

Jonathan Power

The Human Flow

An adventure story

**Uncovering the Brutal Realities of West African
Migrant Trafficking**

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For my daughters, Carmen, Miri, Lucy and Jenny

July 5th 2023

I began my long, long, journey on a shaking bus. I was travelling from the up-country town of Iringa, once the regional capital of German-run Tanganyika, with its jacaranda trees smothered in blossoms of true purple – no better imperial legacy could there be – set haughtily amidst the dark, boulder-strewn, terrain of the Southern Highlands. The town had the smell of the early morning, silhouetted against the sky; the bus was fragrant with its added cargo of oranges. Everything uplifting and sharp, but the daytime heat would soon be upon us. Bit by jot the bus slowly edged itself down the mountainside to the Tanzanian capital, Dar-es-Salaam, residing on an extraordinary perfectly elliptical bay, facing the Indian Ocean, where the dhows flitted on their way to buy cloves in Zanzibar, and the sky appeared to be coloured with the hue of cobalt. Feather-light clouds cut thin lines from shore to horizon ...

... I was tired. I was almost dizzy. I was dishevelled. I felt like a dead-beat, my legs dragged as though gravity had doubled itself. I felt unavailingly impotent. I was annoyed with my situation, their situation and the world's too. The poverty omnipresent all around me made me devoid of inspiration. I was squeezed out, my brain parched. My soul was exhausted. I withdrew and returned to the hotel. Deciding to take a swim in the hotel's lovely open-air pool I breast-stroked around, thinking all the time of my options.

Was she here in Nouakchott, the dried-up, desiccated, capital of Mauritania on the West African coast, was she there? There was no answer. I could only see ahead days of surmise and apprehension. A flirtation with catastrophe perhaps?

I asked directions to the bus terminal. It was a mass of bodies, pushing and shoving to get on the various buses. I asked one driver how I could find information on buses to Morocco. He pointed towards a man in the crowd wearing an official's hat. It was a struggle to make myself understood, but after persisting I got the idea that there was a bus tomorrow at six in the early morning as far as the border of Western Sahara, a state being fought over by Morocco and Algeria, whose battles rarely made the Western press. The Moroccans had the upper hand. Seemingly endless deposits of phosphate were the prize. The bus would take around 40 hours, including a night at the border.

At dinner, my batteries re-charged by couscous and Moroccan (Islamic, you can say) red wine, I decided to get a good night's sleep and then catch this early morning bus and make my hard and slow way to Morocco via Western Sahara. Maybe it would take three days since there was no through bus. If she didn't turn up at the iconic Casablanca hotel where we had always said we would rendezvous if things went wrong and we got separated, I could always come back to Nouakchott and start to toothcomb the city.

It was the thought—was it becoming love? —of Agnes which propelled me. I knew I'd do almost anything to find her, and it would take as long as it took.

I was up at five. The sun was slowly, ploddingly, over a placid, slate-like sea, making its way into the sky. It was refreshingly, stimulatingly cool, as I walked to the bus station. I'd bought another rucksack at one of the truck stops yesterday and I filled it up with water and food. I had no idea what the bus planned to do to keep us fed. I thought I would take no chances.

The bus was crowded. Not just with people and their babies but also with chickens, some strutting in the aisle. Somewhat to my surprise, I found the bus was air-conditioned. There was a toilet and a screen at the front that endlessly played Spanish, French and American war films. Is this the only thing they know about the West, I wondered? In my hotel there had been no BBC or CNN, nor Spanish and French programmes, much less anything that drew on Western culture. I presume these kinds of videos were their window on Europe and North America.

I had got myself a window seat and later was joined by a young man in his late twenties who said hello in French and proffered his hand. He gave me a broad smile. At 7ish the bus departed. We speeded too fast through the town, and I looked again at the shanty towns—if I didn't find Agnes in

Casablanca and had to retrace my steps where would I start?

All morning as we raced through the desert I could see the coast. The road stretched in what seemed an eternal emptiness in a phantom landscape, mysterious and eerie, where little, human or animal, moved, except the occasional cluster of camels and goats. By now the sun had climbed and the sea had turned into a mixture of blue and green, enticing. There was no wind and no waves. I started to enjoy it, only to be disillusioned when the tarmac ended, and the road became gravelly and bumpy. The bus was forced to slow, but not by much.

At noon we stopped in a village. Some of us walked around. A few including the driver dropped to their knees and said their prayers. I peed behind the back of the bus with the other men. Then it was the women's turn—the women always second in life all over Africa. Half an hour later we were on our way again. Back in the bus I pulled out my bread, a packet of imported liver pâté and some tomatoes.

I offered some to my neighbour who gave me a big smile and a thank you. We started to chat. He wasn't a migrant. He was going to Morocco to buy leather goods which he would bring back to Nouakchott to sell. He did this trip once a month, earning enough, he explained, to soon buy a decent house with a washing machine and television. He had three kids and his wife was pregnant again.

I told him my story. I gave him another sandwich. He looked a bit amazed as I narrated my tale, not least coming so far over the cruel and naked desert. "Well, it's possible she's in Casablanca," he said, "but don't be surprised if she isn't." "What do you mean?" I asked. "I don't want to alarm you, but there's a good chance she has been sold. A girl like that is worth a lot of money, as much as three or four Senegalese migrants, if not more."

"What would you do to track her down in Nouakchott?" I asked. "I would eliminate the shanty towns. She may have spent a couple of nights there, but she would have been sold very fast. Since she's educated, pretty, you say, and high class compared with the village girls here, she'd have ended up in some rich guy's house." "How would she be treated?" "Not well—not even pocket money. She would only be allowed out occasionally and then in the company of one of his wives and one of his guards—armed. She would be first for the bedroom and second to do the most menial chores in the house." "And if she refused the sex or tried to run away what would happen?" "He would beat her. Even if somehow, you tracked her down, you would never get to her. His house would be surrounded by high walls and there's bound to be a couple of armed guards on the gate. That's how the rich live here. If you tried to scale the wall they'd probably shoot you."

Slavery is so well ingrained in the culture here that even the government—which has tried—can't do much. The UN is

always on the government's back to abolish slavery, so are the EU and the African Union. The other countries in Africa think it gives Africa a bad name. But nothing happens." "Couldn't I go to the police?" "Ha, Ha! The police can be paid off. Forget it, forget her. My advice is go back home and find a new woman. Africa is full of beautiful women, black and beautiful, just like your Agnes."

Evening was coming and again the bus stopped in a small town on the sea. It was obvious that its people lived off fishing. There was a small café and shop and half the bus crowded in. In the end everyone seemed to get fed. When we got back to the bus there was a new driver. We drove through the night. It started to get cold. I was unprepared for this. I tossed and turned in my seat. It was absolutely a lousy night. The most uncomfortable and disagreeable I'd ever spent. There was a stillness all around, broken only by the sound of the wheels turning on the gravel, which seemed to make everything inside the sleeping bus even more silent and solitary. My new friend was out for the count, wrapped in a blanket. How I envied him. I drifted into the night, exhausted.

The dawn came as the sun, preparing as usual for its day of torturing us, rose out of the ocean. The highway along this stretch of remote, treacherous land seemed to go on forever. At 7 we stopped in another small fishing town. Again, we changed drivers. It was another day of driving. This time the road was tarred, and we could speed along a road that

appeared to have no end in sight. Namibia made me feel small and insignificant. But after another two stops we were at the border of Western Sahara, the statelet that was 'occupied' by Morocco but fought over by Polisario which had long received help and refuge from neighbouring Algeria with its military government and Gaddafi's dictatorship in next door Libya. Indeed, post-Gaddafi Libya continues its support of Polisario.

Moroccan police manned the frontier. The driver asked us to disembark and show our passports. The police were polite to me but were curious about why I was making this long journey. I explained I was a journalist. I asked them about the traffickers. Did they come this way? "No," replied one of them, "They come off the road 10 kilometres or more back. They cut across the desert and pick up the road 10 kilometres into Western Sahara." Another interjected, "Occasionally we do capture one, but that's quite rare. We can't possibly police such a vast area of desert ... Anyway, our first concern is the Polisario fighters. We're overstretched."

We drove on northwards to Western Sahara's dilapidated capital, a small sand-filled town with a bunch of Moroccan flags lamely hanging dejectedly from poles around the town hall. My new friend told me that the bus terminated here, and I must change to a Moroccan bus. Then it would be another half-day's drive. He advised me to do what he intended to do: spend the night in a little hotel he knew and get some sleep and decent food. There were three or four buses

a day up to the Moroccan border proper. There in the morning we could catch a bus to Casablanca. He was going there too. He knew the city quite well. He would direct me to my hotel.

The next evening our bus rolled into Casablanca. He put me in a taxi and told the driver where to take me. "I'm staying in the Hotel Sahara. Remember that. I'm here for a week and if you need help come and find me. Better still, phone me." He gave me his number. Ten minutes later I was in the forecourt of the Casablanca hotel, paying the taxi what seemed like a pittance, but that's all the driver asked for. In the lobby there were big photos of Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman and the hotel's piano player, Dooley Wilson, who played Sam and sang "As Time Goes By," an immortal piece of music. Tattooed on the wall behind the piano was the everlasting line by Lisa (Bergman): "Play it again, Sam."
