

Letter from Italy

*The writer and the struggle
for a better life*

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From the top of the Torre Asinelli, the twelfth-century brick tower in the center of Old Bologna, the red tile roofs can be seen shimmering in the middle of a hot summer afternoon. Cyclists rumble along the cobblestones on the streets far below, and shoppers dodge from storefront to storefront under the welcome shade of the century-old porticos. Office workers order lunch at sidewalk tables before returning to their workstations, and it is a leisurely affair. This is Italy, after all, and on a midsummer afternoon the bright Tuscan sun bakes the cobblestones and the dense humid air stubbornly waits for a breeze to stir it.

After leaving the Piazza San Stefano, I was strolling in the direction of the Piazza Maggiore when a man wearing a baseball cap and holding a plastic shopping bag full of tissue packets approached. He was wearing a clean pale-blue Oxford shirt and jeans, with white athletic shoes that hadn't seen much wear. His skin was ebony black.

"I'm from Liberia," he began, and the rest of his speech was delivered with rote precision. He had repeated it countless times since early morning and would repeat it many more before evening. "I'm trying to get back and I haven't had anything to eat since morning. I want to get out of here, go back to Liberia . . ."

His tissues were collected in large bundles of twelve or sixteen individual packets. I was on the road myself and didn't need so many, but said I'd take two in case they might come in handy, and if not, my single euro was a donation to the refugee crisis sweeping Europe.

He hesitated—what to do with the rest?—but a decision had to be made, and he couldn't refuse a euro dangling in the wind.

"Okay, I'll bust it," he decided, and cracked the bundle open and handed me two of the packets. But we weren't finished. "You know what the problem with this world is?" he said. "There's not enough love. That's what it is. There's just not enough love."

It wasn't the kind of remark to expect from someone selling packages of tissues on the streets of Bologna, so my eyes trailed him as he continued down the street. He approached another tourist. "I'm from Liberia . . ."

There was no sale this time, not even a few of the leftover packets. He moved on, ambling slowly, leisurely, in no hurry. There was no reason to hurry. Italians don't move very quickly on hot summer afternoons, and he had no daily quota to meet. Around him, the café tables were filled with lunchtime customers sipping cups of cappuccino and glasses of white wine. He didn't intrude on the café crowd but saved his pitch for the sidewalk strollers—the city-center office workers, the shoppers, the occasional tourist: "I'm from Liberia . . ."

It wasn't hard to catch up to him. And so I did. I told him I liked collecting people's stories, and that he probably had an interesting one to share and that I'd give him five euros if he told me his.

After a moment's hesitation, he said his name was Richard Johnson. It may have been true, or not. It didn't matter. He had come to Italy through the North African migrant route—across the Sahara to Algeria and then the Libyan coast, and finally aboard a boat to the Italian island of Lampedusa.

I asked him what kind of work he had done in Liberia. He had been a farmer, growing cassava, plantains, and yams on a small plot of ground in the countryside. He wasn't married and had no children to look after, because the support for both was far out of reach for a Liberian cassava farmer.

"I loved to see things grow," he said, his eyes widening. "That's what I like to do. I thought maybe I could get work on a farm here, somewhere in the countryside."

His eyes still shone, and then I asked him, a bit stupidly, why he had left Liberia and the life he loved so much. The civil war in neighboring Sierra Leone had been over for 15 years. Shirley Johnson Sirleaf, the African continent's first female president, had been re-elected to a second term and awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. This must have hinted at greater stability, and a brighter future growing cassava

and plantains or anything else he might choose to do. But it failed to appear, for reasons that form endless talking points at international conferences, from the United Nations to the World Economic Forum.

“All of us,” he replied. “All of us, we’re looking for a *better life*.”

I knew exactly whom he meant by “All.” He meant the migrants who were piling into rickety boats on the coast of North Africa in the hope of finding new lives in Europe, and he wasn’t the only one of them walking the streets of Bologna. More young men planted themselves outside the entrances of supermarkets and convenience stores hoping to receive handouts from exiting shoppers. Some sat on stoops or gathered around the fountains with sullen faces and vacant eyes in the small neighborhood piazzas, but when spare change was dropped into their upended baseball caps their faces brightened and they expressed appreciation with a muted mumble or nod. Like Richard they were neatly dressed and sported new athletic shoes, thanks to the euros they had been given after being cleared for entry into Europe. Others fortunate enough to have the connections to what passes for a daily income lugged shopping bags through the streets, offering tissue packets, soaps and shampoo, and ballpoint pens to passersby.

In other Italian cities the peddling gangs were better organized. They spread bed sheets on the sidewalk to form an impromptu bazaar, where they sold counterfeit watches, designer handbags, and sunglasses to locals and tourists alike. With word of police on patrol honing in, they scooped up the goods and dashed around the nearest corner, only to set up shop a little later in another part of the city.

“The leaders, they don’t care about the people,” Richard continued, echoing a sentiment likely shared worldwide. “They only want to stay in power, get money, and when they get it they spend it on guns and ammunition. They only want to stay in power.”

Liberia’s problems began long before Richard decided to give up farming and head to the Mediterranean. In fact, Liberia’s problems began long before Richard was born.

“It all started with Doe,” he said, referring to former president

Samuel Doe, who ruled in the 1980s with unchallenged dictatorial powers after toppling and then executing the previous president, William Tolbert. Rebel groups led by Charles Taylor toppled Doe in 1990. Doe tried to flee but was captured, and before being beheaded his ears and some of his fingers and toes were cut off. This was after being paraded through the streets of Monrovia naked. From Idi Amin to Mobuto Sese Seko to Sam Doe, Africans had had their fill of corrupt dictators and equally corrupt legal institutions, and it was only a matter of time before mob justice would become the face of the new ruling order.

“Doe—he raised the price of rice from fifteen dollars a kilo to forty dollars,” Richard went on. “Before that, we could make a life. As long as we worked we had food, a house—life was good.”

But Taylor also ruled with unquestioning authority, “Prince Charles, we called him,” Richard said, and the tumultuous rule of Charles Taylor, in addition to the war in Sierra Leone, added political instability to what was already economic hardship. Eventually Taylor was also driven from power. He fled the country, was arrested years later in neighboring Niger, and was ultimately sent to the International Criminal Court in the Netherlands, where he was convicted of war crimes for fomenting the war in Sierra Leone and sentenced to twenty years in prison. The world may have applauded. “Justice,” in the most abstract sense, had been served, but its immediate effect, beyond spontaneous street demonstrations in Monrovia and Freetown, was minimal. A distance of more than miles separates the World Court in the Netherlands from rural West Africa. Liberia still wallowed. Going nowhere in a dead end economy, Richard decided his future, if he was to have one, lay elsewhere.

“You can negotiate the price,” he said, referring to the fees paid to the *touaregs* who transport migrants across the Sahara to the coast of the Mediterranean. “It depends on the season, how many people are moving, how much they want the business. Most of the time it’s four, five hundred dollars.”

Richard got a deal. He paid a *touareg* four hundred dollars to get him as far as the border of Algeria, and from there he made his way to Libya. Getting across the border was easy.

“There’s no government there,” he said, referring to what passes for the Libya state, which has had no coherent ruling order since former leader Muammar Gaddafi was executed by a Libyan mob in 2011. “Gaddafi is gone. I don’t know why they killed him. He was a good man.”

Richard’s admiration for Gaddafi surprised me at first, but soon became understandable. Compared to the European leaders who would rail against the waves of migrants arriving on their shores, the Libyan welcome mat was a rare gesture of hospitality.

“Life there was good,” he went on. “I was there three years. I worked in Tripoli as a car washer. I had a little money, enough to eat. We lived in a settlement for blacks east of Tripoli, near the coast. The police didn’t bother us. They knew we were migrants but they left us alone. Then the Arab Spring came. The government fell. Gaddafi was killed. I still don’t know why they killed him. He was a good man. He didn’t bother us. He let us stay.

“Then one day the police came. It was after the government had fallen. They told us we would have to go. The new people who would be charge, they wouldn’t want us here. It wasn’t safe anymore. But they helped us, the police did—they put us in touch with people who would get us to Europe.”

The assistance from the police amounted to connecting the African migrants to people traffickers who would pack them onto overloaded ramshackle boats with the aim of dumping on the shores of Europe. After a bit of negotiation, Richard paid 500 euros for space on a rickety boat that set off from the Libyan coast. But he was one of the lucky ones. The boat didn’t capsize, and he wasn’t tossed into the Mediterranean to be washed up on an Italian beach two or three months later. He, and all the others onboard, were intercepted by the Italian coast guard and taken to Lampedusa.

“I was there for three, four months,” Richard continued. At first his ambiguity surprised me, but then I realized that time can be a very relative notion for the resident of a refugee camp. A refugee camp is, after all, a nether zone where concepts of space and time and past and future are suspended. One enters this zone throwing oneself on the mercy of such abstract concepts as “international law” and “human rights,” which often have little meaning to those who have surrendered themselves. It is a plunge into the unknown with hope that the unknown will not become an abyss.

“There weren’t that many people there then,” he went on, “but now they’re all *full*. There’s *so many* people coming. All the camps—now they’re all *full*.”

He went on: “We didn’t have it so bad. We had a place to sleep, food, and after a while we got our documents.”

The “documents” certified him as an international refugee recognized by the European Union, with license to move within the twenty-eight-member bloc, to find what work that he could. I still wondered how Richard happened to land on the streets of Bologna. There were many Richards on the streets, the “lucky ones” whose flight north didn’t end at the bottom of the Mediterranean—because the boat they piled into was a little more seaworthy, or seaworthy enough to stay afloat till the Italian coast guard picked them up, or—there were an endless number of reasons why some were lucky and others weren’t. There was a large degree of luck that went into becoming a “successful” refugee.

“We go wherever our friends are,” Richard explained. “We have to make friends, to find out where the jobs are, where we can find a place to stay. We have to help each other.”

Around Bologna, the “lucky ones” often gathered in groups of two or three—for protection, for mutual reassurance, for simple companionship. They were never seen lounging on the pavement or curled up on a park bench or piece of cardboard, like the homeless in North American cities. They were usually standing, as if expecting a bus about to arrive, one that would whisk them away from their

circumstances. To where, the destination, did not matter.

I asked Richard where he would like to go, if he wasn't to stay in Italy.

"Maybe Germany, maybe France, maybe Austria," he said, but he was rattling off countries at random, obviously with no idea of what life would be like in any of them. "Anywhere there's *work*," he continued. "You know, *all of us*"—again using the collective *all*—"all of us, all we want is *work*. That's all we want—work. Not this bullshit." To add emphasis, he shook the bag bearing his packets of tissues. Then his eyes clouded over, perhaps as he envisioned the life that his imagination had generated, before he reached the streets of Europe and found a life nothing like he had imagined back on the dirt streets of Liberia.

"You know, you have a little money, you can find a nice woman. You have a little money, you can buy them a coffee, a meal. Let's face it, women like money. You got enough, maybe you can buy a car. You can make a nice life for yourself."

And then he became downright rhapsodic. His eyes wandered into the distance. "You know, I like these Italian women. I like the shoes they wear."

I had to hand it to Richard, he had taste. All around us were Italian women, sitting at café tables sipping cappuccinos and glasses of white wine and wearing shoes that may have come from the fashion houses of nearby Milan. At least one thing then became clear: like the other migrants on the streets of Bologna, he wanted a destination—but it wasn't Germany, or France, or Austria, or it could be any of them. The only thing for certain is that it wasn't Liberia.

Richard's story was at an end, or it had just begun. Whatever it was, it was certainly worth the five euros I had promised, so I took out the note and handed it to him. He accepted it, folded it up, and tucked it away without so much as looking at it.

"You know, this isn't important," he said, tapping the pocket that now held a crumbled ball of paper. "Love, that's what's important. Love."

He did not say goodbye and I don't remember him even wishing me a good day. He just left me with that thought, picked up his bag of tissue packets, and wandered back into the crowd. In a moment he was gone.

