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The Desperate Journey of Blessing, a Nigerian Girl Trying to Reach Europe

In the April 10, 2017, issue of *The New Yorker*, in "We Have No Choice" (p. 36), **Ben Taub** reports from Nigeria, the Sahara, a rescue boat in the Mediterranean, and Italy, tracing the journey of a trafficked Nigerian girl named Blessing. As African migrants head toward the Mediterranean, hoping to start a new life in Europe, tens of thousands of them find themselves trafficked in debt bondage, traded between owners, and forced to work as laborers or prostitutes. Like Blessing, the overwhelming majority of female victims come from Edo state, in southern Nigeria, where family members are sometimes complicit in the trafficking of teen-age girls. "Many of them say we should not stop this trafficking, because their daughters are making money," a nun who helps trafficking victims told Taub. "The families are involved. Everybody is involved."

Blessing's family was very poor. After they lost their home and property, she decided to accept an offer of help from a woman who promised to take her to Italy, unaware that she was being trafficked into sexual exploitation. Eventually, they reached a "connection house" in Agadez, a smuggling town at the southern edge of the Sahara, where dozens of migrants were guarded by men holding daggers and swords.

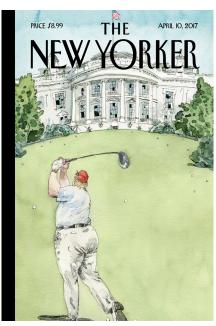
Each Monday, drivers used to go to the migrant ghettos in Agadez and load some five thousand sub-Saharans into the beds of pickup trucks. Now, under pressure from Europe, Niger is cracking down on migration and arresting smugglers. But Agadez has no economy beyond the movement of people and goods. "Each smuggler supports a hundred families," Mohamed Anacko, the President of the Agadez Regional Council tells Taub. Without migration, "these families won't eat anymore," and the youth will be vulnerable to jihadi recruitment. "And the day that the terrorists have a base in the Aïr [mountains] the Sahel is finished," he said. "We'll all become the Islamic State in the end."

Blessing and the woman crossed the desert and made it to a town in Libya, where Blessing was sold to the owner of a connection house to work as a prostitute. Her mother paid a ransom, and Blessing didn't have to do sex work. Soon afterward, armed men transported Blessing to Tripoli, where she was kept in a detention center for several months. Eventually Blessing was dropped at a beach west of Tripoli, where armed smugglers crammed migrants into dinghies, prayed in the sand, and sent them out to sea.

Taub was aboard the Dignity I, a boat operated by Médecins Sans Frontières, which rescued Blessing and the other migrants. While the moment of rescue marks the end of most migrants' debts to their smugglers, for trafficked Nigerian girls it is only the beginning. "You're delivering them to hell," an M.S.F. staffer told Taub. The migrants disembarked in Sicily. Many people who might have been eligible for asylum told Taub that they had never heard of it.

Blessing and other trafficked girls were sent to Palanebiolo, a makeshift migrant camp on the outskirts of Messina. Nigerian trafficking networks have infiltrated the reception centers. An anti-trafficking agent from the International Organization for Migration explained that, at places like Palanebiolo, "the only thing the girl has to do is make a call and tell the madam she has arrived—which city, which camp. They know what to do, because they have their guys all over." In nearby Palermo's underground brothels, trafficked Nigerians sleep with as many as fifteen clients a day; the more clients, the sooner they can purchase their freedom. Many of the girls are in their early teens. According to Salvatore Vella, a prosecutor in Sicily, violence against Nigerian prostitutes is rarely investigated, because "the tendency, here in Italy, has been to not look at criminal organizations as long as they're committing crimes only against non-Italians."

The debt Blessing's mother took on to free her in Libya continues to mount. Blessing tells Taub, "I don't know how my mummy, she will recover that money. But I can't go and sell myself, even though I need money for them." Sobbing, she adds, "I am my mummy's breath of life."



Dana Schutz Painted a Real-Life Atrocity. She Knew It Was a Risk

In "Troubling Pictures" (p. 30), Calvin Tomkins profiles Dana Schutz, the Brooklyn-based artist—known for wildly original and masterly work—whose painting depicting Emmett Till, "Open Casket," recently sparked controversy at the Whitney Biennial. Chrissie Iles, a curator at the Whitney Museum, describes Schutz as an artist who uses painting to bridge two worlds, the analog and the digital. "She emerged at a moment when the Internet was just beginning to affect how we experience images, and she anticipated what's going on now," Iles said. At her studio, last July, Schutz, who is white, said that she was thinking about doing a painting based on Till, the fourteen-year-old whose abduction, torture, and murder by white Mississippi racists in 1955 kept coming up in news stories about the killings of African-American boys. "I've wanted to do a painting for a while now, but I haven't figured out how," she said. "It's a real event, and it's violence. But it has to be tender, and also about how it's been for his mother." In a later conversation, she said, "I was interested because it's something that keeps on happening. I feel somehow that it's an American image."

A few months later, in October, Tomkins asked Schutz if she'd thought any more about the Emmett Till painting. "That one turned out," she said, sounding surprised. She had put it in a show in Berlin, where it caused no controversy. But she was still uncertain about the painting. "I don't know if it has the right emotionality," she said. "I like it as a painting, but I might want to try it again." In February, Mia Locks and Christopher Y. Lew, the curators of this year's Whitney Biennial, visited Schutz's studio and picked three pictures for the show, including "Open Casket." Schutz had worried that the appalling aspects of Till's murder might overpower any attempt to deal with it visually. "There was so much uncertainty with this painting," Schutz said. "You think maybe it's off limits, and then extra off limits. But I really feel any subject is O.K., it's just how it's done."

At the Biennial's public opening, in March, a protester stood in front of "Open Casket," making it difficult for others to view the painting. A letter demanding that it be removed from the show—and destroyed—went viral. To Lew, the impassioned response had a lot to do with the painting being seen in isolation, on Instagram. "When you're standing in front of the painting, it's a powerful experience—deeply sad, mournful," he said. Tomkins writes, "The media circus waxed and waned, but I saw few references to what seemed to me the underlying issues on both sides. One was a deep frustration among black artists that a theme so central to their history should be explored, in a major museum, by a white female artist. The other was that artists, very often, do not consciously choose their subjects. Emmett Till's sixty-year-old murder took hold of Dana Schutz. She struggled with (and against) the urge to paint it." "I knew the risks going into this," Schutz told Tomkins. "What I didn't realize was how bad it would look when seen out of context. Is it better to try to make something that's impossible, because it's important to you, and to fail, or never to engage with it at all?"

How a Libertarian's Film Project, and His Fate, Fuelled the Alt-Right's Deepest Fears

In "Death of a Dystopian" (p. 22), Alec Wilkinson reports from Apple Valley, Minnesota, where the aspiring Libertarian filmmaker David Crowley, his wife, and young daughter were found dead in their home in January, 2015. Authorities said it was a murder-suicide, while alt-right conspiracy theorists claimed the government killed them. As Wilkinson reports, the truth is far stranger. Granted access to Crowley's journal, Wilkinson speaks extensively to family, friends, and colleagues of David and his wife, Komel. In 2010, Crowley, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan before going to film school, began writing a script for a film, "Gray State." In it, a totalitarian foreign regime conquers the U.S. government, and a band of patriots form a resistance. The trailer, posted online in 2012, has been watched more than two and a half million times. Its supporters include conspiracy theorists, survival groups, libertarians, veterans, and the military, according to an entry in Crowley's journal. In 2015, after Crowley and his family were found dead, commentators on the Internet soon began saying that he had likely been murdered by government agents intent on preventing the movie from being made. "Among certain conspiracy-minded, anti-government, Libertarian, and alt-right believers, Crowley has become a species of martyr," Wilkinson writes.

In May, 2014, the producers Michael O'Donnell and Mike Boggio said they wanted to option the "Gray State" script. Mike Boggio recalls, "We left that meeting thinking, We got to have a deal with this guy." Later, when they didn't offer him the contract he had counted on, Crowley was devastated. He put aside "Gray State" for a documentary that consumed him as much as the earlier project. David and Komel stopped returning most phone calls and texts and e-mails, and Komel's family grew concerned. Crowley's journal details a psychic crisis. "Vast personality changes are happening too fast to write about every day," he wrote. "I am being prepped for some slide into oblivion or destiny." Wilkinson writes, "Crowley was losing his mind, and he didn't seem to know it."

The week before Christmas, Crowley and Komel visited their friend Chris Peck, who recalls, "They were uncontrollably, zealously happy." On Christmas morning, 2014, David shot Komel and their daughter, Raniya, and, sometime later, shot himself. His last journal entry reads, "I am no one. It is everyone else who is someone." In the living room, he had done something that the police omitted from their incident report: with his hands covered in his wife's blood, he wrote on the wall, "Allahu akbar," which means "God is great." On the floor by Komel, he had placed a Koran, opened to a prayer of forgiveness. Last spring, when Wilkinson went to the house, it had been more than a year since the killings, but clothes hung in the closets where David and Komel had left them, and the Christmas tree was still there.

The filmmaker Erik Nelson read the reports of Crowley's death, which led him to watch the "Gray State" trailer. "It seemed incredibly well made," he told Wilkinson. His documentary about Crowley called "A Gray State," will have its première in a few weeks, at the Tribeca Film Festival.

At Fox News, Tucker Carlson Brings the Chaos and Hysteria of Trump-Era Politics Into His Studio

In "On the Contrary" (p. 50), **Kelefa Sanneh** profiles Tucker Carlson, the conservative anchor at the heart of the Fox News prime-time lineup, who has had one of the most unlikely comebacks in cable-news history. Last fall, Carlson became the host of his own show, "Tucker Carlson Tonight," on Fox News. He had previously been the co-host of "Crossfire," on CNN, and the host of "Tucker," on MSNBC, both of which were cancelled; between jobs he launched a scrappy Web site, the Daily Caller, which published exposés, conservative opinion, and clickbait. For a long time, Carlson thought of himself as a writer—he had started his career at *The Weekly Standard*—but eventually he realized, or admitted, that he enjoyed live television. "You could blow up your life," he says. "I like the drama." "Tucker Carlson Tonight" was a success both on television and online. Some cable shows rely on the drama of putting people in the same place, but Carlson's thrives on remote interviews, which allow his producers to "box" his face, keeping it onscreen so that viewers can watch him react. As the show's profile has increased, so has a certain reticence among potential guests, especially those who maintain an artful ambiguity about some of their positions. "I think you should say what you think," Carlson tells Sanneh. "I understand the practical reasons why you wouldn't, but I still think it's cowardly." Sanneh speaks with Andrew Ferguson, a senior editor of *The Weekly Standard*, who is not a fan of Carlson's show. "He's on a network that I think is kind of disreputable, and I think he's better than that," Ferguson says. "To me, it's just cringe-making. You get some poor little columnist from the *Daily Oregonian* who said Trump was Hitler, and you beat the shit out of him for ten minutes."

Carlson has carefully positioned himself as not uniformly pro-Trump, but certainly anti-anti-Trump. On his show, he avoids overt expressions of political apostasy. "I'm very conscious of the fact that my views, on a couple of subjects, are out of step—not just with our audience but with most other people in America," he tells Sanneh. "It's better to lead people to things, rather than to just make statements." Unlike most conservatives, he supports closer diplomatic ties with Iran, a topic that he hopes to explore on future shows. "It's going to confuse the living shit out of our viewers," he said. "When's the last time you saw someone defend Iran on Fox News? Right around never?" Charles C. Johnson, a former Daily Caller freelancer, suggests that Carlson has long been more of a political insurgent than many people recognized. "He understood that there was something stirring in the psyche and the mind of Republicans, and conservatives," Johnson says. "I think Tucker, like Trump, represents the return of the alpha white male to our politics."

Plus: In Comment, Amy Davidson concludes that Donald Trump's executive order on climate, signed last week, signals the end of the U.S.'s "meaningful participation in the fight against climate change" (p. 17); in Shouts & Murmurs, Glenn Eichler impatiently listens for Traffic on the Ones (p. 31); Zoë Heller reads Sally Bedell Smith's new biography of Prince Charles (p. 68); Adam Gopnik reads John F. Pfaff's new book, "Locked In," which challenges widely held beliefs about prison reform (p. 71); Hilton Als reviews Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones," now in revival at the Irish Repertory Theatre, and "The Hairy Ape," at the Park Avenue Armory (p. 74); Anthony Lane watches Rupert Sanders's adaptation of the anime work "Ghost in the Shell" and Cristian Mungiu's "Graduation" (p. 76); poetry by Beth Bachmann (p. 33) and Gerald Stern (p. 46); and new fiction by Emma Cline (p. 58).

Podcasts: David Remnick speaks with the playwright Lynn Nottage and the director Kate Whoriskey about their play, "Sweat"; Dorothy Wickenden and Dr. Robert Stavins, director of the Harvard Project on Climate Agreements, discuss Donald Trump's troubling environmental policies; Salman Rushdie reads Italo Calvino's "Love Far From Home" and discusses the story with Deborah Treisman; and Emma Cline reads her short story "Northwest Regional."

Digital Extras: Additional images from **Ben Taub's** reporting in Nigeria, the Sahara, and Italy; photographs of the filmmaker David Crowley at work; **Beth Bachmann** reads her poem; and **Richard Brody** comments on Nathan Silver's "Uncertain Terms," from 2014.

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