

Allah's Garden:

A True Story of a Forgotten War
in the Sahara Desert of Morocco

The agony of Azeddine, a Moroccan prisoner of war in the camps run by Polisario, is a sad reminder of the cost of war in Western Sahara paid by men, women and children far removed from the centers of power in Rabat, Algiers, Washington DC and European capitals. Although Morocco enjoys a stable reputation in the West, the unresolved Western Sahara dispute calls for rapid intervention if not on political or ideological grounds, then on humanitarian. Thomas Hollowell's powerful narrative illustrates this urgency, and it is an excellent account of a humanitarian disaster that started more than 35 years ago.

- James N. Sater, author of *Morocco: Challenges to Tradition and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

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A True Story of a Forgotten War
in the Sahara Desert of Morocco

Thomas Hollowell

Tales Press
Urbana, Illinois USA

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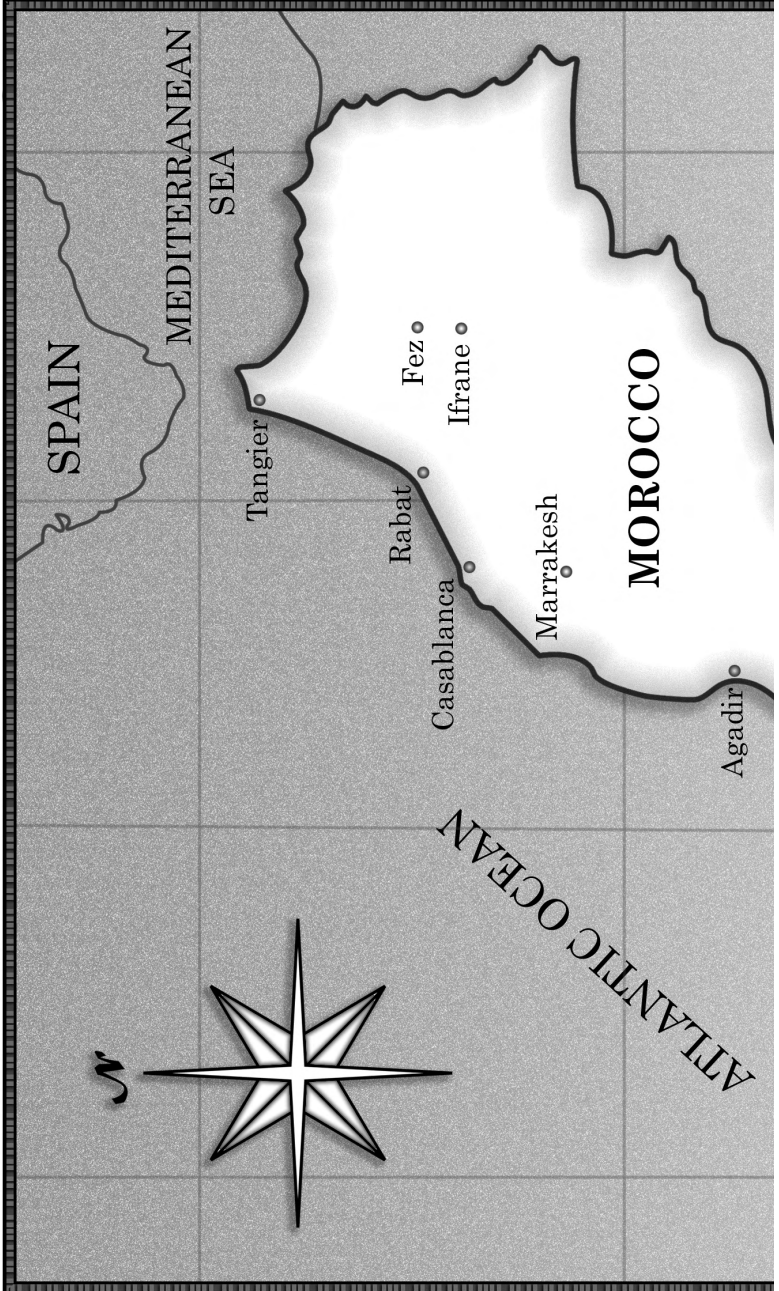
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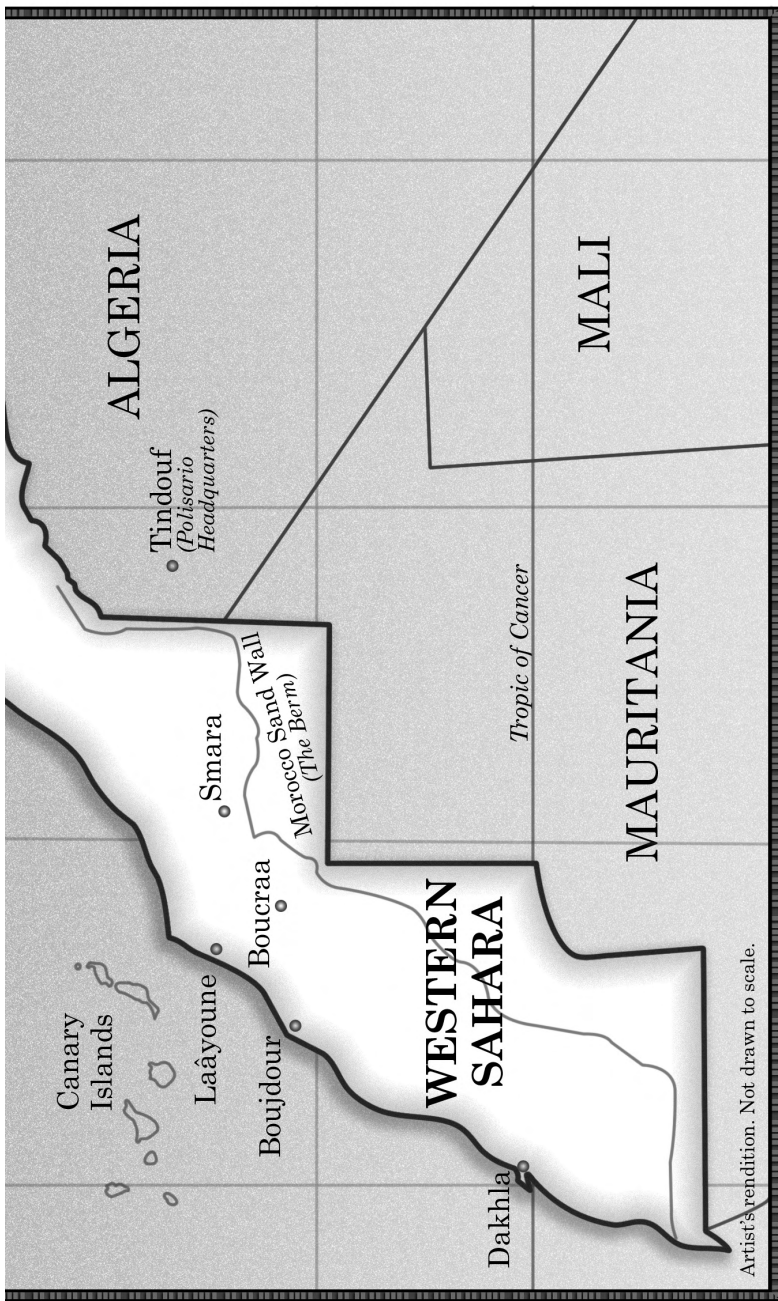
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Author's Note

This narrative took me much farther into Morocco than I'd agreed upon when I joined the volunteer organization called the Peace Corps. It took me all over Morocco, through its culture, language, history, and deep into the Saharan sands. I have learned that this desert will never yield itself. It's simply too vast, too intricate, and too deep.

All of the happenings in this tale are based on true events. Writing the book in narrative form and using Azeddine's plight as the backdrop opened up the flexibility and essential literary tools needed to bring this recounting to life. A few characters presented are fictive personages personifying and embodying a collective group, theme, or event. Creative inferences were used to shape characters, portray events, and frame conversations. The story is based on months of taped interviews with the protagonist, my time with and without the Peace Corps in Morocco, and various political, social, and individual occurrences. Research was also conducted through on-the-ground fieldwork and the reading of various articles, exposés, newspapers, and other books, such as the superbly documented prisoner's memoir *L'Horreur* by Moroccan author Abdellah Lamani. Certain scenes are inspired by and indebted to these portrayals.





Timeline of Events Related to Western Sahara:

- 1884-1975 Spain colonizes and controls the Spanish Sahara (modern-day Western Sahara). They divide it into the Saquia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro. The Saharawis of the interior region rebel often. Later, the land is found rich in minerals, including oil, iron, manganese, and phosphate.
- October 1963 Morocco and Algeria battle in a three-week war dubbed the “Sand War” around the Tindouf (current Polisario Headquarters) area of Algeria. The conflict arose due to ambiguous French demarcations, previously calling areas of the Sahara uninhabitable with “superfluous” borders.
- 10 May 1973 Official formation of the Polisario. The organization’s goal was to rid the Spanish Sahara (Western Sahara) of Spanish occupation.
- 20 May 1973 El Khanga Attack: The Polisario makes its first armed guerilla raid against the Spanish occupiers.
- 16 October 1975 International Court of Justice rules that Morocco and Mauritania do not have a right to claim territorial sovereignty over Western Sahara.

- January 1975 Spain prepares itself to depart the Spanish Sahara, leaving the land now fully titled the “Western Sahara” to its fate.
- 6-9 November 1975 Green March takes place. Moroccan citizens peacefully enter Western Sahara.
- 14 November 1975 The Madrid Accords treaty is signed between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania to fully end Spain’s occupation of Western Sahara. Morocco is entitled to the northern two-thirds, while Mauritania keeps with the bottom one-third. Spain is allowed to keep certain profits of the Bu Craa phosphate enterprise.
- 27 February 1976 Declaration and formation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).
- February 1976 The massive Battle of Amgala, an oasis in Western Sahara, takes place and is the first time Algerian Forces directly back the Polisario against Morocco’s Royal Armed Forces (FAR). Amgala becomes the scene for future skirmishes.
- 24 August 1979 Polisario attack Lebourate, where the young Dr. Azeddine Benmansour is captured. Progressing, the Polisario fight into Smara and take over Mahbes, among other key locations.

- 8 August 1979 Mauritania drops claims to Western Sahara.
- 1980-1987 Construction on the Moroccan Sand Wall (Berm) takes place. By its completion, it is 1,678 miles (2,700 km) in length, about half the size of the Great Wall of China.
- Early 1984 The Red Cross (Croix Rouge) is allowed to enter the camps to attend to a limited number of prisoners. The Polisario subsequently release ten prisoners.
- 25 May 1987 One hundred and fifty Moroccan POWs in Polisario camps are exchanged for 102 Algerian POWs held by Morocco from the battle of Amgala.
- November 1989 The Polisario releases 200 prisoners who wait another six years for their repatriation back into Morocco; King Hassan II insisted on all Moroccan POWs being released at the same time. Several of these in waiting passed away.
- 26 August 1991 The last major battle between the Royal Armed Forces (FAR) and the Polisario occurs.
- 6 September 1991 Ceasefire declared over Western Sahara. The UN's MINURSO oversees delegations with offices set

up in Layounne. The result is a political stalemate that continues today.

- December 1991 Algerian Civil War begins. This results in less focus on and funding of the Polisario from Algeria.
- 23 July 1999 Hassan II passes away. His son and heir, Mohammed VI, becomes king. He improves diplomatic ties and relations within the kingdom, and with Algeria and the world.
- 1 September 2003 Azeddine and others are released and flown to Agadir, Morocco. Certain groups are freed before this. Following their liberation, POWs are reunited with their respective families.

to Azeddine and pure human courage

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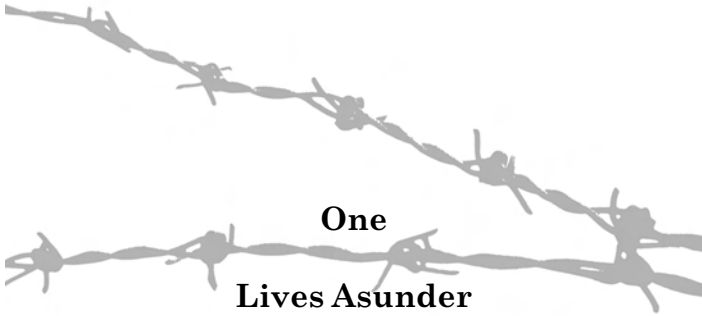
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Part One: Echoes of Death

As outlined by the World Health Organization, all prisoners we have seen are suffering physical and/or emotional maladies. For this reason, all need to be immediately treated.... The actual health conditions of the prisoners cannot be fully analyzed as many of the population have been in the camps of upwards near twenty-five years.... The systematic emotional and physical abuse over these many years has affected everyone and cannot be calculated on any understood scale. The forced labor and abuse without protection, plus the increased risk of injury due to work has left many prisoners handicapped or dead.... All the conditions here give any doctor visiting under the International Red Cross an impression that this place is a concentration camp. These prisoners, nonetheless, are suffering against everything outlined in the Geneva Conventions [1949].... The prisoners eat neither fruits nor vegetables. Outside aid has helped the situation some. Our visits were done with the help and precious time and information provided by Doctor [Azeddine] Benmansour (EHT 00612) and four other nurses.

- Confidentially obtained medical records from the International Red Cross (IRC): Medical report of Moroccans detained by the Polisario Front. April 2000 in Tindouf, Algeria & IRC Internal Medical Report: 12/10/1998 to Florence Sechaud, IRC Tunisia.



24 August 1979 Sahara Desert, Morocco

“...Mohammed Rasulullah!” Azeddine chanted as the eastern hills reverberated the bombs blasting the crumbling kasbah walls. The sky ignited the horizon with shades of pink and tinges of orange, casting an amber hue over the distant sand dunes and the closer, rock-strewn terrain. “Allah Akbar. Estaghfer Allah!” The death mantra crept uncontrollably to his lips, replacing the morning’s usual salat prayer.

An explosive sound shook the walls. The metal plates inside the windows clanked against the bars. Sand, dirt, and rubble blew underneath the door, which sat unevenly on rusted hinges. Azeddine bit down on his tongue. Sand continued to wisp inward.

As he ran toward the wooden doors of the infirmary, Azeddine heard Ahmed scream. Rushing in, he bent over, breathless. The Moroccan fountain in the middle of the waiting area wasn’t flowing. No soldiers had

arrived yet. Most were a part of the enfilade that was to barricade the town—to secure where the outer wall had failed.

Two nurses, however, worked hastily under one lit bulb that reflected off the pasty blue walls back in the “salle d’hospitalisation,” located on the other side of the corridor. The place was normally organized despite being a bit run-down, but now it was a disaster. Chairs were turned over and papers lay scattered all over the tile floor. The small dental office door was closed. No nurses were in the triage room or in the nurses’ station.

Azeddine quickly headed to the back ward, still catching his breath. Working to unpack gauze and roll the beds in a straight line against the back wall, he didn’t feel like a professional doctor, but an ill-prepared pupil who was facing fate head-on.

Dr. Ahmed and Head Nurse Omar burst through the door. Ahmed was saying something in a mix of Arabic and French about getting the place secure. “Put the defense covers over the windows!” Ahmed had survived an attack some two weeks prior, which was all Azeddine knew. Ahmed’s eyes still had dark circles beneath them and he squinted as if he were forcing his eyes open to face the world. Since so much was left unsaid, Azeddine never overcame his uneasiness when he was around the sturdy man. He only knew that Ahmed had been in this small, dusty village when the attack occurred, somewhere on the edge of what felt like the end of the world.

The doors flew open, and two soldiers carried in an injured Moroccan cadet.

The young trainee bellowed uncontrollably,

“ALLAH!” His right leg looked like it had been torn off at the knee. Embedded with layers of ground-up skin, it was ripped apart. Bright blood spurted out onto the floor.

As if he'd been planning for this day repeatedly in his mind, Ahmed knew exactly what to do. Was it the bloodshed he'd already lived through? Was he ready this time to go down fighting?

The two soldiers ran out as soon as they laid their injured comrade on a gurney.

Azeddine could see them from the pharmacy room. The soldier's leg had been horribly severed. Nurse Omar grabbed a tourniquet and wrapped it tightly around the bleeding stump. He removed the upper pant and tried to soak up the blood with a sponge, then grabbed a dirty towel.

Two more Moroccan men—one dressed in a captain's uniform, the other a chauffeur's—rushed in. The driver slammed the door behind them as they approached.

Azeddine swallowed hard and forced himself to walk away from his patients toward them. His eyes dropped to the captain's right arm. It dangled unnaturally from the elbow. He knew it was broken, although no bones were exposed.

Ahmed was busy with the cadet. Azeddine wasn't quite sure how to handle the situation. He wanted to look at the captain's arm but couldn't ask him to remove his shirt. The officer was a higher rank and much older; even in an emergency, he'd have to adhere to societal norms. Instead, he asked the captain to remove his jacket, and then slowly tore off the sleeve.

He was trying to hold back his shaking hands as he put the captain's arm in a sling, but he still heard the piercing wails of the young soldier behind him.

The captain looked as if he were trying to examine the old infirmary, then he turned, looked up at Azeddine, and asserted quietly yet sternly that he was leaving. He told Azeddine and the rest they should do the same. The withdrawal route had already been prepared, and they would die if they didn't admit defeat.

"Retreat. Live!" is all that Azeddine heard as the captain headed out.

Azeddine looked over at the injured soldier, then back to the retreating captain. Azeddine followed the commander to the infirmary doors, trying to keep his voice down as he explained about all the patients flooding in, how there was nowhere else for them to go, and how they couldn't simply abandon them there.

The captain pointed at the gurneys. "Luck will only take you so far!" he told Azeddine in Moroccan Arabic, known as Darija. The captain's cheeks drooped and looked heavily flushed. His throaty voice emitted a "Layownkoom." God help you.

Ambulances arrived bringing in more injured soldiers and civilians. Men with shrapnel and bullet wounds lay in agony. One had a swollen eye. The encrusted blood looked like a dried-up waterfall caked on his cheek. Azeddine had nothing to clean it with.

A morphine drip and a bag of blood trickled into the soldier missing his leg. The rough tourniquet held back the dam of blood, but like a leaky faucet, small droplets still dripped onto the floor. The tinge of blue on the soldier's hand indicated it might be too late; he'd

already lost so much blood. Azeddine raised his eyes up to the soldier's. A jolt shot through Azeddine as he remembered this smiling, young soldier playing ball with a Berber boy outside the infirmary just days ago. The soldier lying in front of him wasn't even a man yet. Maybe he would never be. It couldn't be his time.

On the next gurney lay a soldier who'd been shot in the shoulder. The wound was high enough that nothing vital was damaged. His eyes were closed. He wheezed in and out. Azeddine whispered a prayer and pulled the sheet up to the man's chest as he looked at the wound, preparing for the quick removal of the shrapnel.

The beds were filled. The captain had fled. Why couldn't Azeddine and the others do the same? He watched as many struggled to breathe. Ahmed looked from across the room as if trying to say something, but was at a loss for words.

Many of the patients were still alive. "Allah, shnoo radi ndirou?" Azeddine mumbled. Allah, what are we going to do? He sat for a moment. It was all he could do to keep himself together. He didn't have his prayer beads, a gift from his mother to remember Allah's 99 sacred titles. Ahmed looked up again at Azeddine. Only when Azeddine looked down at his open, shaking hands did he truly realize his own limitations. There would be no miracles.



Two
Cultural Mayhem

1999 to spring 2002

TWO MOROCCAN students at Wabash College in Indiana, a university of 800 men, talked one evening at dinner to me and my identical twin brother, Terry, about the people and Mediterranean vista near Tangier, Morocco. They told us stories about endless summers on pristine beaches, the eerie blue water where the Atlantic and Mediterranean meet, and the Cave of Hercules. Over the span of a week, we met a few times over dinner, discussing their home country.

The famed artist, Henri Matisse, had frequented Tangier with religious regularity searching for the inspiring colors described by Delacroix. The city had a growing eccentric appeal, especially by the time Paul Bowles and William S. Burroughs set foot on its sandy terrain. This northern city, just a stone's throw south of Spain, had become an international zone—a new epicenter of European and American debauchery. Tangier

became a new figurative and literary playground. It was an *Interzone* full of opportunity for expression and indulgence.

In their dorm room, the Moroccan students had a replica of an ancient, cream-colored travel poster of Tangier. The center of the scene merged to the forefront where a man of genteel heritage sipped a cup of tea. In the background, the walled city spread out into the horizon; mosques towered over the square houses. The poster invited all from far and wide to experience the newfound sovereignty.

Tangier prospered in the 1920s and 1930s. Common was the smuggling of drugs and contraband. International spy networks used Tangier as a haven, if not as a place to convene. The rich used it for offshore banking. Once World War II hit, Spain decided to watch over the newly formed conurbation, perhaps hoping that one day they could contend the territory. Morocco, however, reclaimed the territory in the mid-1950s. The city lost much of what gave it a daring, secretive, avant-garde zest.

My brother discovered a tattered *Lonely Planet Morocco* guidebook in the International Studies building on campus. He confirmed that Morocco was geographically similar to California. It had mountains and thousands of miles of coastline, not to mention a sizable chunk of desert.

On a foldout map displaying Morocco in its entirety, a small dotted line separated the upper half of Morocco from what appeared to be its lower half. After some supplementary research, we learned that under this dotted line, this perplexing underbelly of Morocco was

once called the Spanish Sahara.

Labeled now as Western Sahara, an expansive history of the region was left untold. Little did I realize, as I do now, how its sands engulfed like quicksand those who trod daringly close.

Coincidentally, as Terry and I were researching this North African country, a Travel Channel special dedicated to Morocco aired. One line in the entire thirty-minute special described it best in saying that the Maghreb, the land of the setting sun, had a brilliant radiance that could only be illustrated as tangerine-orange.

According to the show, the beaches along Morocco's Atlantic coast were superb, while the strangest, most magical beach was Essaouira. The tangerine-orange and the beaches of Essaouira, known in Arabic as "Sweara" (or picture) in reference to its alluring vistas, filled our minds with wanderlust for quite some time.

After college, Terry and I set off to Costa Rica for our very first adventure abroad. After securing a "paid" volunteer stint—where we paid an organization to volunteer—we left for three months, living in the mountains and getting in the way of park rangers in Chirripó National Park. We lived with host families, practiced Spanish, skinny dipped with travelers in the town's famed hot spring, and wagered which of our nine host sisters would get pregnant, again.

Upon our return to the USA, I started reading more about North Africa, which heightened my desire to visit Morocco. Until I could get there, I began teaching at a center for at-risk youth. Terry started work on his Master's Degree.

To friends and family back home, Morocco might as well be the capital of Antarctica. Hoosiers, as Indiana locals are referred to, are proud to be the world's leading popcorn producer and are a warm-hearted bunch. But many regions lean to the conservative and are not overly adept with the gift of geographical gab. With many residents, mentioning a far-flung locale gets you a side-ways, doggish glance.

In Indianapolis, I met with a well-groomed representative from the Peace Corps who was holding a meeting with potential volunteers. In a white shirt, blue tie, and a nametag written with marker that read "Jeremy," the recruiter asked me several questions. "What would you miss if you left the country for two years? Do you have any health concerns?" And finally, "If you are involved in a relationship, how would you and your partner handle the separation?"

I wasn't sure how to answer some of the questions, but I attempted to do so as smoothly as possible. I had never left the country for that long before, so how would I know? I had had some knee problems in the past. And, I had been involved in a serious relationship that was on the brink of implosion. *How to answer? How not to set off any red flags?*

Excited at the possibilities, I'd perhaps have an opportunity to explore the mysteries of Africa. The sign-up form indicated to circle which region of the world I would be interested in serving. While South America, Africa, or the Pacific Islands were options, I didn't circle anything, but wrote quickly what looked like MARCO. The representative asked me who "Marco" was.

“Morocco,” I clarified.

“We can’t guarantee anything. If you are invited somewhere else, it is because you match a need elsewhere.”

“What if I don’t accept an invitation to serve in another country?”

“That would be looked down upon—if you don’t have a valid excuse.”

The application process was a game of patience and perseverance. While awaiting a response, I began reading more about the Peace Corps. A book entitled *So, You Want to Join the Peace Corps* laid down the realities of the organization. It also talked about the practicalities of living abroad. How will I learn the language? What should I expect from the Peace Corps organization itself? Should I have a maid? *A maid!*

Plus, I had more tasks to complete for Washington D.C., a Big-Brother entity who carefully assessed who was fit for what type of service. Included in the process, I was to turn in all past medical records and have a dental checkup.

The dental examination involved a machine that circumnavigated my jaw, shooting a constant ray of radiation through my skull. As the dentist stood behind his protective lead panel, he assured me that an hour of direct exposure to the sun gave a greater concentration than this machine. He mentioned afterwards that I should not have an x-ray for another three months. The incongruity of this fact with his earlier nonchalant statement didn’t add up. It didn’t matter. I knew it would all be worth it. Following the exam, the dentist said I would have to have my four wisdom teeth pulled

out. I thought to myself: *This better be worth it.*

Dental surgery came the following week. Surgery left my face bloated up like a small woodland creature, cheeks stuffed and puffed, preparing for winter. All that was left of my mouth was a small slit from which I could slurp milkshakes, applesauce, and pureed food abhorred by babies and nursing home tenants the world over.

The fear of scaring the neighborhood kids kept me indoors. Using my tongue to properly pronounce the consonants, I looked in the mirror and said out loud with a slight lisp, “It better be worth it.”

Months later as the fall leaves fell to the ground, a postal delivery truck dropped off a thick Fed-Ex envelope. My brother stood beside me as I sat down on the stairs and ripped open the envelope. Pulling out the first piece of paper, the insignia at the top revealed a document from the Peace Corps.

“Funny the government doesn’t use the USPS.”

“Read the letter!” Terry urged.

My heart raced as my eyes zigzagged across the page until I reached the bottom: “...invited to serve in Morocco with the Peace Corps,” was all I needed to read. I was elated. Terry was thrilled, but slightly forlorn.

“What do I do now?”

“Run inside and tell Mom!”

Peace Corps Training (called PCT—as government agencies are wont to do by applying their *official* acronyms) came and went in a flash. Terry and I gripped each other as I tossed my daypack onto the airport

security machine's x-ray belt. My mother had tears in her eyes. Peering back at their stares and half-waves, I walked to the flight that would take me to Philadelphia, followed by a bus trip to New York City, and a direct flight to Morocco.

After crossing the Atlantic in the longest flight I'd until then been on, we arrived in a metropolitan city of Morocco recognizable to most Americans because of Humphrey Bogart's romantic portrayal in the early 1940s film of the same name, *Casablanca*.

A portly, smiling Peace Corps representative gave us brown bags filled with fruit and nuts. As we rode along together in white mini-vans, I saw rickety houses with tin roofs, black plastic bags waving in the breeze, and decrepit and uncovered wells lining the highway.

After ten days of receiving vaccinations, practicing newly learned Arabic phrases, and living with host families in the colonial-looking capital city of Rabat, we headed south to Ouarzazate, where we would have language training for three months. Darija and Berber with a dash of French became our focus. Mud rooms. Homestays. Meat stews, called tagines. Bread. Olive oil. Volunteers in West Africa were jealous that those serving in Morocco had so many amenities. We were dubbed the "Posh Corps."

During training, loneliness was the common denominator amongst volunteers. I wasn't able to call home often; however, I kept busy by flirting with one of the Peace Corps' official Moroccan language instructors named Sanae, an intriguing girl with captivating eyes.

We knew and agreed that we'd only be able to show

our affections once my training had ended. To do so before becoming an official volunteer would mean my removal from the program. On the last day of training, I stood before the governor of Ouarzazate and the Ambassador to the United States in Morocco with my hand raised and, thereafter, became a full-fledged volunteer of the United States Peace Corps. It was a two-year commitment to this governmental organization established by John F. Kennedy in 1961, whose goals were laid out and still continue to this day: to help those in resource-poor nations, promote world peace, and exchange cultural understanding with people of developing nations.

The next morning, I hopped on a bus to Marrakesh. I longed for some freedom after three months of intensive training and extended homestays with village families.

At the Menara Gardens, a square pool of murky green water, two kilometers away from the famous Djema el Fna Square, I met Sanae. We sat next to the pavilion where, if not for the continual smoggy haze of the city, we'd have a clear view of the High Atlas Mountains in the background. We kissed each other lightly. The area attracted locals and tourists who wanted to enjoy the cool environs while strolling around the surrounding orchards and olive groves.

"Is this your wife?" two Moroccan men asked me in English as they approached closely.

"Why does it matter to you? Seer!" Go away!

"They are patrolmen," Sanae said to me as she let go of my arm. "They are holding to Islamic Law."

"You both. Come with us."

“You’ve got to be joking!”

“You are fraternizing,” one with a nice leather jacket said nonchalantly. “This is illegal.”

They believed Sanae to be one of Marrakesh’s numerous “entertainment specialists.” They escorted us to a Renault van with a faded red insignia reading “Sécurité National.” Rusty wire grates over the windows, along with cracked top-mounted red and green lights meant that government funding didn’t filter down to the civil forces. These undercover police did everything to convince us (save physical force) to get into the back of the van.

“We are going to check your hymen!” they ranted in Arabic to Sanae once they slammed the van doors shut. They said that it was their duty to ensure she was still a virgin. “All we need is a medical certificate.”

In desperation, Sanae said, “Give them money. They will take it!”

I offered them the equivalent of 80 dollars to let us out of the van, probably more than half a month’s salary.

“Put your money away! Do you want more trouble?”

They drove to a health center, still threatening to check her virginity.

“Check mine too. I’m a virgin too! Take us back to the center of town. You are not serious!” I was desperate and furious.

At the medical facility, we didn’t go inside, but stayed in the parking area. Sanae and I sat and stared at each other, as if we were playing a game of who could stare the longest. Our sudden disinterest got the driver even more heated.

“We want the truth,” the driver said in English. We didn’t say anything and simply sat in the back of the van. The driver shrugged and started the van, as if he wanted to prove his power over us even more.

At a decrepit police station with empty, yellow walls somewhere far from the center of Marrakesh, we sat for hours on a bench behind bars that one might picture in an old John Wayne movie. We signed some sort of papers that, according to the officers, would mean we could leave.

“There will be more to sign,” said the plain-clothes cop.

The documents were written in Fus’ha, classical Arabic. By this point, our minds were fried; our eyes followed to the click-click of the typewriter from where we sat.

That same day, the police shipped us into court. In front of three judges, each wearing a black gown and perched high above on a fortified stage, Sanae and I were not allowed to talk.

Guilty, the judge motioned. We didn’t even get to speak in the five-minute hearing. “Return in three weeks... final sentencing.”

We were released without a real feeling of freedom. In a manic state of despair, I called the Peace Corps Director from the rooftop of the cheap hotel where I was staying. Next, she called the American ambassador—the one I stood before in Ouarzazate. The ambassador’s office called this or that office.

In the middle of all of this, it was recommended that I return to Rabat to clarify everything that had happened. During my time there, I was introduced

to a psychologist from Austria. He had a thick accent, smoked a pipe, and at first talked about his “beloved” city of Vienna. He sat in a leather chair in front of a window that overlooked the American Embassy, the flag flapping in the wind. I sat in an orange vinyl chair from the 1970s. He looked a bit like my deceased grandfather, which added to the dramatic effect of the situation. *Was I suffering trauma?*

The Austrian advised me to return home, to my twin brother. “Start life again,” he commenced. “Get a Master’s Degree. What you really need is to forget this traveling nonsense. The girl, she only wants papers to travel to America.”

It all felt too ridiculous, too surreal. I was speechless and one breath from voicing my true opinion. *Why don’t you go back to Vienna, you patronizing bastard?* I breathed slowly, got up, and walked out.

When the Foreign Minister of Morocco caught wind of what had happened in Marrakesh, he mentioned the incident to the King of Morocco, Mohammed VI, who at the time had happened to be visiting President George W. Bush in the United States.

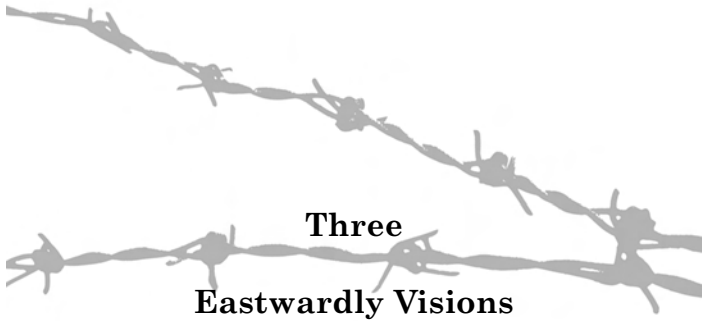
The charges were dropped. It was as if nothing had happened. Maybe George W. Bush had said something on my behalf. The Peace Corps office in Rabat told me to sign papers saying the whole incident was my fault, and “not due to a lack of cultural training.”

Later, I figured the Peace Corps wanted to prevent a lawsuit. I wanted to forget the whole mess. I signed. The next volunteer group arriving the following month would receive not only the regular lecture on how to use a condom that took place in every training session, but

also how not to “bisou,” or kiss, in public—especially in Marrakesh.

Soon after, the Peace Corps office sent me deep into the High Atlas Mountains south of Marrakesh. At least there, I would keep out of trouble.

As a kid, I had always wanted to be a superhero. Now, I had become an icon of misbehavior. Stories flooded the foreign community: this naive volunteer learned the hard way how not to act in an Islamic country.



Three
Eastwardly Visions

24 August 1979

BEYOND THE tightly latched infirmary doors, Azeddine stood; the world he knew would soon be gone forever. He realized that the false security the infirmary walls provided would come crashing down. A total of twelve patients, Head Nurse Omar, Dr. Ahmed, and himself remained in the infirmary. The other two nurses had fled to the commanders' quarters in hopes of escaping with someone else bold enough to leave. Azeddine wondered if they'd made it.

The ensuing battle blended vivid colors in Azeddine's mind. Another explosive burst, which seemed just a few feet outside the walls, rang deep inside his ears. Gunshots echoed in the distant hills. Only war produced such a refrain that beat to the rhythm of distress. As blood heavily flowed and clotted within the infirmary's walls, he felt the bulging aneurysm was about to explode. Images of his own hands covered in

thick blood shot through his head.

Smoke began to saturate the clinic. The stench of burnt rubber filled the corridor. Guns fired. The doors flew open.

“Get down! Hide!” Ahmed looked around the room, covered his head, bent low, and ran into the adjacent room. Nurse Omar followed him. Azeddine didn’t know where to run.

He ran toward the beds he had aligned earlier. He thought about pushing them into the corridor, but it was the only way in or out of the infirmary. He had nowhere to hide the patients. Azeddine had to react. *I can’t let them die!* He found a small gurney folded up against a far wall. If he had he seen it earlier, he would have used it. He decided to crouch down behind it for cover.

The smoke became thicker. If he hunkered down, he’d not only be able to hide but also to breathe a little easier below the smoke.

He saw a patient gaze over at him. His shaking hands gripped his head as he bent lower. “Allah, Allah maana” Azeddine repeated. Allah is with us.

Pressed against the cloth, he could see out into the room. From his angle, he was well hidden and all the patients were within sight.

Three of the attackers entered the room, turned, and then left. From the SADR flags on their arms, he knew they were members of the Polisario, an Algerian-backed militant group. The strange-sounding Hassani tongue echoed through the waiting room.

Many claimed Tuareg lineage. Their ancestors had traded and controlled the trans-Saharan trade routes

through the Sahara Desert once upon a time. They had survived the Sahara for centuries. In the 1970s, countless fled from Western Sahara into Algeria as refugees, becoming rebels, gaining military know-how from Algerian leaders. Their mission: to rid Western Sahara of every outsider, including Moroccans, and to establish their own state.

Two of the men re-entered. They wore bright blue gondoras resembling flowing gowns of tissue paper the color of the Mediterranean Sea. Maybe they were the leaders of the group. Their gondoras allowed for the easy concealment and drawing of weapons, whether sword, knife, or gun. Indigo turbans encircled their heads.

Another soldier came into the room. He stared at the helpless patients as other members entered carrying Kalashnikovs; one had a pistol. The injured lying on the beds had no chance. They would become the prey of these scavengers.

“You didn’t die,” said one of the guerilla fighters in Darija so the patients would understand, “so we came to finish the job.” Two of them approached the patients. Azeddine watched from behind the folded gurney, biting down on the cloth covering the small mattress.

One of the Polisario soldiers put his gun up to the first patient’s temple. The patient’s eyes widened as his hands flew up in the air; a crimson stream poured out onto the white pillow.

The same killer shot each remaining patient the same way. Azeddine covered his ears and bit down harder. His chest felt like it was going to explode. The last patient in line kept convulsing after he’d been shot.

Blood spilled down his face, smearing his cracked lips. He began to gurgle his own blood. The patient grabbed his head, shrieking in agony.

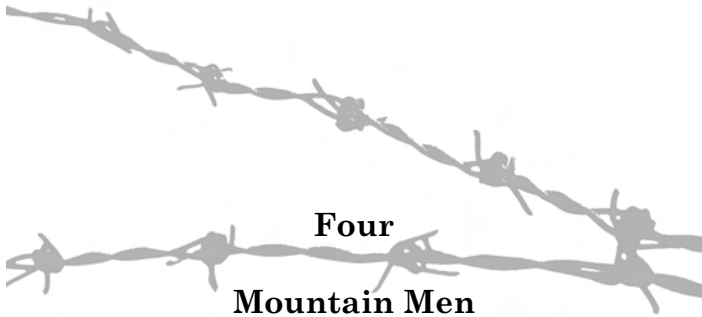
“This hamar won’t die. Finish him off!”

One of the soldiers pointed his Kalashnikov at the bleeding man.

Azeddine thought he heard the patient utter his name; fear stabbed him like jagged glass. He only had a few seconds until his discovery and imminent death. He uncovered his ears and heard the noise of guns and machinery outside. The earth trembled beneath him and the walls shook. The supply shelves and tables toppled to the ground.

Azeddine’s legs went numb. His mind wanted to purge everything he’d witnessed. Different Polisario soldiers came in and counted the bodies. They made sure each one was dead. Azeddine watched as they entered and checked the heartbeat of each jeefa, a corpse no longer containing its soul. The soldiers turned, laughed, and then departed.

Azeddine felt death’s dark soul encase his body. He roamed in its layer, hiding in the shadows. He spun in and out of reality, gripping his head, looking out into the room of lost souls. He lay beneath the surface of darkness. It pulled him in. He became part of its coagulate being, drowning in its thickness. Visions of his father whirled through his mind. He longed to be near him, to kneel beside him and pray eastward toward Mecca one last time before death captured his spirit. Such lucid, painful visions he had never known before that time.



Four
Mountain Men

Early summer 2002

IN THE mountains south of Marrakesh, Brahim sat on a bright-red, plastic rug with blue mosaic designs inside the mud hut. He would be a part of my new Moroccan host family during my stay. Before my arrival that day, like a Sherpa he carried a door up a winding mountain trail for three hours so that I would have a door to my room. He somehow made it clear to me in his Berber language, “I want your stay here to be comfortable.”

After all the commotion about my ordeal in Marrakesh, I wasn't ready. The same day I arrived, I felt like I was going to have a mental breakdown. Too much to handle, I re-packed my backpack and headed down the mountain trail lined with opuntia.

In a hotel that night, I dreamed of Essaouira. I would head there the next day. Sun. Wind. Escape. Freedom.

After I got off the rickety bus, a Moroccan family who said they had a room to rent immediately pinpointed

me. Essaouira was magical. However, relaxing on pristine beaches was not what I had come to Morocco to do. It was just another drop in the sea of endless days that became my short time of service in Morocco.

Returning to the High Atlas after a few weeks, I decided I would give my stay in the mountains with Brahim another fresh start. He had put a new window in my room with screening to keep bugs out. We bought a mattress together at the weekly, open-air market, called the souk. He wanted to carry that up, too, on his head, but we opted for the big Mitsubishi dump truck that the villagers piled into each market day.

Mostly the female villagers carried potatoes and onions in bright purple or dark black meeka, plastic bags. One man ahead of us smiled at Brahim and waved our way as the truck bounced up and down. He had one gold molar on the left side, and small sharp black points for front teeth.

The village had mud-brick homes with flat roofs. Plastic stuck out of the ends of each corner, which revealed how they kept rain from seeping through and gravel was thrown on top to keep the plastic from flying away. The huts sat side by side and had no glass in the windows, only wooden or tin shutters.

Off in the distance were perfectly flat circles of dirt surrounding a singular wooden pole. After much pointing and gesturing, I learned that these spots are where mules, donkeys, or the rare horse husked wheat, barley, and oats from their chaffs each season. Tied to the center pole, the animals worked all day long with a Berber farmer alongside, urging them with whistles,

chants, and clicks of the tongue.

Beyond this and some harvesting of walnuts, cherries, and apples at various intervals throughout the year, copious troupes of these mountain men hung out much of the day. Bent-over elderly ladies, their daughters and granddaughters walked by with piles of winter wheat tied on their backs for their animals. The men squawked at the women for tea “and don’t forget the sheeba!”—a local absinth. Following, the men might throw a rock or two at the chickens. Work or the lack thereof didn’t seem to bother the men all that much.

On the surface, women and men lived completely separate lives. While the Berbers are known for their kindness and were neighborly to any passerby, the weight of the Berber’s existence sits literally on the women’s backs and shoulders. From childrearing to preparing meals to pasturing the animals, the women spend sunrise to sunset and beyond completing the day’s chores.

A good portion of my (and the women’s) morning was spent filling sought-after plastic bottles, old oil containers, or used gas cans with potable water from a spring. The source near my house flowed out of a gutter contraption made of sticks and thick green leaves.

Hygiene in the Western sense wasn’t easy to maintain. Bathroom practices were a whole other game. I’d have to head to an outer shed where baby goats bleated for attention. While there was no toilet, per se, I’d squat and aim into a hole of eight inches in diameter. The stuff landed into a lower level where a cow or two were kept.

Learning to understand Tashelheit, or the local

Berber dialect, wasn't difficult. I knew I had a good grasp of the language when I could finally understand what Brahim had been trying to explain to me slowly for months. He wanted to let me know how he had begotten eight children; his message was to the effect:

“Mountain men are strong. We aren't like those weaker men in the cities. Berbers in the mountains are the best lovers.”

He also detailed how he had prostrated his wife in their meager kitchen to prove his manhood. *Was this mountain-man humor or something more primitive?* I wasn't sure. It probably wouldn't go over well back home, I thought.

Because of the altitude, when the rest of the country had rain, there was snow in the village. Even in June, the snow fell lightly. The stunning view of the river cutting through the Ourika valley 150 feet below painted a pristine picture that competed with any Ansel Adams portrayal, what Byron would label as sublime.

Many were scared of the river, however, with good reason. Hundreds of people had perished years prior when a surprising rain came in late summer and didn't stop. The floodwaters washed away mud villages, goats, and workers and campers who were close to its banks. It was one of Morocco's worst natural catastrophes. The government consequently installed solar-powered flood stations. If water levels escalated, the radios would automatically contact rescue units. I wasn't sure who these *units* would be. At my height above the valley, I wasn't worried about flooding as much as rock or mudslides.

In passing, I heard of another Peace Corps volunteer

who was stationed in the town around the bend, one hill over (which is how the local Berbers give directions). The neighboring villagers said he didn't come out of his house. This made me wonder. He left a few months later.

Brahim wanted to show me off to everyone around. His community now had one of these motatawayas, or volunteers, of their very own. They would make me pronounce "emiks emik, agrom, agrom" repeatedly in their Berber dialect for a laugh. The locals never tired of hearing me constantly repeat "little by little" and "bread, bread." The concept of animal or people cruelty didn't exist in these parts.