

The realisation that I might be wrong about politics was the furthest thing from my mind as I lay half-asleep in the back seat of a car parked on a dirt path a kilometre from the Turkish coast. It was my third night camping out on a route well used by traffickers moving people by boat to the Greek Island of Lesbos. With Lauren Southern, my partner and co-producer George and our fixers, I was waiting for a group of migrants and traffickers we had been trailing on the ground in Turkey. Down the hill and across the dark 10km stretch of water, the lights of Lesbos twinkled in the distance, accompanied by the sound of crickets and waves breaking against the shore. For the past three years we had campaigned against mass immigration into Europe, believing those crossing its borders to be either criminals, terrorists or simply barbarians hoping to pillage Europe for its resources. With a firm conviction that this was the case, we had set out to make a film exposing this truth and our investigation had led us here, to this moment, to capture footage of migrants and those facilitating their entrance into Europe.

If my belief in what I thought I knew hadn't been so strong, I wouldn't have taken the risks we did. Journalism is not something taken lightly in Turkey, the country with the worst track record for jailing journalists. As independent filmmakers we obviously didn't have the proper credentials and had the Jandarma, the Turkish police, found us, we would have faced years in prison. But, I thought, *this is worth it*. I had a sense of being part of some grass roots movement, the same movement that saw Trump elected or made Brexit a reality. I thought I was part of the pushback.

At around 4am we still hadn't found the group we were looking for, so dismayed and exhausted we prepared to call it a night. As our driver turned the keys in the ignition the engine started and our headlights lit up, flooding the track ahead of us. 'Holy Shit...' I heard Lauren mutter next to me. As if out of nowhere the group we had been searching for for days appeared right before us, not twenty metres away. Confusion ensued and the misapprehension that we could just show up and talk to a group of fighting-age men about why they wanted to come to Europe quickly dissipated.

There were men in the group of course, but of the hundred or more people we were now walking alongside, most were elderly, or women, or children. My heart broke instantly. There were young men carrying babies on their shoulders and frail old women with their only remaining possessions inelegantly stuffed into black bin liners. One of them, who must have been in at least her seventies tripped and fell as I tried my best to light the path with the torch from my phone.

On the way to the shore, trekking through an olive grove that veered sharply downhill, we came upon a small wire fence with a small drop on the other side. It was a surreal moment as we all pitched in to help the women and children clamber over it, our hired close protection guy even lifting a small baby out of its mothers arms so she could cross the fence.

As we reached the shore we waited with the group, talking to many of them, some on camera others not. Suddenly the black and white worldview we had clung to so passionately became obsolete and everything suddenly seemed so much more grey. Some of them were fleeing war, some of them persecution, others were simply looking for better economic opportunities. Some of the group told us they had picked certain countries they were hoping to reach while others, mainly the women and the elderly among the group told us they just wanted to reach Europe for the safety they had heard it could offer them.

As we waited by the shore, some of the young men became hostile. The boat hadn't shown up and it seemed the traffickers were waiting for us to leave before they would take these people away from here. I felt guilty, guilty for misunderstanding these people in the first place and now guilty for potentially standing between them and their chance to get away from all they were running from. We moved off from the shore, hiding nearby in another olive grove while we planned a route back up the hill to the car. We watched for a few minutes in silence, contemplating the silhouettes we could still just about make out on the shoreline.

The sun was rising as we reached the car and we huddled to debrief after the night's events. My voice cracking slightly, I blurted out "I hope they made it". Lauren and George nodded in agreement, "I was kind of rooting for them" she said. As we drove away I glanced over at the 10km stretch of sea between Turkey and Lesvos wondering how I could have been so wrong, and how on earth I could have gotten to this point.

Three years ago the thought of being professionally involved in politics would have been something I found laughable. I was twenty one and working in a good PR job in Belgravia with a flat down the road in London's desirable Chelsea. My life consisted of parties, constant dinners and PR campaigns featured in TIME magazine, the New Yorker and the Evening Standard. Politics was no more than a passing interest, something to debate after too many glasses of wine at a dinner with friends.

I suppose I had always read the papers like anyone else would, and I would occasionally watch alternative media shows like the Young Turks, but as the 2016 US election and Brexit began to dominate the news so too did politics begin to enter every day life for people like me. Those around me, business owners, property investors, clients all put forward arguments for Brexit being a good thing for the UK while the media seemed to denounce it. Fuelled by a sense of the people around me being disparaged by the media I began to look for answers elsewhere.

I went online and found Rebel Media, the Canadian conservative Youtube channel that claimed to be telling 'the other side of the story', I found Gavin McInnes the co-founder of Vice who had since become a Fox News contributor. I found myself listening to two hour podcasts by Stefan Molyneux entitled 'the truth about...' which covered various topics in detail, often refuting conventional narratives, or Dave Rubin who abandoned left-wing politics to give radically friendly interviews to conservatives. I would watch and listen to these commentators while I got dressed in the morning, on my lunch breaks or while walking home from work. More and more their arguments seemed compelling, structured and they seemed to provide evidence for the points they were making. The gender wage gap is a myth, they claimed, so too was the idea that Republicans were the party of racism. They talked about how the fear of upsetting the muslim community was what allowed grooming gangs in places like Rotherham to go unchallenged, or how changing demographics warned that soon Europe's native white population would soon be replaced with people from other, non-Western cultures.

I soon began to find myself parroting these talking points. They made arguments that felt convincing and I began to believe that I had been lied to, that this was my 'red pill' moment; a reference to a scene in the Matrix where Neo is offered a red pill to reveal the world as it truly is. I saw countless videos of feminists getting 'wrecked' by conservatives with faster, sharper arguments, I saw right wing media personalities catching out opponents in street debates about Trump or his comments about Mexicans. There was such an energy to all of this it felt impossible not to be swept up by it. I watched the hysterical reaction when Trump was elected and couldn't believe the sheer stupidity of those protesting him, who didn't have all the knowledge I had recently acquired.

When I heard there was going to be a 'Women's March' in London on the day of Trump's inauguration I felt compelled to be there. Suddenly all of this stuff wasn't just taking place in America or online - it was going to be right on my doorstep, it was a chance to get involved and be a part of the resistance. So I grabbed my camera and dragged my boyfriend George along to Trafalgar Square. What we found was a feast for the senses, everything we had been promised by these videos from the American 'new-right'. There were topless women with inane slogans scrawled on placards, there were blue haired feminists shrieking about Trump while others had adorned the 'pussy hats' now synonymous with the Women's March in America. So we set about asking questions, and quickly turning their answers back around against them to make them appear foolish. We cut it up into a three minute video and put it online. Within hours the video had garnered more than three million views on Facebook and over a million on Youtube. Suddenly I was inundated with emails offering gratitude, support and jobs. Rebel Media hired me to make videos and I did the same thing many times, often making videos offering 'commentary' on current affairs where I would

repeat the same talking points I had learned from the people who were now my colleagues and peers.

Before long I was stood on the Victoria Embankment in London, just yards away from the spot Khalid Masood plowed into pedestrians with a 4x4 before killing a police officer inside the gates of the Houses of Parliament. I was there with Tommy Robinson to report on the attack as we had been filming for Rebel Media in my Chelsea flat when the attack happened. He got angry and gave a blistering tirade against the UK's tolerance for Islam and I got riled up and joined in, blaming the left and cowardly reporters for the attack on innocent people. For a long time that was my proudest moment, across social media the video received over 30 million views, more than BBC, Sky News and all the other mainstream news outlets' coverage combined. Only now do I look back and cringe.

But that is the point I am trying to make. It's a slippery slope into a dark and surprisingly isolating echo chamber. I always thought of myself as a reasonable person, and I often wonder how a reasonable person could end up believing the things I did. Not all at once that's for sure. It starts with a sense of mistrust in the media, you see your more reasonable beliefs being denigrated and the online right play into that. You read statistics that show that in the most gender equal country in the world women are overwhelmingly choosing to be homemakers and mothers, you discover that much of the wage gap doesn't account for things like pregnancy and the scarcity of women choosing STEM. It all seems reasonable, but the next video assures you that these are not misconceptions but *lies*, lies intentionally told to you to beat men down or to make you more compliant. It's a rabbit hole and it's scary and difficult to admit but before you know it not only are you listening to ethnonationalist content but it's sounding *reasonable*.

For so long I believed the right-wing line that the driver of the car that ran down and killed Heather Heyer in Charlottesville in 2017 was only speeding because his car was attacked. It was only when I watched a straight down the middle documentary about the event that I even realised it was a genuine Neo-Nazi gathering. But this is how it works, bit by bit you go deeper into the rabbit hole and you become isolated in an echo chamber and your whole worldview becomes utterly warped.

I was someone who was vulnerable to radicalisation. But when I displayed what I would not recognise as signs of going down that road, I was shunned and made fun of, I lost friends and found that *real* people, those around me, wouldn't engage with the things I was talking about. So your social life begins to take place online, and it centres around the politics because all of these people are in the same position. So you become isolated, and when there's a whole community of people online welcoming you with open arms it's easy to feel like you have found your people.

Fortunately as I have travelled the world and spent time outside of Europe and America my eyes have begun to open. It has been a long process and not an easy one; I would argue having your entire worldview disintegrate is perhaps one of the most stressful things you can do and I imagine this is the reason so many people, regardless of political leaning, shy away from it. Meeting real refugees in Turkey and in many of the other countries I filmed in has been a crucial moment in understanding all of this, but now, being a little more removed from it I have to say it feels like coming up for air. It's like feeling the rush of cold air hit your lungs after too long underwater, it's painful but it feels good.