



ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Fished out of the sea and locked up in the temporary stay centre, the L'Espresso correspondent Fabrizio Gatti lived in inhuman conditions with the immigrants for a week. He was then released with an expulsion order.

by Fabrizio Gatti

A made up name and a dip in the sea. That's all you need to be locked up in the immigrants' centre in Lampedusa. You need only pretend to be an illegal immigrant and you'll soon find yourself in the cage in which thousands of people finish their journey every year, and where no observers or journalists are allowed. The fastest way to penetrate the Cayenne of the European Union involves a jump from the rocks and several hours in the water. Unless you want to set off from Libya and risk sinking with the overladen boats there are no alternatives. So I chose myself a foreign name and a stratagem borrowed from Papillon, the legendary 1973 film: in order to flee from Cayenne, the real one, Steve McQueen threw himself from the rocks and entrusted himself to the Ocean grasping a life raft. But here the aim wasn't to flee, rather to be caught. And that's what happened to me: I was fished out by a motorist, seized by the carabinieri on a first aid bed and released the following week, on the evening of Friday 30th September. Free, with the chance to go and work in any city in Europe as an illegal immigrant, in spite of previous penalties and a sentence in 2004. That is how my eight day diary as a prisoner in the hell of Lampedusa starts and finishes. It is the price you have to pay to play a first hand part in the indignities, abuse, violence and everything else that Italy has always hidden from the European Parliament and United Nations inspections. But it was also an opportunity to experience the appalling solitude of men, women and children who, in the struggle to improve their lives, have been up against the wilderness, traffickers and storms, and now that they have landed have against them the law which they should abide by.

Friday 23rd September

This evening the Mediterranean is breathing slowly. Beneath the moonless sky the water is invisible. Only its sound can be heard, two or three metres down there at the foot of the cliff. Before jumping you need to become synchronized with the rhythm of the sea. And to jump into the water when the wave is at its highest, make the most of the backwash and get away from the rocks straight away. One. Two. On the count of three the coldness is already enveloping my body. From this moment onward, I am Bilal Ibrahim el Habib, born on 9th September 1970 in the imaginary village of Assalah, in the Aqrah district of Iraqi Kurdistan. No traces were left on the rocks. My socks and shoes were sunk using four stones. And even the stray Rottweiler which had decided to follow me to spend its evening in company is now going away, a little puzzled. Bilal doesn't have much with him. He is wearing black canvas trousers, boxer shorts, a cotton vest, a blue sweatshirt, a heavy fleece jacket and a lifejacket with writing in Arabic. Bilal clenches a sports bag to his chest. Inside there are three small tins of 'Product of Morocco' sardines, three bread buns which are now mush, a bottle of water and a pair of old plastic mules. But that bag, swollen with air, above all helps him to float. It's an ideal evening for jumping into the sea without being seen. In the sky the lights and sounds of 'O' Scia', the Claudio Baglioni festival, are reflected. Almost all the tourists, inhabitants and police and carabinieri squads are at the show. And Bilal can swim undisturbed as far as a

headland on which the lights of a house are shining. There is a toing and froing of young men, cars and scooters. And at least four and a half hours go by before someone notices the man in the sea.

The people of Lampedusa and the first aid nurses have offered all their generosity. But now Bilal is in a carabinieri car. The headlamps light up the road with no exit next to the airport. Then a gate on the right decorated with barbed wire. It is opened by a carabinieri in a riot suit, military boots and a pistol in a holster. It must be half past two in the morning. Even though according to law he is still a free citizen, Bilal can no longer leave here. "They've delivered this one to us from first aid," the soldier who gets out of the car says to his colleague. Bilal is accompanied with his head down as far as a small courtyard in which other carabinieri are waiting with a young man wearing the uniform of the Misericordia, the association which has the contract for the Lampedusa centre. The young man offers him a glass of water and four packs of croissants. Then he takes a cotton t-shirt and a track suit out of a bag. "Put these on so that you'll be warmer," he says. "What's your name? Where do you come from?" a carabinieri wants to know. "I don't understand," whispers Bilal in English. The question is repeated in macaronic English. "Kurdistan? But he's whiter than I am, how can he be Kurdish?" asks a very sun-tanned carabinieri. Bilal keeps his eyes down on his shabby mules and listens to the voices. "A Kurd who speaks English. Well, well! Couldn't he be a journalist from CNN who has penetrated here?" "Yes, or maybe he's an Italian journalist?" "Why no, the Italians don't do things like that," replies the first voice. The danger has been averted. "Bilal, you must tell ze verity," shouts a carabinieri. "Ze verity, understand? Otherwise bam bam," and he mimes slaps. Verity? The English for *verità* is truth. Is it a mistake or a trap? "Come, Bilal," calls the young man from the Misericordia. He drags a foam-rubber mattress taken from a pile of mattresses. He sets him up in the corridor between a row of clean toilets and the door of another very dirty toilet. Then he covers him with a paper sheet. "Tonight we'll have him sleep here," the young man says to the carabinieri. Another immigrant is snoring, wrapped up in a blanket like a mummy. And from a partially closed door the shapes of dozens of women and a child lying on the floor can be seen. When Bilal comes back from the toilet, to which a carabinieri followed him, he finds his place has been taken. More than 200 flies thought that cool white paper sheet was for them. But they are polite flies. They get up when Bilal arrives and only set themselves down on him again after he has lain down. Try to whisk them away is a hopeless task. A very strong odour of urine rises up from the floor. The light from the ceiling is never turned off. The carabinieri laugh and talk in loud voices all night long. It's difficult to get to sleep. And then there's the problem of his skin colour. He needs to come up with a credible explanation before tomorrow morning. Maybe this one could work: Bilal is so light skinned because his father is Kurdish but his mother is Bosnian.

Saturday 24th September

Dawn announces itself with a deafening noise. In his drowse it seems to be the noise of a vacuum cleaner. No, perhaps it's a polisher. But no, it's too loud. The smell solves the mystery. Yes, these are JP aircraft fuel fumes. So that's what it is: the nearby airport. When the Airbus manoeuvre they fire the blast from the engines straight into the windows where the immigrants are sleeping. It's still dark but they're all awake now. Young Eritrean or Ethiopian women come out of the women's room. Others appear from a second door. There is even a heavily pregnant woman. The sum is done straight away – there are almost fifty of them, counting the teenagers and adults. Plus Bilal and the other man who is sleeping in the corridor. For all of them there is one single toilet, four showers and a few washbasins. The carabinieri don't want them to use their squat toilets, the only ones that smell of bleach. Bilal pretends to sleep so as to avoid questions and problems. But he watches and listens. There is a toing and froing of carabinieri and some policemen around him. They are wondering if he really is Kurdish. The young African women spend the time knotting plaits. One of them, who can't be more than twenty years old, has all her nails half varnished. The end part is embellished with a light pearly film while the newer part has grown without being cared for. Maybe her journey started where the nail varnish finishes. Outside in the small courtyard, the latest arrivals' shoes, trousers and t-shirts are hanging. Yesterday evening 161 immigrants landed, then another 37, and then Bilal. A copy of the Koran has been left to dry in the sun. "Bilal," a voice shouts loudly. "You," says a policeman and indicates with his hand that he has

to follow him.

The police identification office is a large room with four desks. They have Bilal sit down at the back on the right. In front of him are two plain clothes policemen, a computer and a young man with a Berber look. He is the interpreter. "Do you speak Arabic?" he asks in Arabic. "Yes." "Where are you from?" "Kurdistan. But I would like to continue in English, Arabic is not my language and the Arabs have occupied my land," replies Bilal. Choosing the language is the first item on the list of 'Immigrants' Rights' written on Prefecture of Agrigento paper and hanging in the corridor. A young woman whom they call doctor and who is wearing a US army style camouflage t-shirt joins the interrogation. She wants to know everything. Bilal says he wants to go to Germany, and to have been shut in a container in Turkey, loaded onto a cargo ship and put on a motor launch some miles away from the Italian coast. Then the motor launch burst apart, it sunk and Bilal saved himself by swimming. They want to know about the writing in Arabic on the lifejacket. "Happiness 3 is what is written on it. Maybe it's the name of a ship," explains the Arabic interpreter. "Do you know what is written there?" asks the doctor, still in English. "Yes, as *Soror*, happiness - all of us came to Europe to seek it." Bilal has to repeat the story of his journey three times. They try to get him to contradict himself. They ask trick questions: "If you're Kurdish you speak Urdu." "No, Urdu is the language of Pakistan." Then they become angry: "You haven't come from Turkey, you have come from Libya. And that Arabic writing shows it. Now we're going to send you back to Gheddafi," promises the doctor. "Will you give us a moment so that we can take him to the torture room?" a robust policeman who has just joined the group asks her. But maybe it's just a way to understand whether or not Bilal speaks Italian and to scare him. The interrogation immediately returns to a more human level. The doctor picks up the telephone and complains to the carabinieri station because the person who picked up Bilal at first aid had not written a report and no-one knows where he was fished out or who had brought him to the centre. "There you are, you need to tell the sergeant that he's an arse-hole," concludes the doctor. After the interrogation you always have to leave finger prints. The fingers and palms of the hands are pressed onto the red glass of a scanner and you are automatically filed. Outside, 21 teenagers are waiting their turn. They must be 15 to 20 years old and seen together they look like a class of high school students on a school trip. They are all from Kerouane in Tunisia, all close to home, and all had left on the same boat. Bilal doesn't have time to sit down near them. A policeman gives him a ticket with registration number 001 and entrusts him to the carabinieri. They take him to a large green gate framed with rolls of barbed wire. Another carabinieri opens the padlock and then releases the bolt. Immediately afterwards the gate closes again.

Hundreds of immigrants are seated on the asphalt in rows of ten between two prefabricated huts and four containers. "Today we are at the level of 447," they had said in the police office. The carabinieri shout and laugh. On their suits is the distinctive red of the department: 1st Mobile Brigade. "Go to the end, move, move," yells one of the soldiers. Bilal goes to sort himself out behind everyone, next to a short, thin fifty year-old with a Bergamo t-shirt, and two young Egyptians. Two trickles of purplish-blue liquid are coming out of a door on the right and slithering under the feet of the last rows. The sewage stinks of urine and sewers. "Sit down," shouts one of the carabinieri, first in Italian then in English. "But here at the end it's disgusting," says his colleague, a big young man with a Neapolitan accent. "The sergeant told us to make them sit down. Sit down," the first one shouts louder and surprises an immigrant from behind, lashing him on the ears with his leather gloves. Bilal and the others had crouched down on their ankles so as not to dirty themselves with the sewage. But that was not enough for the carabinieri. In order to avoid a beating you had to resign yourself and get wet. In front, the Berber interpreter and a plain clothes policeman call the next people to leave the camp. A plane is leaving for the temporary stay centre in Bari or maybe for Libya. No-one explains anything. The carabinieri with the leather gloves tries to kick closed the door that the trickles are coming out of. Then he places himself in a strategic position and still with his gloves lashes the ears of the person called by the interpreter. Some people have to walk in front of him again to go and get their bag with its few things from the dormitory. And they get another clout. The carabinieri laughs; light eyed and fair-skinned. And his colleagues laugh too. Another lash. It's just a game for them. The interpreter and the policemen pretend not to see. But among the rows seated on the ground, teenagers and men murmur angrily. "Italians, bitch, arse-hole," whispers the thin man with the Bergkamp t-shirt.

It doesn't seem anything like a reception centre. And in here there isn't even the attitude of respect that the police in the identification office had in the end kept up. Bilal and all the others have to remain seated and crouched for more than an hour as after the roll-call they had to queue for lunch. A plastic plate with pasta and tuna fish, another with small pieces of fried fish (maybe) and sweet-and-sour vegetables, a bread bun, an apple and a two litre bottle of water to split between two with no glasses. A chance to socialise but also a risk if someone has been in contact with an infectious disease. Even Bilal was not examined by the centre's doctor. You eat on the ground under the scorching sun, resting your apple and bread on the asphalt or the walls. In the afternoon you need to find a place in which to shelter from the heat. The bunk beds are all taken. Dozens of them sleep, even on the canteen tables. No Misericordia assistants explain to Bilal what he has to do. Behind the canteen/dormitory are some mattresses that have been freed by the people who have just left. When you have a better look at them they are full of tiny insects, maybe fleas. And there aren't even any paper sheets with which to protect yourself, they had been left outside as a policeman had said that the Misericordia would have distributed them once you were inside the cage. But it wasn't true. Bilal falls asleep in the sun, protecting his head with a towel they had given him to use as a cover. He is woken by an Egyptian man: "Hey, *ashara-ashara*". *Ashara?* In Arabic it means ten. "*Ashara-ashara*," shout squads of carabinieri who have come into the camp with Tonfa truncheons stuck in their belts. You have to go and sit down on the sewage path again. In rows of ten, "*ashara-ashara*". There's another transfer: this time the Alitalia plane is leaving for Crotone. Among other people, they call the Egyptian light boat pilot from Rosetta who had piloted the boat which had arrived the previous evening with 161 people. He is fair-skinned and has thick, black hair. In his backpack they have found (and left) five thousand euro in cash, the pay for his work. "It is the third time this year that this one has come to Lampedusa," says the carabinieri lance-corporal. But someone should explain why the light boat pilot has stayed less than 24 hours in Lampedusa this time.

Before the evening comes, the identification office discovers that Bilal's fingerprints match those of another immigrant: Roman Ladu, born in Bucharest on 29th December 1970. It's the name I used in the year 2000 to get into the temporary stay centre in via Corelli in Milan, which was later closed because of its precarious detention conditions. But the computer does not tell the policemen that Roman Ladu is a journalist in reality. And maybe not even that the journalist, alias Roman Ladu, was exposed for that report and sentenced to twenty days in prison. So Bilal, the real previous offender, can stick to his guns. "You are Romanian and you speak Italian," insists a plain-clothes inspector. One of his colleagues comes up and asks, "*Ce face?*" (how are you?). Then he whispers in Bilal's ear, "*Pizda, pizda, pizda, pizda, pizda...*," a not particularly refined way of calling the female genitals in Romanian. Bilal's gaze remains motionless. They try again with a Moroccan interpreter, who in the end concludes, "I don't think he is Romanian. He speaks Arabic but he continues to ask for the interrogation to be in English."

Sunday 25th September

Bilal decided to go to the toilet at nighttime. The toilets are an unforgettable experience. The prefab that houses them is divided into two areas. In one there are eight showers with blocked pipes, and forty washbasins. Plus eight squat toilets, three of which are overflowing to the brim with a creamy mixture - the source of the two trickles. The other area has five toilets, two of which have no flush, five showers and eight washbasins. Salt water comes out of the taps. There are no doors, no electricity and no privacy. You do everything in front of everyone. Some people cover themselves as best they can with a towel. And there isn't even any toilet paper: you have to use your hands. It's best to go there at nighttime as during the day the level of sewage on the floor is higher than your mules so you have to put your feet in it. But having a foot-bath in the washbasin before you go out is a problem because as soon as you put your foot in, your mule it starts to float and travel with the current. And yet on 15th September the league member Mario Borghezio, when guiding a delegation of European Parliament MPs, said that the Lampedusa centre is a five-star hotel and that he would live in it. On that date the Home Office had had him come across only 11 inmates, and that week traffickers had diverted the course of the boats to Sicily. Who knows, maybe in Borghezio's flat it's normal to have the floors covered in sewage. But the majority of the immigrants locked in here come from clean homes where you can even go in barefoot.

Breakfast is a glass of cold milk, two croissants and a bottle of water to share between two people. At the morning *ashara-ashara* the carabinieri realise that five people are missing. But they discuss it between themselves and decide not to notify it. It's impossible to know who has escaped as no roll-call is made and the inmates are only counted. Halfway along the fencing that separates the centre from the airport, and right behind one of the poles with the closed circuit television cameras, the barbed wire has been cut. And on the pole two nooses of white cloth have been left behind, possibly tied there to facilitate the grip of the people who climbed up above the net. The carabinieri do their count once again and get everyone to sit down in the sun again. They stay like that for hours as there is another roll-call. They send away all the Eritreans and Ethiopians who landed on Monday the 19th. Among them is an entire family of brothers and cousins, the Abrahams. They had fled from Eritrea so as not to be sent to the front, and they want to continue their studies in Europe. One of them, Youssef, is an athletics hope – he continued his training in the centre at six o'clock every morning. There are many minors, locked up together with the adults for a week. A carabinieri in front of them shows them a big mobile phone and some of them cover their eyes with their hands, but we can't understand why. For several days Ahmed Ibrahim has had an intestinal infection. He asks to go to the toilet and after a several minutes the carabinieri allow him to get up. He stays in the toilets for a long time. "Has the one who went to the toilet come back?" asks one of the soldiers. "No, he hasn't come back; I'll go and check now." Other people ask if they can go to the toilet but the carabinieri don't allow them to. Almost half an hour later Ahmed Ibrahim reappears, sweating and exhausted. "You," the carabinieri who was showing the mobile phone shouts to him, "you're an arse-hole." Ahmed looks at him in fright. "You're an arse-hole. Go and sit down and don't get up again." His colleagues laugh. In the end 150 immigrants leave, perhaps for the centre in Caltanissetta. You get up and sit down again straight after the lunch *ashara-ashara*. Now Bilal is in the third row. There's another long wait, sitting and crouching. The carabinieri with the big mobile phone comes up. He is the least robust of his colleagues. He has well-groomed black hair, a very visible mole on his right cheek, a silver bracelet and a leather one with small gold medals on his right wrist and a watch with a leather watch-strap on his left wrist. After playing some techno music, he presses a button and the mobile phone starts to puff. He bends over and shows the display to the minors sitting next to Bilal. There are pictures of a porno film that maybe he has downloaded from the Internet. The carabinieri stands up and smiles, "And shampoo afterwards," he announces to the minors mimicking the gesture of masturbation. The teenagers laugh. Then he bends down again in the first row, walks along it and expects everyone to look. A thirty year old man covers his eyes with his hands. He is one of the young men who had led the prayers in the footpath mosque the evening before. He is a practising Muslim and doesn't want to look. The carabinieri with the mole pulls his hands away from his eyes, "Look so that you'll learn," he says, putting the display in front of his nose. The thirty year old turns and looks at Bilal with shining eyes. A carabinieri behind them jokes with his colleague, "Drop it, that one is gay."

The commander arrives – a lance-corporal who goes around wearing a bandana, an over shirt and trousers down to his calves in his free time. The harassment hasn't finished. The lance-corporal wants a photo of himself taken in front of the inmates. He yells "Italy" and everyone has to raise their right thumb and reply "One". "Come on," says another carabinieri, "if you don't reply 'one' you won't get anything to eat." Bilal doesn't reply and doesn't even raise his arm. The carabinieri sees him. Bilal stares at him and the carabinieri lets it go.

Shortly afterwards the police want Bilal back in the office. But not for an interrogation. Two inspectors who are always kind and respectful get him to put on the lifejacket which they had confiscated the night he had landed. All they want is a souvenir photograph with him. One stands on his right and the other on the left, "Bilal smile, *sorridi!*". After that snapshot no-one bothers any more about the identity of the strange Kurdish immigrant. Another day goes by. People play football on a clearing with sharp stones. There aren't enough shoes for everyone, so half the players wear a right shoe, the other half a left shoe and the two goalkeepers stay barefoot. Before dinner there is a sudden silence. A coach and an ambulance deliver 21 black immigrants. They are exhausted, starving hungry, dried with salt and burnt by the sun. They pass in front of the gate and people stare at their suffering. They are photographed, registered, undressed and searched. They are given a cup of hot tea, a croissant, a towel,

and those with shabby clothes are also given a tracksuit. They can't stand up. But half an hour later the gate is opened and in groups of six they are pushed into the cage. They don't know where to go and they are staggering. Two of them have no shoes and when they see the conditions in the toilets they come back to ask for a pair. Cherriere, a French Arab who is suspected to be one of the most famous light boat pilots of the Mediterranean, forces the carabinieri to serve the latest arrivals before everyone else. Cherriere is a real cultural mediator: the carabinieri and police often call him for help with Arabic or to dampen down the pressure. The doctor has even sent a man suffering from scabies into the cage. He can't even sit down because of his sores but the soldiers insist that he does the same as the others. The last one to come in must have sunstroke as he continues to stagger. The carabinieri make him go back and forth three times. "How much has this one had to drink?" laughs a soldier. Bilal and Cherriere insist that he too is placed in the front row with his travel companions. Then a carabinieri talks about Bilal, sure that he doesn't understand him: "We have to teach this one to mind his own business." But nothing can be done about the shoes. "We've given everyone shoes, tell those two not to break our balls," rasps the department head of the Misericordia, a man with grey hair who is very different from Angelo, Andrea or the cook, young men who are always willing, even though they work hard all day long. So the two men stay barefoot. After dinner the latest arrivals look at the course from Libya to Lampedusa painted on the prefab at the entrance: "We lost our bearings and stayed out at sea for a week. My wife would say, "We gonna die." But I would tell her, "No, God will lead us to Europe." Almost all of them are Christians. Before they go to sleep they sing a thanksgiving gospel song in the darkness of a dormitory. Holding the tears back is impossible.

Monday, 26th September

Bilal finally found a bed to sleep on. A rubber foam mattress and a blanket that had been used by who knows how many before him in a room containing Egyptian boat-owners and some of their passengers. The night soon draw to a close, however. They were woken by the sound of crying. Several of them got up and went to see what was wrong. The sound seemed to be coming from the next room. As they approached the cry, it took on the form of a song that was out-of-tune: "So much time and then, I'll make you hear, so much time and then." It came from beyond the gate: the carabinieri were singing karaoke using their portable computer. It was half past four in the morning and the same shift that was there yesterday morning was watching porn on their mobile phones. Their corporal was there too. They were crowded together and did not notice. He went back to bed, but couldn't get back to sleep, because an Airbus from Windjet continued to circle low over Lampedusa. The lights on the control tower were out and the pilots were waiting for someone to wake up so that they could land.

Immediately after breakfast, Bilal had to solve a serious problem: to let his family and his editor know that he was locked up in the centre. After four days with no contact, they would start to worry. The opportunity of contacting their families was of secondary importance amongst immigrants' rights according to the notice that the Prefecture of Agrigento had put up on the walls and in the bathrooms. However, every time Bilal and the others asked to be given or to buy a phone card, the head of the Charity Service replied: "I'm not the director", or, "Bukara, tomorrow," or "Don't get your hopes up." This is the reason why some boat-owners, shut up for weeks in the chicken run, made their money by selling 3-euro cards for 20 euros. Given that no-one could leave, however, who was passing them through the gate? Bilal absolutely had to phone, but he could not access the line with a metal wire. He had an idea - 118 was free to call. "I need help, I am shut up in a centre for immigrants and I can't make phone calls," said Bilal in French, "I must let my family know. If I give you an Italian telephone number, please call and say that Bilal is alive. It will cost you less than one euro". It's no joke: hundreds of fathers and sons inside have the same serious need, but there is no-one who is willing to do them a favour. Bilal tried again, dialling a free number. 0800-400-400 was the number of the secret cell for the Province of Milan. It is a centre-left committee – and, as such, maybe more sensitive to immigrants' rights. However, after thirty minutes' insistence in English, the girl on the other end of the phone even invented a law: "I can't, the law on terrorism prevents me from making this call." No-one was interested in the anguishes of the immigrants cooped up in here.

That evening, after dinner, Bilal prepared for another night of hell. Lampedusa saw the arrival of a boat that had been adrift on the seas and contained 350 foreigners. The police from the Office of Identification and the employees of the Charity Service set to work. Even the carabinieri from the Mobile Brigade were ready for action, if required. That evening, however, there was a benevolent squad on duty. They were commanded by a brigadier who gave orders in a Neapolitan accent, with his grey hair which was beginning to thin out. Throughout the week, none of his boys was heard to shout or insult an immigrant and, when the first passengers streamed in off the boat, he made himself understood with gestures, without shouting.

Tuesday 27th September

Another humid day: many of the inmates had bites and stings on their face and hands. The biggest ones were caused by mosquitoes, the smallest perhaps fleas. Every time Bilal tried to go to the bathroom, he thought of the Borghezio house. It was a day of waiting. The transfers announced yesterday were postponed, because the police had to identify those who had just arrived. It was the only day the rooms were cleaned. One of the employees of the Charity Service used the same broom, with which he had tried, unsuccessfully, to remove the grime from the baths. They also used a spray. The inmates, instead of being cleaned, were fired at random. There was even something not quite right at mealtimes. On Saturday evening, and at other times, the small cutlets were not meat, but made of breadcrumbs, flour and, maybe, egg and, as such, they could be cut with a plastic teaspoon. It was as if, at Lampedusa, someone was substituting breadcrumbs for meat. Bilal and the others were being deprived of both their freedom and their protein.

Wednesday 28th September

The midday ashara-ashara was a fascist parade. It was the same Saturday shift that had made Bilal sit down in the mud and slime. There were now 600 immigrants inside. They were all seated waiting for lunch. A carabinieri officer faced a door and imitated il Duce. A brigadier, who looked a bit like Mussolini, placed his hands on his hips, flexing his knees. He, then, saluted his colleagues with his right arm extended. "No", one carabinieri corrected him, "that's the Nazi salute. The Fascist one is like this. Italians!... The next time we'll learn the Faccetta nera¹, shall we?". The brigadier was one of the men most respected by the imprisoned immigrants. Yesterday evening, Bilal had seen him carry an invalid in his arms from the infirmary to his bed. At night, however, those boys really showed what they were made of. The immigrants went to bed and Bilal hid behind a net, listening and observing – another hard night. The police had worked late to interrogate the final immigrants off Monday's boat and now there were 180 new arrivals to process, search and organise. Seated on a small wall was a pair of two year old twin girls, with their mother and father. The carabinieri, with steel toe-caps and latex gloves, suddenly began to check pockets and bags. He was assisted by a colleague in civilian clothes, perhaps discharged, with well-groomed sideburns, gelled black hair and a t-shirt with some writing on the chest. "Strip naked," he said to a boy in a vest, who was trembling with cold and fear. He didn't understand. He remained immobile for an entire minute. "What is the problem?" shouted the carabinieri, slapping him on the head. The immigrant, pale and skeletally thin, shook. Another slap. All those naked in front of the carabinieri were slapped. For half an hour, the men talked about making a corridor and, in military slang, this was not an area linking two places, as they soon demonstrated: a line of six foreigners to be taken into the coop passed by them, each one taking his fair share of slaps. Four carabinieri gave four slaps to the head. Finally, the brigadier arrived who had imitated Mussolini earlier that afternoon. "Is he giving you problems?" he asked the man in civilian clothes. He punched the immigrant in the middle of the chest, although this boy did not understand what he had done wrong and remained motionless on his feet, in his vest. Another line of immigrants passed by, another corridor. This time, they were accompanied by an employee from the Charity. He was a man with a goatee and a small scar near his nose, who, one evening when a boy had called the Muslims to prayer, had begun to bark every time he heard the words Allahu akbar. Perhaps he would make them stop. Instead, he looked and laughed. The brigadier was standing in front of the line. He did the goosestep and pretended

¹ Translator's note: Historic songs from the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-36

to carry a spear: "Forward march". Only one Neapolitan carabinieri played no part in the game. The slaps rang in the air for a full half-hour, before, finally, a police official took note. She was a blonde girl, not very tall, who, in the day, had her hair in a bandana. "Marshal," she said nervously, "I can see what your boys are doing and I feel there are too many hands." The marshal jumped up and went to the other carabinieri: "Well, boys, I suggest," he said to them and they all began to laugh. The last six immigrants were taken inside the cell that was as black as night and had to sleep on the tarmac, as there were no more beds. The carabinieri celebrated with a barbecue in the courtyard.

Thursday 29th September

Bilal spent the day convincing a group of fervent Muslims that he couldn't follow them in prayer. At six that evening, before the dinner ashara-ashara, a female voice changed his mood. "El Habib Ibrahim Bilal. Present yourself at the gate at eight tomorrow morning, because you are being transferred," said the Moroccan interpreter in Arabic. "What destination?" "Agrigento". "Bilal is going away," said Cherriere. In front of Bilal there formed a line of prisoners from the cell who wanted to greet him. Rachid, 31 and Moroccan, who had landed yesterday evening, explained to him how it worked: "They give you an exit sheet. You hold it for five days and you can travel and move until you get to where you are going. Then, you throw it away. I already have a job waiting for me in Padua with my cousin. There are many ways of entering Italy." That evening another 350 immigrants landed, but it was the good brigadier's shift and no-one was beaten. John, 27, had barely arrived in the coop from Togo and his travelling companions were asking where they could eat. The Charity, however, let it be known that the first meal would be distributed the next morning. "We are starving, we haven't eaten for seven days," John trembled, "When we landed, we saw a shop and wanted to buy something but the police told us we couldn't and that we would have something to eat in here. We have money. If we are free, why can't we buy something to eat?" Bilal saw the doctor passing, then called him over and explained the situation. "I'll bring you some brioche," the doctor said. However, he went away and brought nothing. John and the others went to sleep on a pavement, because the mattresses were all used up. One official in civilian clothes overturned a can of Coca on the immigrants through the bars. "Why are you doing this?" shouted Teemer, a 26 year old Palestinian, "We are clandestine, but we are not animals." The official apologised. The rooms were overflowing with people, with some even under the beds. The radio was at full volume in the kitchen and sang out the words that perhaps hundreds of boys were saying for their dads locked up in here: 'How I wish, how I wish you were here'. They went to sleep surrounded by a scene from the end of the world.

Friday 30th September

When he returned from his night-time shower, Bilal found his bed occupied by two other people. These were his last hours in the coop, so he could stay up. The sky was lit with lamps and lightning. The storm didn't last long, but the roar of the water woke up the hundreds of people who were sleeping in the open air. In front of the gate, they were registering more people who had just landed and the carabinieri were, again, hitting the boys they were searching. The first were two men who had not sat down in the right place. They called one Maradona, rained down insults on him and Maradona became a football. They only stopped when the lieutenant in civilian clothes, the one with the goatee came by. Then they started to slap around twenty men who didn't understand what they had to do and two others who did not sit down when they were told, because they only spoke Arabic and French. This obscenity had to stop. Bilal shouted in English: "Why are you beating these people?" One carabinieri aimed a kick at the net from where he was observing, trying to strike him. Bilal was called outside the gate. It was a tense, nervous face to face confrontation, Bilal's eyes gazing into the eyes of the carabinieri with greying hair and the grille to hide him, but at least the beating had stopped. When the sun was at its highest behind the centre, 1250 people had gathered there. "This is the professor," one of the carabinieri said to two colleagues, referring to Bilal, "Did you see what he did before? A day ago we called him out and gave him a review". Five minutes later, however, the police called him out. Bilal was taken to the exit, where he joined the group about to be transferred: nine adults and 35 minors. The Charity Service distributed white t-shirts to everybody and shoes to the three that were without them, but they did not return the money that the young boys had deposited with the secretariat. The

carabinieri accompanied them to the exit without telling them that they would be transferred from Lampedusa. "We can't do it today, there's no-one in the office, who can give you your money back," explained a young man from the Charity. Bilal insisted in English: "We're talking about hundreds of euros, it is vital that they leave with the money." One carabiniere indicated with his finger and showed his empty palms.

They left without their money. At the ferry embarkation point, the last of the season's tourists looked at the line of immigrants escorted by the carabinieri. Each one had a small bag with two rolls and a bottle of water. They travelled until evening fell in the boat's lounge, flanked by a brigadier and two very polite carabinieri. Youssef, (16), was sure he was being deported to Libya and began to pray in the direction of the bow, convinced that the ship's course was set for the South-East. When the mountains of Sicily appeared on the horizon, all the others pressed against the window and laughed: "Jebel Scisciglia". At Porto Empedocle, the 45 were loaded into a bus supplied by the Cuffaro company and escorted by the police. The caravan finally arrived at the police headquarters at Agrigento and Bilal and the other 8 adults were separated from the minors. The teenagers were taken to an institute to be reunited with relations already in Italy. The other received three sheets of paper and a bag containing two rolls and a bottle of water. They were then loaded onto a lorry that left at great speed. "Bilal, I'm afraid. I think they're taking us to Libya," said Abdrazak, the 18 year old Moroccan, who wanted to rejoin his uncle in Catania. They ended up at the station, but the train for Palermo had already left: "Wow, it never leaves at the right time," said an inspector angrily. Another journey by car and lorry, with sirens, to Aragona, the next station. This time, the train had not yet arrived. "Boys, listen to me," explained an official in English, "You have five days to leave Italy. You are free." Bilal was also free, despite his Romanian alter ego and his previous penalties. When the others understood, they cheered. One wrapped his arms around the inspector's neck, who smiled, but preferred not to be kissed. All of them, except one, had a job or a relation waiting for them in Milan, Turin, Naples or Catania. The final obstacle was the ticket office, the next morning in Palermo station. The official was convinced that they were immigrants who spoke no Italian and shouted insults at them. He even abused a commuter who offered to help them: "Do you think we can't understand you?" Bilal exploded saying, "we understand some Italian, do it – issue us with tickets!" The surprised official set to work immediately. "What language was Bilal speaking?" asked Abdrazak in French, "Was it Kurdish?" n

Comments from readers are available on-line with no form of censorship. However, L'espresso reserves the right to block any entries that contravene the penal code (e.g. offensive language, threats, defamation, incitement to racial hatred etc).

Instructions for escaping

"If you go to Crotona, you can get there with 150 euros. At Bari, you can escape from the detention centre at night, jumping over the fence and following the paths. You can't at Caltanissetta and Trapani: if they shut you up there inside, you only leave when the police decide." Ahmed, as he calls himself (26), an Egyptian from the Nile Delta, has been detained for a few weeks in the Lampedusa centre. He is a boat-builder by trade and his only desire is to be transferred to the immigration centre at Crotona: "Because that's the easiest one to escape from and this is why some of us travel with satellite phones. When we are near Lampedusa, we call someone in Crotona and tell them what name we will use when we present ourselves to the police." Is it possible to arrange your own destination? "No, if, here in Lampedusa, they know that you want to go to Crotona, they will send you somewhere else. However, some of us do succeed more easily than others in getting to Crotona. The reference point is a group of Sudanese. Once free, we go to Rome, make a duplicate passport and then

return to Egypt. After a bit of rest, we go back to Libya legally and we are ready for another trip. It costs 5 thousand euro or 6 thousand dollars to travel. However, some Libyan policemen ask for between 5 and 20 thousand euros to allow the boats to leave – it depends on the number of passengers." The recent mass arrivals signal the end of the agreement between Silvio Berlusconi and Colonel Gheddafi. The boat that landed at Lampedusa on 26th September with almost 350 immigrants came from Tunisia: "We were gathered up in Libya and taken beyond the borders," recounted the passengers. *F. G.*

Human rights according to the Viminale²

In seven days of imprisonment at the immigration centre at Lampedusa, the detention of Bilal Ibrahim el Habib was not validated by any judge: no citizen can be deprived of his liberty for longer than 48 hours without a judgement by a magistrate. The immigrants released on the evening of Friday 30th September received the order to leave Italy within five days signed by the police commissioner at Agrigento along with the deportation decree with accompaniment to the border. In reality, it was only a formality, since no-one was physically accompanied to the border in confinement. In no document held by the police commissioner was any of the immigrants held for more than a week. Instead, the Prefecture paid for railway tickets for nine foreigners from Agrigento to Palermo. The Minister of Interior recently confirmed to the European Commission and the European Court of Human Rights that it respected the dignity of humans in the procedure for identifying foreigners: in particular thanks to the replacement of ink by digital imprints using the Visa Scanner that does not dirty anyone's hands. The Ministry of Interior has also assured the EU that all foreigners detained at Lampedusa will have a validation audience in front of a justice of the peace. In the cases of Bilal Ibrahim el Habib and the foreigners held between the 24th and 30th September in the cells of the immigration centre on this island, this affirmation is false. *F. G.*

It's mangeria time

In Lampedusa a type of slang is used based on various idioms.

Maifrend: from the English "my friend". This is the way the carabinieri, policemen and assistants address the immigrants detained in the chicken coop at Lampedusa when addressing one of them. The plural is "bastards" and only used by the carabinieri.

Ashara-ashara: from the Arab ashara, ten. This is the roll-call when the immigrants sit in rows of ten. It is also the evening signal for the distribution of cigarettes – ten per head, one packet between two prisoners.

Fisa-fisa: from Arab: this is the order given to immigrants who have to move or do something quickly. visa-visa is also used.

Mangeria: meal-time (breakfast, lunch or dinner). The Egyptians also call it mangheria or mangaria.

Asciugamano: This has many meanings in the cells of Lampedusa and many functions outside. It is used instead of cover, cushion, parasol, trousers, booths in the WC, turban, handkerchief, cloth and is used to protect the eyes from the sun so that you can sleep at night. **Kulu kulu:** from the Arab – anything to do with eating. *F. G.*

² Home of the Italian Ministry of Interior

