

THE CLIFFS Transcript (LOVE ME)

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[00:00:01] I guess our relationship was quite normal. We'd do quite a lot of everyday things together. Get up in the morning, one makes coffee. The other one gets some breakfast. If it was sunny we'd sit outside, and we'd have a favorite song that we'd listened to in the morning. And then I'd go off and do my job. He'd go off and do his thing and then come together again in the evening at the end of the day. And told each other about the kind of day we'd had and what we'd done and who we saw and our shared space needed to be kept clean and tidy. So there was that, just domestic chores. Yeah and then sometimes there'd be a very sudden reminder that things aren't normal at all.

One time on a really beautiful incredibly sunny day we went for a walk on the beach just to get away from everything the noise and the people and just ran around in the sand quite silly, and sat down and Tamim was kind of looking out over the sea and was pointing to the distant cliffs. And he turned to me and he was like 'So these cliffs over there. Is that like some island?' And I was like no that's that's England, that's the white cliffs of Dover. That's where you're trying to get to. And it was terrible. It was such a terrible moment because it was so close and it was the most impossible journey in one of the hardest places for him to go. But I can just go there and be on the other side in 45 minutes. Yeah.

[00:02:10] He actually had to get up and walk away a few steps and just swallow that.

The Calais Jungle, as the name already suggests, wasn't an authorised or planned camp and with the refugee crisis that we've been seeing the last few years the numbers increased very rapidly, and went from a few hundred to several thousand people from all these different places.

You'd come through an industrial area by the motorway and then on this quite large site of wasteland you'd see hundreds of tents in all states of disrepair. There was women in tents, children in tents, people with disabilities in tents. It was filthy, there were rats. You were like up to your ankles in mud and you'd just have like small lakes with people just living in a huge puddle.

I first met Tamim after we built a shelter for a group of like six or seven young Syrian men. He was one of the people that the shelter was for, and he was cooking us food and bringing us tea. I started speaking Arabic after a while. At the beginning I was quite coy about it. Like, tongue tied, and then, because I felt quite emotional about meeting them. The gestures, the jokes and the quite casual sense of humor that's very particularly Syrian was like a big wave of memory. A really intense sense of familiarity.

I lost my dad, who is the Syrian part of my family, I lost my dad when I was 14 so it felt that there was a missing link between me in Europe and my Syrian origin.

[00:04:37] I'm born in Germany and when I was a tiny child we moved to Syria and stayed there until I was five and that was a time when the Berlin Wall fell, so we decided to go back to Germany. When we'd go on holidays to Syria we'd stay with my family who lives in Damascus. We'd visit friends and go to the sea, and we'd have these incredibly noisy dynamic meals and tell stories and laugh and pass the food and it was all very, that is one of, for me, one of the hallmarks of Arab culture, is that the meals are really social and very noisy.

After my last visit which was when I was in my early 20s I didn't go again for several years because I found it too.. too difficult to place myself because I don't look the part that people expect an Arab woman to look. And on top of that I don't even look the part they expect a European woman to look. I have tattoos, I'm tall, I wear quite like masculine clothes. 'Who is that person?' And then the uprising started. So that door just suddenly shut.

After watching the events in Syria for a few years and being worried for people being like 'oh I might never see my family again'. I heard about the projects in Calais to provide shelters and I said 'look do you need help? I can be useful. I'm a builder'.

I was instantly drawn to Tamim. We kind of had a quite similar sense of humor, laughed about the same silly jokes a lot. But I was very careful with that feeling due to the vulnerability, the innate vulnerability, of someone who's been forced to flee. As a volunteer you are seen to be in a position of trust.

[00:07:09] I was very cautious in striking up really deep friendships.

One night we were at Tamim's shelter and we were a group of five six people having dinner. The guys were chatting and I just suddenly got really emotional. I just suddenly got, it felt like I was skinless from one moment to the other. Just being so aware of this separation from my family and of just the sheer injustice of the whole situation. Here we are all people. I am the only one in this room that is a recognised person. And that's because I have a passport that says Germany on it. And I am more than aware of the fact that in very specific terms this can be me that isn't just an abstract idea to me. If my parents would have decided to not go back to Germany it might be me now. So all that hit me, all these emotions just hit me and I started to cry and I really really tried to not cry. One of my own personal rules was do not cry in front of people who do not have the luxury of tears. And then suddenly I couldn't, I was really struggling to arrange my face and keep my emotions together, and Tamim just kind of shuffled a little bit in front of me. We were all sat on the floor cross legged in a circle. So he just changed his position and just made sure that he'd kind of cover me and I could just lean back into the corner into the darkness and then he kind of just reached a tissue to me without ever stopping to follow the conversation and be part of the group.

[00:09:10] He just completely gave me that moment, and that care really opened my heart to Tamim.

So Tamim is a very handsome guy. He's got a really strong expressive way to look at people and I mean that may sound silly but I really enjoyed being looked at by him. And I told him that 'I, look I find you really interesting and I'm feeling attracted to you. And how do you feel?' and he was like 'Well, I'm attracted to you too but I don't know. We are where we are'.

Over the next few weeks we continued the conversation and he'd come to me with questions like 'Well how do you feel about this? What do you think about that? What do you think about us?' And then yeah like eventually the inevitable question of like 'Can I kiss you?'

Most volunteers lived either in hostels or they'd live in accommodation near the warehouse. I had already decided that I wanted to live in the camp because I wanted to be closer to the community. I felt that it was important to be there at night as well as in the daytime in case of emergencies and in case of police violence, to be there as a witness because it happened almost on a daily basis. And then very early in our relationship Tamim offered his space and said that if I wanted to I was very welcome to stay in his shelter. A two by two and a half metre small shack, thin wooden boards for walls and then everything was wrapped in plastic and a small wooden door set into that. No windows. One has to make a lot of compromises about privacy and vanity.

[00:11:45] Basically there is no privacy and you can't afford much vanity. You will see absolutely everything of your new partner. They are your mirror. Because there is no actual mirror.

At night we'd often stay awake really late and just talk about different things that he was dreaming of in his new life, what he wanted to work. Then I would ask him questions about Syria and how things had been in the last years. Sometimes, sometimes we'd talk about very painful very emotional themes, that almost needed to be kind of cushioned by a whole night of conversation

Falling in love with Tamim in the camp rather than anywhere else in the world made it less of a like falling and letting go that maybe most people associate with falling in love, just because the place didn't really allow for that. But much more of a creating small pockets for each other in which we could surrender.

Tamim was trying to get onto trucks and cross the border every night or near enough every night and it was really important to me that he kept doing that because his reason for being in Calais was not for us to be together but for him to make it to the UK. And some of these nightly attempts were incredibly scary. I mean in the time that I was there more than 12 people have died trying on that stretch of motorway. Sometimes I felt like Tamim was, instead of going to try to get onto a truck to cross a border in dangerous ways, I felt he was kind of a worker going on a nightshift.

[00:14:15] We'd go to bed around midnight and then later in the night he'd get up get dressed and get his things ready. I'd often get up with him and we'd have a cup of tea together, usually not say very much, just be quiet and then he'd leave. Yeh, sometimes he'd call me while he was trying. When they were waiting in a ditch and waiting for the police cars to pass or waiting for the traffic to slow down and I could hear all the noises. I could hear the other people, I could hear the police, I could hear the trucks, the traffic sounds and sometimes I would not hear anything from him for 4 or 5 days in a row, and I'd just have to trust that bad news travels fast.

So the way I learnt was when I received a message with GPS location and I opened up the GPS location on a map on my phone, and I saw that it was the railway terminal in Dover. And that's how I knew that he had made it. I was suddenly about a tonne lighter and I jumped up and did a little dance and started excitedly shouting quite a lot until I realised that I was in public and that should probably not make a scene. Sat down and just giggled hysterically. He was in the UK finally being able to rest and to get that whole year of exhaustion and never getting a break and always that tension and anticipation, to get that slowly out of his system, and just peel himself out of all of that.

[00:16:27] I imagine he'd have had like several five hour showers in the beginning in a row and then just went straight back in just because he could. But it also put a new strain on the relationship because we weren't in the same place anymore. My phone reception in Calais was ridiculously bad and he didn't always have money on his phone so he couldn't always call me when he wanted to.

[NEWS READER]: Heavy equipment removes scattered and burned debris from the notorious Calais Jungle. Authorities say the camp is now empty after a forced removal that began on Monday.

After the eviction I went to the UK and saw him again. And I think we both started to understand that our relationship changed quite a lot. Because it felt like we were both gonna fall short of what we'd need of a partner. Like he needed to completely focus on his own new life. I needed to slow down and just process the whole last year of being in Calais and reconnecting with my Syrian side and my Syrian origin. That's when we decided to end the relationship.

There was certainly an aspect of love in the times of war. In that way our relationship was very much marked by Calais and what this place meant. You're more awake and less filtered than the rest of the time.

The really hard part is to almost like harness that energy and that intensity and clarity of feeling and then translate it back into the messiness and sometimes contradictory challenges of real life.

I think what we've both taken from the relationship (laughs) I don't know, it's so many things.
Um, I feel very proud of both of us for having connected on such a deeply human level... in such a difficult place.