

“God is my fire”

Encounters with Eritrean men at a refugee camp in Calais, France

photography and text by [Alex Holmes](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue



Hamid (Photo by Alex Holmes)

*British photographer, writer, and volunteer Alex Holmes frequently spends his free time at the impromptu Eritrean refugee camp in Calais, France, where he talks with the young men gathered there. These men have escaped from what the Global Slavery Index calls the “highest prevalence of modern slavery across Africa (and the second in the world).” They are trying to get to the United Kingdom, where they believe there is hope for a better life. Constant police evictions and violence disrupt their daily lives. The text that appears with these photos is taken from Holmes’s*

*notes and conversations over the last four years.*

Fireside. Hamid is drawing. A broad highway tapers across the paper toward the mid-distant horizon. He uses the side of his phone to draw the tall walls that cut the road from the surrounding landscape. “Like here,” he says, pointing to the four-meter-high, UK-funded “security wall” beneath which the small Eritrean encampment nestles. “When I get to the UK, I will be an artist, or I will have a restaurant. That is my dream.”



Yusef escaped from Eritrea in a mass breakout. He walked six days with no food, no shoes, terrified he would be informed on if he knocked at a door to ask for help. He eventually made it home, only to be caught and imprisoned after a second failed attempt at escaping the country.





Mewael picks up a stone and hurls it toward a stationary rat sniffing the air. He misses his target by a whisker. "I tried to read *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle, but it was a bit hard," he tells me. "Now I am reading *Think and Grow Rich*." I ask him what he will do if he grows rich. "I will have a chain of hotels all around the world."







Hamid and Yusef emerge from the darkness into the glow of the fire, their faces creased in pain. They've been pepper sprayed by the Calais police. Handed small cartons of milk, they let the contents dribble down over their closed, stinging eyes. The pain lessens, and they come and sit at the fireside. As the milk dries, their faces become a blotch of dark skin and white.





At the camp, it is 21 degrees Fahrenheit. The mud is a frozen crosshatch of footprints—humans, birds, rats. Fireside, the flames offer some comfort from the cold. Saare places small cartons of milk near the orange embers and, once heated, they're passed around the fireside circle. A charred-black kettle balances precariously on the burning timbers; soon there'll be sweet, warming tea. At night, plastic jerry cans filled with hot water and two sleeping bags apiece plus blankets make the long, freezing hours bearable.

"It's now ten years since I was at home in my village in Eritrea," says Girma. "We always had a fire outside our house. It was beautiful. On one side there were sheep, on the other cows, and children playing everywhere. We drank coffee and chatted around the fire." Dark is falling fast; the flames light up Girma's face, which breaks into a smile. "Calais life is hard, but I am always happy. I am happy because God is my power." He pauses, his smile widening. "God is my fire!" His eyes sparkle.







"Home is now. Home is wherever I am; even when I was in the detention center, that was home. I am at home because God is inside me, always with me," Isaias says.



