

## Morrison in Morocco 1989

We never would have gone if it had not been raining or if we weren't so young, impulsive and ignorant. Trying to escape the cool and damp of January in London we headed to Spain and ended up camped out in a corridor of the ladies shower block, a section that was closed during the off season. The overweight chain smoking cleaning lady knew we were there, but we knew how many hours she spent sitting in one of the empty stalls smoking hand rolled cigarettes, reading the newspaper and farting. Mum was the word all round.

It started innocently enough during a game of gin rummy in the camp's communal cafeteria as we were whining about the weather. Someone asked, "Why don't you go to Morocco?" So we did. A bus, a ferry, a choppy ride across the sea and we were there. Or so we thought. Without a map or a clue, passports at the ready for inspection, we disembarked in Ceuta, spent the night in a campground full of confused roosters, just down the road from an early rising military camp, still in Spain.

The boarder to Morocco was just a long, low building full of bank teller style windows, guarded on both ends by uniformed soldiers and anxious German Shepherds. There were no smiles, no 'Welcome to Morocco' signs and the rain was belting down. Bored black eyes stared though a cloud of cigarette smoke on the dry side of booth five. Water streamed down our faces as we slid damp passports under the gap only to be purposefully ignored. Customs officials obviously hold copious amounts of power, and if our very presence was this irritating we dared not perturb him further by tapping on the glass.

Patiently processed we walked straight into the arms of a waiting 'official' tourist guide, who whisked us away from the bus stand and into an idling taxi for a tense thirty-five minute ride to Tetouan, a city set at the foot of the Rif Mountains and surrounded by fragrant orchards. We were installed in a guesthouse where men lounged dangerously in doorways facing a common square

hallway. Dislodging our guide was not an option. With his foot firmly planted to prevent the closing of our door he smiled sweetly and insisted we get to the market before it was too late. Villagers from the surrounding hills and mountains came only on Wednesdays to sell and trade in the city. Hardly believable.

Hundreds of carpet viewings and six sweet mint teas later, we wound our way through narrow alleys past rows and rows of cave like shops wondering how in the hell we were going to shake our disappointed guide and find our way back to the guesthouse. Affording the taxi had heightened his expectations of receiving a large commission on all the rolls of carpet we would surly buy. Our poor did not equal his poor.

Backed against the doorway to our guesthouse, magically home, we tried to say goodbye and thanks for everything. "Nothing for me?" Smiles gone he reached under his white robe as if he was about to produce something dangerous. He pressed himself against my friend and hissed, "I could cut his throat right now." I blurted out a number higher than the taxi fair but he scoffed. "All this time, I waste!" It was then that his eyes caught hold of the battered Sony walkman in my pocket and I was willing to hand the whole lot over without question before he asked, "What music is in there?" I ejected 'The Best of The Doors', where a sultry Jim Morrison was still faintly recognisable on the plastic of the cassette. The change was instantaneous. "Ah, 'The Doors' .....here, here!" he gestured with both hands, backed away from my friend and held it like a prayer.

"You can have it. Please. Take it." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other as two soldiers, arm in arm, ambled past, rifles slung casually across their shoulders. "Ok? I can take this? This is mine?" Glancing at my friend, whose mouth was hanging open, I assured him the tape was his. "You like Jim Morrison, you have the tape. It's a gift." With that he muttered a stream of thanks and backed away as if carrying an extraordinary treasure.

“We should have a guide book.” It was all my friend could say as the colour returned to his face and we climbed the stairs, sealed ourselves in and slept till late the next morning. There was no point in breakfast but we braved the streets, keeping track of landmarks, and found a small restaurant with a set lunch menu and two English guys who were making their way, in an old land rover, cross country from Manchester to Cairo. We listened to all their visa issues and discovered there were actually four of them but they had to do everything in shifts to prevent the total stripping of their vehicle. “The other two are in the Rover?” The one called Paul shovelled fingerfulls of vegetable couscous towards his mouth and nodded vehemently. “Yup, and we’re going to take our sweet ass time because we were stuck in there all night.” They recommended we head to Rabat and directed us to the bus station. “It’s supposed to take six hours but don’t count on it.” Only our second day in Morocco and we weren’t counting on anything.

We spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around the ancient Medina where low white houses served as the premises for weavers, jewellers, leather workers and of course, carpet sellers; where colourful tiled floors and pillars shone in the pale winter sun. Thousands of years melted away leaving us suspended somewhere between reality and fantasy.

But it was reality, in all its nightmarish glory, which latched on and clung tight during the bus trip to Rabat. It was easier than we’d thought purchasing our tickets and locating our bus in the huge covered terminal. Our packs were hefted onto the roof and we were escorted inside and shown to our seats before a young man demanded twenty thousand Dirham. “For your luggage!” When we refused he proceeded to walk along the aisle smacking the backs of people’s heads saying, “He pays!” Smack. “She pays!” Smack. The passengers were confused, frightened and obviously didn’t speak English. He ranted, threatened and signalled for his mate outside to throw our bags down and I finally flipped. “Fine, take them off! We’re not going! We’re not going anywhere!” Just then our driver and another man with a battered tool box boarded the bus and our friend was gone like smoke. “Yup....we should have a guidebook.” My friend the smartass.

We were the only tourists on the bus, full to capacity, teeming with baskets and bundles wrapped in cloth and tied with string. Arabic music blasted from the rattling speakers and once on the open road we were pulled over every forty minutes by black clad police in speedy jeeps who barked questions and removed bags and bundles until their vehicles were full. People cowered and cried, begged and pleaded to no avail. We hadn't a clue what was happening except that we seemed to be exempt. Someone else noticed too. After the seventh police stop a sealed cardboard box was slid under the seats until it came to a rest right under ours. "Shhhh! Shhh!" His black moustache quivered and I knew whatever was in there could potentially land us in prison, Moroccan prison.

At the end of the fifth hour we got a flat. With no jack and forty odd strangers standing and watching, the mechanic took turns with the driver digging a hole then navigating the bus until the flat was in it. Clever, although it did require some pushing and the strategic placement of a tree limb, cork, I think. The radio crackled as we pulled away and played a song by the Pixies, 'Here comes your Man'. Strange and surreal and out of nowhere, we knew everything would be ok.

We survived the next three road raids and moustache man was eternally grateful as we pulled into Rabat. "Whisky." He whispered, Dirham dancing in his eyes. We graciously declined his offer of accommodation and installed ourselves in a spacious room containing just a bed and ceiling fan inside the heart of the Medina. Over the next few days we discovered Harira, the cheapest meal going; avoided purchasing golf ball sized chunks of hashish and turned down marriage proposals in exchange for camels.

As the sun set, bruising the sky with red and orange and purple, we sat on the large and ancient stone wall at the mouth of the Bou Regreg River and watched the endless flow of the Atlantic. My friend sighed. "We should really come back some day with a guidebook."

But what kind of adventure would it have been if we'd had one?