces in Yugoslavia or to stop his military campaign in Kosovo. The bombing then soon commenced.

Beginning on March 24, 1999, NATO bombed Belgrade and other Serb-controlled areas for seventy-eight days. Unsanctioned by the United Nations (UN), NATO's campaign damaged twenty-five thousand houses and apartment buildings and destroyed hundreds of kilometres of roads and railways. In terms of civilian casualties, estimates range between five hundred and twenty-five hundred. On June 10, Milošević agreed to the withdrawal of all Serbian forces from Kosovo and to the arrival of thirty-six thousand peacekeepers. Serbs today still hold deep antipathy

towards NATO and the West for the destruction they wrought and for which they enjoy impunity.

From 1991 to 1998, when war engulfed the former Yugoslavia, the violence displaced 3.2 million people. Within the three months of the NATO bombing campaign specifically, fifty thousand Serbs fled their country, with most seeking refuge in neighbouring Hungary. Although a sizeable percentage of the displaced were mothers and their children fleeing the bombs falling on Belgrade, fifteen to twenty thousand were also men fleeing the draft and the long arm of the Serbian military.

Those who fled Milošević's Serbia comprised the dictator's most pointed critics, including professors, journalists, photographers, opposition leaders, and protestors—those very people whose voices Milošević's architecture of fear and intimidation tried to silence. Together they lived in exile in Hungary, unable to go back and unable to move forward, and wait for a time they may restart their lives free from oppression.

Belgrade now knows peace, but the displaced still roam its parks and streets. In the summer of 2015 and into 2016, hundreds of thousands of people fleeing war, poverty, and persecution passed through Belgrade on their way to Western Europe. The city did not have the resources to cope with the influx, resulting in a humanitarian crisis. The EU has since tried to close the Balkan route and make travel more difficult and dangerous through the region for displaced people. With the aid of smugglers and vast communication networks, however, the displaced still ply this route with the hope of reaching Germany, France, Italy, or the United Kingdom (UK). Although the number of displaced people

passing through the Balkan route no longer reaches the numbers seen in the summer of 2015, thousands still pass through Belgrade. However, the city has few resources to support them.

One issue is hygiene. People on the move rarely enjoy the pleasures of a shower. They can go days, even weeks, without one. Even though showers can seem peripheral to survival, or even an indulgent luxury to those who take them for granted, dignity, not to mention health, is correlated to the ability to clean oneself. Noting this connection, one NGO transformed an old bakery in the centre of Belgrade into a wash centre, offering showers and laundry services to people on the move and Serbs experiencing homelessness or poverty. I volunteered at the centre for six weeks and met many people passing through Belgrade. Here are some of their stories.

## The Showers

When the showers get busy, and people are waiting downstairs for their turn, I am sometimes not as detailed in my cleaning of the showers as I would like. I sometimes must sacrifice thoroughness for expedience. People are waiting. They are on the move, maybe leaving this afternoon or evening. They want to shower. No, they need to shower. And I am holding them back.

During calmer moments, when I do not hear any commotion coming from downstairs, this is what happens. A beneficiary exits the shower, and I direct him to the hamper he can throw his dirty towel. As he looks at himself in the mirror, passing a comb through it or applying almond oil at his leisure, I take my bottle of detergent and enter the shower. I spray the three shower walls and floor and

wash it all away with the shower head, watching the bubbly remnants of soap and shampoo travel towards the drain. Periodically, I peek my head out to see if the beneficiary needs anything else or whether he would like to exchange his socks for a new pair. If he requires nothing further, I then watch to see if anything is obstructing the water's passage, and, if so, I put on my green latex glove and go digging for the culprit, which usually takes the form of a clump of matted hair. I then spray the shower again. If I am lucky, the water will pass easily, leaving behind a clean floor of immaculate white. If I am unlucky, however, the water will leave behind strands of hair or other small pieces of dirt or debris, requiring further work to remove the pieces. While I am squatting and wiping away whatever remains, I remind myself how I would like to find the shower if the shoe were on the other foot. Would it matter that I was a refugee? Would my status and situation warrant I be treated with less respect or given a shower a citizen would find unacceptable? Would I be expected just to shut up and be grateful? These thoughts propel me to wipe away any remaining dirt or pick up any hairs that stubbornly refuse to go down the drain. When I am satisfied with the stall's state, I call downstairs to say I have one shower available. I then grab a clean towel and wait for the next beneficiary to arrive.

When things get a little more chaotic, though, when beneficiaries begin to ascend and descend three at a time, when there is a queue forming downstairs, I do not have the time to be so exhaustive. I still disinfect the walls and floor and ensure that nothing plugs the drain, but the second passing sometimes gets overlooked, and sometimes once the water drains, hair and other things get left behind. I justify this oversight in the name of expediency. We try to serve as many people on the move as possible in a dignified

way, so when time does not allow such a deep clean, I comfort myself with the thought that at least we are getting people through the door. And, I admit, I comfort myself with the thought that a person on the move, someone sleeping rough and fighting for their survival, would not begrudge me an errant hair or piece of debris. They must be satisfied with the shower, soap, shampoo and with the feeling of warm water hitting their skin and washing away all the dirt, mud, grime, and even blood that had accumulated there over the past days, weeks, months; indeed, who can say the last time they showered, so they must be grateful just for the shower, just for the chance to be clean again.

These thoughts swirl as I maddeningly spray the shower walls with disinfectant and water and watch it all slowly sink into the drain. Nothing seems to plug its passage. The water flows as it should. I yell downstairs to the shift leader to send the next person and then soon hear the footsteps ascending. I do one last quick spray, grab a clean towel, and direct the beneficiary to his shower. I glance at my watch to see how much time the other two showering beneficiaries have left, since we try to limit each shower to five minutes, especially when it's busy. But when I turn to go inform them they have only about one minute left, I am met by the beneficiary, now shirtless, whom I had just met. He is pointing towards the shower stall with an unamused expression on his face. Although his English is almost nonexistent, he knows the words to convey his displeasure. He is direct: "Dirty," he says. I follow his finger to the shower, and sure enough, a dozen or so hair strands have coated themselves to the white floor. They look like emaciated worms desperately trying to reach the drain to again find sanctuary and safety within the darkness of the pipes. I am angry with myself. If I had waited another minute or two for the

water to drain instead of calling this beneficiary up, I would have noticed these obstinate hairs and their refusal to disappear. I would have removed each either by hand or water. I would have made them go away. I would have. I swear I would have. In that moment, those remaining hairs represent my privilege as a citizen of the world. Someone with papers, someone with money, someone with security. I would never accept a dirty shower stall, but it's good enough for them. That's what the hairs scream. They should be grateful. Yes, grateful. The Serbian police round them up like dogs. The Serbian people treat them with disdain and derision. They sleep rough in parks or under bridges and are exposed to daily threats of violence. They have nothing but the clothes on their back, maybe a rucksack, maybe a cellphone. We are here to help. We are doing our best with the limited resources at our disposal. We need to serve as people as possible. I want to say this to the beneficiary. Sometimes, corners are cut. Sometimes, shortcuts are taken. But it's better than nothing, right? An imperfect shower is better than no shower at all, right? Why can't you just be grateful?

No. I do not say this. These thoughts thankfully do not stay long.

Dignity does not exist in a hierarchy.

I grab my green gloves, pull them on, and get to work. I kneel over the floor, showerhead in hand, and attack each strand of hair, each stubborn little worm. Some I send hurtling down the drain; others, the more obstinate, I grab with my thumb and forefinger and fling into the garbage. In a few minutes, the floor is as white as it should be; all traces of the former showerers have disappeared. I spray the walls one last night and watch the water flow down the drain. The

beneficiary enters, and I hear no further comment or complaint, only the water coming to life.

## Rahim

We have a mirror in the shower area. It's a dignity thing. People on the move can examine themselves once they exit the showers; they can use the combs and oil we provide to brush and style their hair if they so choose. And most do. Appearance remains important regardless of immigration status. The thing about the mirror, though, is it rests against a wall because it appears too tough and solid to allow the passage of a nail or screw to hang the glass. So it sits on a crate and leans against the wall, which means that some of the taller people must crouch slightly to see their reflection. Because the mirror stands close to one of the boilers, not quite underneath it, a taller person can, if he is not careful, bump his head on said boiler after checking his appearance and standing tall once again. Some beneficiaries also check themselves for wounds.

One afternoon, two beneficiaries make their way up the stairs. Their movement is laboured, unconfident. They seem to have trouble keeping their balance. They are distant, seemingly occupying a different plain of reality. In essence, they appear stoned, which worries me slightly, since our centre has a zero-drug policy. We do not tolerate drug use on our premises, and we do not serve people under the influence.

One plops down on a chair and starts removing clothing from his backpack. The other heads towards the mirror, kneels, and inspects an ugly gash he has on his neck. He removes a pair of

scissors from his jeans, the dull kind children use while doing arts and crafts, and takes one point and presses it against the red spot on his neck. He grimaces and says something to his companion in Arabic. He is in obvious discomfort, and I can feel my anxiety rise. We are not a medical centre; we have a First Aid kit. That's it. We can provide some Band-Aids and bandages. We can inform people on the move when Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) will next visit the city, which is once a week at the best of times. We have neither the skills nor the resources to offer any medical assistance beyond that. He pokes his wound and then grimaces. Again and again. And I wonder just how dull that blade is, whether it can pierce skin, an artery. The neck is notoriously vulnerable, and here he is poking it with a scissors' point. Should I intercede? What if he cuts himself? What if he further hurts himself? What if? What if? Just as I am about to direct him away from the mirror and towards the shower, he stands from his kneeling position and bangs his head on the boiler. Rage envelops him. I see it. It's the culmination of a million indignities, small and large, suffered on his journey from there to here. No more suffering. No more humiliation. This is the final straw. I am a human being, and I will no longer tolerate this degradation. And as if to prove to me beyond a shadow of a doubt he is a man who possesses agency and can affect, nay disrupt, the happenings around him, he violently grabs the mirror and lifts it a centimetre or two from the ground. I think he will smash it. The mirror is already cracked. It wouldn't take much. There would then be shards everywhere, each a threat, a chance, an unknown variable. In those seconds, he grasps the mirror; I do not begrudge him his decision. I do not judge him. Fuck the boiler. Fuck the mirror. If it were me. Fuck the endless hell of my life. Fuck the gratitude I must display, the incessant grovelling, just for some crumbs, a pair of socks, a hot shower. Fuck these volunteers who

hand me towels and tell me I have five minutes for a shower. Fuck the way they try to humanize an inhuman situation. Fuck their benevolence and good intentions. Fuck their empathy. Fuck how good they must feel for handing me a towel when all that separates me from them is pure chance.

At the last moment, though, he stops himself. He exhales and relaxes his muscles. He has walked himself back from the edge, the precipice. I take the mirror from him and lean it against the wall. "No problem," I say, directing him towards the shower. "No problem." He follows my hand and disappears behind the shower curtain. His friend, meanwhile, still sits on the chair, rifling through his backpack for this or that, removing and repacking items, never completely sure what he is looking for. Now and then, he shouts something to his showering friend, who sometimes replies and sometimes does not. He strikes me as unpredictable and combustible. His demeanour can change at a moment's notice. His build is athletic and strong. He can handle himself; he has handled himself. The scars shock me. When he removes his shirt, I see long, thin cuts covering his torso. It was as if a group had held him down and someone had dragged a rake or a spading fork across his chest. They are pronounced; they are difficult to avoid. I cast my gaze downwards out of respect and disgust. I have never seen such wounds before—those caused by the intentional violence of another. What souvenirs people get on their journey to Europe. What memories they must daily suffer through, their horrible echoes and shrieks only rendered mute by narcotics. The world's callousness has tattooed itself across his body, forever marking it.

Once he shuts the shower curtain, I rush downstairs to tell the two other volunteers what happened, about their demeanour and scars. The shift leader tells me to watch their behaviour and see if either wishes to divulge how they received their injuries or about what happened to them. The NGO is partnered with an organization that takes testimonies from people on the move who have experienced violence from the police and then uses them for advocacy purposes. There are signs taped to the wall explaining about the network in Pashto, Farsi, Arabic, Urdu, and English, and the shift leader says to point out the sign to them to see if they wish to share. If their violence is police related, their disclosure will not lead to any tangible benefit for them, except the knowledge maybe that someone has heard their story, someone has believed it, and someone has tried to use it to prevent from such violence from visiting other people in the future.

I ascend the stairs, wondering how I will broach the topic, how I will ask the men whether they want to share something intimate and horrible with a stranger. Beside the shower, I stand, hands behind my back, on the ready, waiting for the men to emerge. Yet something suddenly does not sound right, something does not feel right. It then hits me: I can hear only one shower running. I glance towards the middle stall, which should be showering the man with scars across his chest, but see no movement. No curtains are rustling, and no water is running from the shower head. No signs of a person. I ask if anyone is there while peaking behind the curtain. Empty. Just the stool, the wooden mat, and two containers full of shampoo and soap. In an instant, I know what has happened and where the man has vanished to. There is no secret. But I don't want to believe it.

We have a washroom on the second floor, a metre away from the showers. Volunteers use it to relieve themselves and other mundane yet essential tasks like filling the water jug or the disinfectant bottle. People on the move cannot use it, for incidents have occurred, or so I was told. One man, allegedly, barricaded himself inside to do drugs, much to the chagrin of the volunteer who was pleading for him to exit, to get the hell out. Since then, people on the move are forbidden to enter, which creates some discomfort when some see the mysterious door and ask whether there is a toilet inside, and I must lie and say no or that the washroom is only for staff. We tell them they may find public toilets at Republic Square, a fifteen-minute walk away, but we know many of them will not venture that far into the city, preferring instead to hang around the bus station, where exit, or escape, is more feasible. As someone with an unpredictable bladder and who has been left in perilous situations on many long bus journeys, I sympathize with the desire to use a toilet whenever one presents itself.

I knock on the bathroom door, and someone knocks back. I knock again, and he knocks back. “You have to get out now,” I say, but I am only met by silence. What is he doing in there? I picture a syringe and a vein. I picture a knife. I picture wounds and blood. I picture an ordeal. “Please, you have to get out now,” I beg. “The bathroom is for staff only.” I hear a sputtering of Arabic and a little bit of movement. But the door remains shut. Anger has replaced anxiety. My body stiffens and tightens. “Get out now,” I scream and bang on the door. My anger, though, does not resemble that of the beneficiary who bumped his head on the boiler. He was frustrated at the injustice of his situation. At the barricades people mounted between himself and hope, between himself and a future.

At the little and large humiliations he has suffered to get a chance, only a chance, to show himself worthy of safety, somewhere where carnage and mayhem do not fall from the sky. In contrast, I am angry at the disorder this man in the toilet has caused. He has flouted the rules and displayed an utter lack of respect for how we do things in the wash centre. We do not ask for much, just politeness and decorum, a little reverence for the rules. We do not wish to be thanked. We have no interest in being hailed as heroes or saviours. All we want is to get as many people through the door as possible. All we want is to perform our roles with as little hindrance as possible.

"Get out now," I shout. I try to pull it open but again am met by resistance, but in the slight crack, I see him for a second in the middle of getting changed. Was that all he wanted? More room to change? A little more privacy? A taste of dignity? Am I depriving him of the very thing we seek to provide?

"Jesse!" The shift leader is calling from downstairs. "We have a problem." I wonder how she knows about the man in the toilet, but when I look over the rail and see her standing at the bottom of the stairs, I realize she is talking about a very different problem. Water is falling from a pipe from the bathroom across the first-floor ceiling and is quickly pooling on the stairs. I grab a container in which we ask people on the move to leave their shoes, and we situate it under the waterfall.

"A man has locked himself in the bathroom," I tell the shift leader, somewhat sheepishly, since I am still chastising myself for my dereliction of duty.

A native German speaker, she pauses to see if she correctly heard me.

“He won’t come out,” I say.

“He must,” she says.

I race back up the stairs, leaving her to inspect the pipe from which the water is falling. For the sake of decorum and sensitivity, women volunteers are prohibited from going upstairs when men are showering. When I arrive at the showers, the beneficiary with the wound on his neck, who did take a shower, has emerged fully washed and clothed. I ask him to please tell his friend he must leave the toilet immediately. The beneficiary bangs on the bathroom door and yells some instructions in Arabic. Muffled words can be heard in return. “He is coming. He is coming. One minute. One minute.” I shake my head. “No. Please tell him he must come out now.”

“Jesse.” I turn to see the shift leader at the bottom of the stairs. “Can I come up?” The second man has dressed, so I indicate she may. She knocks herself, once and then twice. “You need to come out now. This toilet is for staff only.” A pause. “Okay. Okay,” the voice says. “I am coming.” She turns to his friend. “Tell him he must come out now.” The friend says, “Sister. Sister. This is not my fault.” He points to me. “You see, I took my shower. No problem.” We reassure him we don’t blame him, but his friend must come out. So he again bangs on the door, and he shouts some words in Arabic, and again we hear some muffled words in return. “Soon. Soon,” the friend says and returns to organizing his clothing. “Jesse, once these two guys leave, we will close the showers for a

few minutes to see where the leak is coming from." I nod, and she descends. A moment or two later, the toilet door swings open, the athletic man appears, half-dressed and with a bag in hand, his scars as present as ever, but instead of finishing getting dressed next to his friend, he darts into the shower and closes the curtain behind him. "No, the showers are closed," I scream. "You can't shower. We have a leak." I tell his friend to tell him he cannot shower, and a shouting match soon erupts between them in Arabic. From the stall, I hear the athletic man say, "Just two minutes. Please, just two minutes." I lean over the rail and shout downstairs: "He has gone into the shower." She appears in a flash, just in front of the falling water, which has not decreased in volume, and tells me in no uncertain terms he cannot. A maelstrom of English and Arabic passes through the room as his friend and I beg him to please stop. I use the simplest expressions, the most basic of body language, wagging my finger, making an X with my arms, but it's no use. The man understands what I want. There is no ambiguity. Nothing is lost in translation. He has chosen to ignore me: The man has decided to shower. He has undressed and has turned on the shower. "Jesse," the shift leader is calling me. "Has he come out?" I lean over the rail. "No. He is showering. There is nothing I can do."

A calm settles over the shower room. Gone are the noise and drama. A quiet descends. It's as if nothing had happened. The friend combs his hair, gathers his things, and soon skips down the stairs. The water has stopped leaking for now. I stand with my hands behind my back, replaying the previous minutes in my mind. If I had only not gone downstairs, he would not have gone into the toilet, and none of this would have occurred. Why did I go downstairs? Was the information that pressing? Couldn't it have

waited ten or fifteen minutes? Of course, it could have. The steam rises from the shower stall and floats underneath the light. I hear the man cough once or twice. He spits. I wanted to feel as a valued member of the team. I wanted to have something to share, pressing information to which only I was privy. I wanted them to hang on my every word and realize that, yes, I belonged and had something valuable to contribute. Insecurity breeds over-compensation. Wanting to impress is its own kind of imprisonment. Yes. This situation could have gone quite differently if I had only been a little more secure in my skin, a touch more resolute in attending to what matters: the dignity of the people we encounter. He only craved a little more room to change. He casts an imposing figure, and the space between the two shower curtains, where we have put a stool and a wooden floorboard, is simply too constrained to accommodate him. Will he be banned from using our services? Perhaps. Will he be expelled for expecting something we take for granted daily: space and privacy?

The water has stopped, and there is movement behind the curtains. He exits bare-chested, with jeans on. He passes me without apology or regret and stands in front of the mirror. He takes a t-shirt from his backpack, situates it over his head, and then rolls it down over his chest, concealing once more his scars, the irrefutable evidence something is not quite right. He applies cologne and fixes his hair in the mirror. You'd be forgiven for thinking he was grooming for a night out and not preparing to face another uncertain afternoon and evening on the streets of Belgrade. He sits his cigarettes, lighter, and bills on the chair and ponders which pocket each should go. He is in no hurry. Nothing rushes him. Although his movements still strike me as unconfident and

wobbly, he is calmer than he was fifteen minutes ago, less unpredictable, less prone to antics. He finally grabs his backpack and throws it over his shoulder, and without looking at me, he says, "Thank you, friend," and walks down the stairs and leaves the centre. The shift leader asks me if everything is okay. I nod.

"What is his name?" I ask.

"Rahim," she says.

Rahim continues to visit the wash centre—still demanding and unpredictable. He and his friends possess a chaotic energy. They demand a shower or to have their clothes washed. Lines and time slots do not seem to matter. They are unstable and shaky. Trouble follows. Knife wounds often grace their bodies; one man has a large, vertical cut from the ear lobe down his neck and another one just past his eye. They take drugs; they may even deal drugs. I don't know. One once told me they had been in Serbia for eight years; "a shit country," he said. There is a local man who hangs around the centre, collecting bottles and scavenging the local trash bins, who once he told me, pointing to Rahim and his group, those Arabs are all dangerous drug dealers and we shouldn't wash their clothes or give them showers. I ignored the racist caricature and went on with my day. We judge behaviour done in the centre, not outside. Although Rahim and his crew have come to the centre intoxicated and high one or two times and are a little difficult, they have done nothing to warrant being banned. We think they are from Algeria, and I find it ironic Europeans would castigate people from the Maghreb seeking better futures in Europe when just one hundred years before, Europeans were settling in North Africa searching for the same thing.

It's raining when the group arrives. They come in with umbrellas and demand a shower because they will catch a bus in a few hours. I look around but cannot see Rahim, who is not hard to spot, towering as he does over the rest of his mates. Tim, the shift leader, kindly tells them to put on a mask, because of our COVID-19 regulation, which they reluctantly do, and then informs them that all the showers are occupied and will have to wait thirty minutes. They protest and cannot seem to fathom how another person could be showering when they want to shower. Their demeanour is not threatening, just playfully obnoxious. They are almost charming in their demands. One, Farhad, the ostensible leader without Rahim, gets close to Tim so they are less than a metre apart. He has something he wants to tell, a secret he wishes to divulge, a burden to cast away. "Rahim is dead," he says and runs his finger across his throat. He says a few more unintelligible words, maybe something about a train station, maybe something about the police, maybe something about a knife. Tim looks suspiciously at Farhad, cognizant of how this group likes to exaggerate and even lie. And as if sensing Tim's disbelief, Farhad repeats himself: "Rahim, he is dead." But then he laughs at Tim and me. "Are you joking?" Tim asks. Farhad laughs some more. "No, no. Rahim is dead. He is dead," he says, again running his finger across his neck. "Are you serious?" Tim asks again, but Farhad has returned to his friends, and they continue to demand a shower as soon as possible. "You will have to wait," Tim says. "Twenty minutes. Wait twenty minutes." The crew go outside for a cigarette. "Is Rahim dead?" I ask Tim. "I don't know" is all he says.

## The Translator

Most days on outreach, we communicate with people on the move through a smattering of English, body language, and our translation pages. We aim to find people on the move, tell them about our services, and book appointments for them. We note their name, gender, language spoken, and appointment time. All the people on the move I have so far encountered have been male and young. We do not ask for their country of origin, only their first language to know better about the communities we serve and ensure we have the necessary translations of all the languages we encounter. Most people we meet speak Pashto, one of the national languages of Afghanistan, followed by Farsi.

We need people to visit our wash centre and use our services. They must come to us; we cannot go to them. We must inform people about our wash centre. We must go to the parks and find people to inform. So, what do you do? You enter a park and see dozens of people. Do you ask every person whether they would like a shower or to have their laundry done? Such an approach would be the most equal and the least problematic. We are operating on the assumption that everyone—regardless of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and immigration status—could potentially benefit from our services. Yet not everyone needs our services, and we are not, practically speaking, in a position to offer showers and laundry to everyone. We are here to provide services to people on the move, people who have fallen through the cracks, people who do not have access to the many things we take for granted, and people who are sleeping rough and who might not have had a shower or had their laundry done for weeks on end. So, we target people on the move.

We profile. We look for clues and markers. We search for an unkempt appearance, old and beaten shoes, or a backpack. We hunt the parks for groups of young men sitting together on benches, scrolling through their phones. Most of all, we seek those with nonwhite faces, who stand out from the crowd and appear as though they do not belong. It's dangerous to reduce a person to a stereotype—to have an image in your head and then look for people to confirm it. We are often right, but there are other times when we examine a body from a distance, note his shoes and clothes, and cannot say whether he is passing through.

We use the same method as the police when they go hunting for migrants. They know what to look for. The hints. The tells. They know what a Serbian looks like, who belongs and who does not, who deserves to be left alone and who deserves to be stopped, questioned, and detained. Police cars and vans buzz around the parks like ravens over carrion. They are here to convince the locals they have control, which they do not. They are here to show the locals that even though the Serbian economy is weak and the educated and young cannot leave the country fast enough, what matters is keeping migrants out of city parks, off benches, out of sight. These roundups keep no one safe, but they are not meant to. They are symbolic actions. They are about borders, control, and order.

When we approach a group of people on the move, we say our usual prattle: "Hello, good morning. How are you? We are an organization that provides showers and laundry to people on the move for no cost." We then wait to see if they have captured the meaning of our words. Today, though, a young man in jeans and a hoodie does not hesitate: "You are from an organization." We

nod. “You provide free showers and laundry to refugees.” We nod again. He repeats our message in Pashto to the group of ten guys surrounding him. They seem interested, and we ready ourselves to make appointments. “It’s not enough,” the man suddenly says. “Showers and laundry are not enough.” He looks at us hard, and I feel my body temperature rise. The look is not one of hostility but of frustration. Absolute frustration. His leg twitches; there is irritation in his voice, as if he cannot believe he needs to explain his point. “Tell me, what do we do after the shower? We come back here and sit in the park? And then what? Where should we go? What are we supposed to do?” A voice rings in my head: Just listen. All you can do is listen. “Last night, it rained. It was cold. Winter is coming. We do not have the clothing for winter.” He points to his clothing and then to the guys surrounding him. They are inadequate. Sweaters. Jumpers. Hoodies. Trainers. They will not suffice. Out on the road or deep in the forest, they will not suffice.

At the wash centre, I sometimes check the shoes of the showering people. They are often extraordinarily ruined, held together by only the thinnest of threads. Their structure has lost all integrity; their shape has become warped and flimsy. There is no support. The elements have ripped the tongue from its place; the sole is cracked. Laces are missing. Grime, dirt, mud, and grass all cake the outer material. The smell is pungent, remarkably so. When a person on the move does come in with a new pair of trainers, they seldom fit properly, and when they struggle to put them on, when they have to jam their foot into the too-small opening, I know blisters and rashes and an assortment of other foot ailments will soon follow. I see their feet when they are changing. I see the swelling, the discolouration, the wounds. I see them grimace when