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Alone in the Jungle

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By Daniel Sippel*



#StopEvictingCalais: Children in the Jungle before the eviction

from Daniel Sippel

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About 30 miles away from Dover, Rambo asks Liz for new shoes. He needs them to jump on a lorry, which is supposed to take him to his paradise. Last week, a friend of Rambo's died when he tried to do the same thing. Rambo, wearing white forearm protectors, will not die, because he is the king of the universe. At least, that's what Rambo believes. He also believes that he is about 12 years old, but he doesn't know for sure. Only a few of the boys in the Calais Jungle know their actual age.

"I'm horribly committed now", says Liz, who volunteers as head of the *unofficial* Women's and Children's Centre in the Calais refugee camp. The Centre's [Facebook](#) page has this "unofficial" in its title, a way to subtly point to the fact that despite the existence of 500 children, there is a conspicuous lack of "official" governmental assistance, or even a single UNHCR representative.

Thus Liz, a former British fire-fighter who worked with young arsonists in her free time, is left to be the camp's Swiss army knife; for the 20 unaccompanied children between the age of ten and 13, she is mom, carer, psychotherapist and sparring partner. She hates her children, and she loves them. She swears from time to time when she speaks about them, calls them idiotic, brazen, stupid – and she is right.



Liz and Children. Calais. February 2016, D. Sippel.

Rambo is one of these stupid, unaccompanied children. He is from Afghanistan, like almost all his friends who were sent away by their families. Son and heir, he was dispatched to reach the Promised Land, Britain. For his family, who live in rural, Taliban-controlled Logar Province, Britain is the safe haven. It is the place where NATO does not kill civilians by accident, a region the Taliban surely does not invade. It is a country that has historically been a land of migrants, an island that offers a good welfare system, even for little Rambo, who has come from so far away.

“Reach the UK at any price. Do not engage with anyone until you are there,” is the lesson his family drilled into him. Unlike some of his friends in the camp who have family members in Britain, he has not. There is no legal way to fulfil his seemingly impossible ambition. But Rambo is determined to heed his family’s wish. He is determined to be a good son.

They call him Rambo here because he takes the greatest risks, Liz admits. For his last attempt, he left Liz’s van, where he lives, at 1am to walk seven hours to the nearby camp in Dunkirk, in order to have easier access to UK-bound lorries. Then he tried to jump on them. That is why he needs good shoes, and why Liz hates her children. She is utterly worried about them, like a mother, and describes Rambo as “scary”. Not because she is scared of him channelling his trauma through violent fights with her. She is a former fire-fighter – she knows how to defend herself. It is because she is scared what might happen to him. “It is a bit of a fucking nightmare” is Liz’s felicitous way to describe both her feelings and the humanitarian crisis in Calais.

A slender woman in her fifties, Liz knows her children. Over time, she has learned some Pashto, but the boys also understand her English by now. And if they don’t, they still can clearly distinguish the different tonalities of her voice: The indignant reproof when Rambo has erased all contacts on her antiquated, grey phone. The fervid plea, mixed with anger and frustration, when she appeals to the French Government to manage the crisis in a humane way. The incredible tenderness that her raspy voice miraculously evokes when she consoles the delicate yet hardened souls to make them forget what they have experienced.



A toy lies in the mud at Calais, a reminder of a childhood misplaced. February 2016, D. Sippel.

For their journey to Europe, the boys have been drugged, beaten and put into tiny spaces by traffickers. Nevertheless, Liz says, they were hopeful when they arrived in Calais. They were close, very close to their goal. Just thirty miles from the white cliffs of Dover. Months of knee-deep mud; temperatures around freezing point; panic and riots over food distribution, and unfruitful attempts to cross the Channel, have taken their toll. Liz’s children are changed. Now, all Liz and her team can offer them is resilience, because they are “fucked, lonely, and frightened”. Like all frightened children the boys want to talk to their mom — their real mom, in Afghanistan, if she is still alive. So Liz organised phone top-ups for them, because it hurts her watching them falling apart slowly.

The French authorities are impatient. Rather than waiting for the camp or the boys to fall apart, the [riot police will evict a part of the Jungle this week](#). The countless flashing blue lights on the horizon — police vans that surround the camp day and night — augur through the smoke of wooden stoves: the state is ready to restore its power monopoly. For the boys, the lights are the sword of Damocles. It means that they will be registered, that fingerprints will be taken. Their chances of crossing the Channel will be taken as well, they sense. The state will put them in containers, far away from the Children’s centre with film nights, counselling, kickboxing classes, and Liz, she believes. She does not know, the authorities have never spoken to her. Who knows what will happen. In any case, they must run soon to fulfil their parents’ dream. Rambo needs new shoes for that, his pair has holes. Liz gets him a new pair, size 2.

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