

Rome, 24th October 2018

George¹ is 25 and comes from The Gambia, a country otherwise known as “the smiling coast of Africa”, he tells me with a grin. Back in The Gambia, George was a bodybuilder. These days, it’s not so easy for him to get to the gym.

George has a deep Christian faith. He tells me that The Gambia is a country where Muslims and Christians live side by side without difficulty. However, when a Muslim scholar was invited to be the last president’s personal guest a few years ago, George was unhappy with the message which this scholar spread, a message which, in his view, fundamentally misinterpreted both the Koran and the Bible and would create division within the country he loved. George took to social media to explain at length why he thought this scholar’s teaching was flawed. His criticism was not appreciated by the authorities. Within days, it was made clear to him that his life was at risk if he remained in The Gambia. He knew that he had no option but to flee.

George’s eighteen month journey north out of Africa took him through Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Algeria and Libya. On arrival in Libya he was detained. He tells me that nothing could have prepared him for the time spent in detention. Every kind of abuse was practised on detainees, whose meals were drugged to reduce their defences, and who were given salt water to drink. George was able to leave the detention centre only because one of the guards decided he would take him for himself. For the next six weeks, George was effectively a slave to this man and his wife. George then found sufficient strength and opportunity to flee to the coast where he joined a boatful of people heading for Europe.



The overcrowded boat was at sea for eleven hours, which George describes as utterly terrifying. Eventually rescued by a German NGO, the passengers were disembarked at Lampedusa, a tiny Italian island around 70 miles off the coast of Tunisia. From there, in line with the government’s migrant dispersal policy, the

¹ Not his real name

passengers were taken to other parts of Italy. George has now been living in Piedmont for just under years in accommodation run by the Diaconia Valdese.

George speaks to me with little rancour. Although he misses The Gambia, he has no regrets about standing up for his beliefs. His focus is on the future. Finding work has been difficult. His Italian is good but his English is better. There is little use in Piedmont for the other five African languages which he speaks fluently. However, he has been volunteering in a care home for people with disabilities and is studying hard so that he can be employed there.

Although he cannot currently afford 45 Euros per month for gym membership, George and his friends have been introduced by locals to curling, which has grown in popularity in the region since the Winter Olympics were hosted there in 2006. With the support of the local community, George is proud to be a member of the First Africa curling team and effusive about the merits of his new sport.



George's courage, tenacity and willingness to adapt are clear from his story. But this new life of his could be altered at a stroke, for George's application for asylum has not yet been determined. He will learn the date of the interview which will determine his fate tomorrow. I am starting to learn that self-determination is a privilege rather than a right. For those of us used to having a modicum of control over our lives, this is a fairly terrifying thought. For those who are asylum seekers, it is a reality.