

# Everything I Learned About **Morocco** I Learned in the Epcot Pavilion

by KELLY SEBETKA

Our plane descended over a desolate span of sand and mountains. The sun lowered into the desert and cast a pink glow against the shadows of the Atlas' peaks. Leaning over Jen's lap, I stared out the window, looking for any sign of modern, bustling culture that Marrakech tour websites had promised. The runway provided the only evidence of civilization, and anxiety jabbed at my lungs and wrung sweat from my palms when the plane's wheels bumped against the asphalt.

The seatbelt light dinged off. I tugged my backpack from the overhead compartment and leaned toward Jen.

"You sure the hotel sent someone to get us?"

"Look at the mountains. Some of the best fossils in the world are here. I hope I can find a trilobite at a fossil shop."

"Hey, geology nerd." I dropped her overstuffed backpack, approximately the size of a pre-pubescent child, onto the seat next to her.

"What? Oh, yes. They'll have a sign for Mrs. Schmitt. I let them think we're both married—to other people, of course."

A man across the aisle turned and openly eyed our appearance: arms glowing white from the sleeves of tee shirts, hair lit with gold rarely seen under this desert's light. He grinned, apparently finding the contrast to his traditional djellaba and fez amusing. I smiled back for a minute, thinking we were sharing a "look at those tourists" moment. Then—Damn it—my lips pulled together and my eyes snapped back to the window. Moroccan culture deems men smiling at or speaking to strange women disrespectful, indicating impolite motives. I concentrated instead on deciphering the stewardess's welcome, relayed in French and Arabic. I thought about my three years of high school French, lost in some dark tunnel of my brain, and my French-English dictionary, dust-covered in an Iowa bedroom over 4,500 miles away.

Out the window, attendants positioned metal stairs at the aircraft's exits. I shrugged into my backpack, using it as a personal space boundary when the flight crew opened the plane's doors and every single passenger squeezed themselves into the aisle at the same time. As we clattered down the stairs and onto the tarmac, heat wrapped itself around us, pressing against our jeans and into our lungs. The air shimmered over the Atlas Mountains and the tiny airport, with its

script above the entrance, and, beneath it, Roman letters spelling M-A-R-R-A-K-E-C-H.

“Holy shit.” I squeezed Jen’s wrist. “We’re really here.”

We entered the airport and met our first challenge: using the bathroom. We managed to find the facilities behind an array of faux potted plants and decipher which door to enter without the help of universal gender symbols. We hunched, under the weight of our packs, toward the doors, then paused. The arrivals line was forming across the lobby, and there was an unsettlingly small number of people in the non-resident line, the majority of them Caucasianly un-turbaned and dazed-looking. We were overcome with paralyzing fear that the passengers of our small plane would all clear the entrance process before we returned. The thought of the attendants leaving their booths, flicking off the fly-spotted lights, and retreating into the belly of the airport, leaving us stuck monolingually in its foreign-tongued mouth, was too much for Jen and me to process. We stood between the restrooms and the dwindling arrivals line staring at each other, motionless except for the slow swelling of our bladders.

“We’ll just go really fast.”

So began the first of a string of instances that must have entertained the natives endlessly. No wonder they promoted tourism so much.

We sprinted to the restroom dodging turbaned men and hijab’d women and barreled through the door marked “femme.” Bursting into the stalls, we dropped our bags at our feet. I yanked my jeans down with such force that my thumbnail dug a chunk of skin out of my thigh. No matter—I would nervously chew off the thumbnail soon enough. I sat. Every muscle in my abdomen urged my bladder empty.

“Goddamn it, no toilet paper.”

“Got some.” The ever-prepared Jen thrust a travel-sized roll under the rusted edge of the metal stall divider.

My fingers fumbled around the edge, trying to find the beginning of the roll. No luck. I tore a portion from the side.

Jen paced the area between the sink and the stalls. “Hurry.”

“I am.” I tugged my zipper up and shouldered open the door, already halfway into my backpack.

We glanced at the sink. Flies landed in the empty soap holder. The trash can overflowed. A heavy, musky smell seeped into our nostrils. Listening closely, we heard bacteria squiggling across the floor, toward us. We suppressed our American urge to sanitize and hustled out of the bathroom, adrenaline pounding a beat on our eardrums.

The arrivals line had not moved. Apparently, it takes tourists longer to fill out a customs form than it takes them to urinate. Sweaty and flushed, we walked

toward the line, grateful that the excuse of polite behavior allowed us to avoid eye contact with amused strangers.

An airport employee passed us our customs cards. Using our passports as mini-desk surfaces, we filled out our entrance cards in smearing black ink and shuffled toward the turbaned men behind bulletproof glass.

"Hi." I approached the booth and slid my form through the slot in the glass. I smiled, then grimaced, then smiled again, wondering if friendly faces were acceptable in business-setting male-female interactions.

"Nom?" The attendant blinked at my presumed facial tick. His cheeks remained neutral.

"Kelly Sebetka." I pointed at the form and pushed my passport in behind it.

He checked over both documents and stamped my passport, then said something I didn't understand.

"Je ne sais pas. Ma fran—Sorry, I only speak English."

"Enjoy your stay." He handed my passport back.

"Oh, yeah, thanks—uh, merci."

Jen and I examined the Arabic script the attendants had pressed into our passport pages as we walked to baggage claim. Although we had packed lightly enough for this trip to carry everything in our backpacks, I had paid RyanAir the extra 15 euros per flight to check a second bag so that I could carry my Gerber pocketknife with me. My mother had had a fit of panic when I sent her my travel itinerary, and rather than reminding me to take plenty of pictures, she ordered me to not get abducted. My boyfriend had reacted similarly and attempted to post a second, larger knife to me. Neither were reassured when I reminded them that tourism is the second-largest staple of Morocco's tepid economy, and the government was well-aware that the disappearance of Westerners would not encourage the arrival of additional Westerners. The police were especially intolerant of crimes against tourists, and several online discussion threads had reassured young white Western women of their safety. Their hysteria had shaken my social justice viewpoint—that Morocco was no more inherently dangerous than my home state of Iowa—right out of me. I'd concluded it was best to leave open the option of burying a few inches of blade into someone's vital organs.

My red duffel bag rode the motorized track with its wheels and frame pointed upward like a dead Moroccan cockroach. I hoisted the duffel off the carousel, set it on the tiled floor, and knelt next to it. I pulled the tiny luggage-lock keys from my jeans, unfastened the bottom compartment of my bag, and reached into my Converse All-Stars stashed there. Though the weather was always warm enough for sandals, an online travel checklist had included, "closed-toed shoes to protect your feet from mud and manure."

The knife was still safely nestled in my shoe. I slid it deep into my pocket rather than clipping it to the top so that the weapon wouldn't be visible as I exited the airport.

"All right, woman. Let's go find our ride."

We walked through a set of sliding glass doors and into the arrivals lobby. A small white woman holding a paper sign reading "Mrs. Schmitt" and "Dar Souihla", the name of our hotel, waved to us.

"Mrs. Schmitt?" she asked in a heavy French accent.

"Yes," said Jen. "How'd you know it was us?"

"Two women traveling alone. Easy to find. Now, you need dirhams? Money?"

She stood with us at currency exchange as our euros became dirhams. King Mohammed VI gazed up at me. I peered down at him. It reminded me of Monopoly money.

"Now hurry, it is good to be home before dark." Our guide turned and walked toward the exit.

We jogged after her into the fading light and uneven parking lot.

"This your first time in Morocco?" she asked.

"Yeah."

She stuck her arm out in front of us, blocking us from a honking taxi's path.

"Oh, oh." She widened her eyes and sucked in air through her teeth.

"Must be careful, two girls alone."

When we reached her minivan, she popped the trunk and loaded our bags for us. Jen sat shotgun, and I slid into the middle of the backseat and leaned in between them to hear our guide's continuing list of instructions. She elaborately buckled her seat belt, motioning for us to do the same.

"Listen." She reversed the van, sped through the parking lot, and turned right onto a potholed highway, one of the roadways that qualified Moroccan infrastructure as among the most well-developed in the continent. My brain jostled against my skull, and my organ biles churned into a foam. I was grateful we'd used the toilet in the airport.

"You travel together. You travel back to hotel before dark—bus does not come at night. You do not talk to men in the street or carry passport with you. Very important."

"Is there a safe or something at the hotel we can leave our passports and laptops in?" Jen asked.

"No safe. Leave in room and lock room."

Just leave them in the room? Anxiety expanded again in the place between my lungs and stomach. I wiped my humid palms on the back seat's

upholstery and leaned my head against the passenger's seat. Jen turned and raised an eyebrow above her glasses at me. I could tell she was already calculating how to fit everything on our six-point checklist (passport-wallet-computer-phone-iPod-camera) into her shoulder bag. Meanwhile, I was busy calculating how long we'd been in the van. The dashboard clock reported that ten minutes had passed, and still only rudimentary signs of civilization rolled by.

"How far is the hotel from the city?" I asked.

"Thirty minute bus ride."

We were in, then, what would be called "suburbs" in the US, but the only thing this place had in common with cleansed American neighborhoods was various shades of beige coloring everything. There were certainly no home owners' association fees here. Rather than looking well-manicured and sanitized, the outskirts of Marrakech looked somewhere between nuclear fallout\* and the kind of poverty I'd seen on a service-learning trip to rural Mexico. This neighborhood was full of gutted buildings and barefoot brown kids playing in the dirt. Groups of young men sat smoking on rusted-out construction equipment. Women moved in gender-specific groups, each of them with their hair wrapped. Fires burned in trash barrels. Not all the trash, however, had a barrel. Piles of garbage dotted the roadside, and starving stray dogs, feared by Moroccans, pawed through them. The cats, on the other hand, revered in Islam, were well-fed, if not sleek, and ate scraps from the plates of outdoor diners. Mules stood along the road, some with carts behind them, some tied to twisted trees, too exhausted to even lower their heads to graze the sparse vegetation.

Looks like Africa, I thought, too overwhelmed to notice anything beyond the place and people's salient characteristics.

An image popped into my mind and clouded out my vision, an image from every movie I'd seen set in Africa, of murderous-looking, dark men waving machine guns at passersby from the bed of a beat-up pickup truck. I could practically taste the dirty strips of cloth strangers would use to gag and blindfold me. Jen's expression communicated that she also found our impending doom unpalatable.

"Bus stop is here." Our driver pointed out the window at nothing in particular and took a hard right onto a streetlight-less lane. The van's headlights shone far down the road onto no landmarks at all. Two women dressed in head-to-toe-to-fingertips black stepped out of the van's path. Our driver swore softly in French.

"This is why you must return before dark. Dangerous to walk here at night. No light."

She maneuvered the van around several potholes before pulling into a driveway leading to a gated-and-walled fortress. She hopped out of the van and

typed a code onto a keypad. The gate opened slowly and slid shut when the van passed.

“Safe inside.” Our guide smiled.

She parked on the gravel drive near an adobe building fringed with thick vegetation. The building had a patio area covered by an overhang made of branches and dried palm fronds. A group of men sat smoking on the patio. Our driver spoke French to one of them and he stood and smiled at us. We gave nervous half-smiles, wondering who he was. None of the men wore uniforms or name tags to indicate they were hotel employees.

“You can leave bags here. Follow me,” the man said.

“We can carry them.” Jen and I picked up our bags.

He smiled again and reached for our luggage. When we didn’t hand it to him, he grabbed it, set it on the ground, and walked past us into the adobe building. We followed him into a small whitewashed room with a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. We gathered from the desk and computer that this was the hotel’s lobby.

“How many nights?” asked a man behind the desk, who turned out to be the hotel owner and our driver’s husband.

“We have reservations for six nights,” said Jen.

He gave us the total, and we pulled out our debit cards.

“Oh, no. Paper money only,” he said.

“Oh. We don’t have that much cash right now.”

“It’s okay. Pay for tonight and get dirhams in the city tomorrow.”

Jen and I shuffled through the unfamiliar paper and each handed him 150 dirhams—about fifteen dollars.

“Soon we get technology for cards, but not yet. Now follow me.”

He led us back outside and down the gravel path. The hotel grounds also lacked any outdoor lighting. The rooms were in several buildings separate from the lobby and dining area. The owner unlocked our door and showed us inside. The space contained a bedroom, bathroom, and living area. He told us that food was not allowed in the room because it attracted insects, handed us the keys, and crunched his way down the gravel.

Jen locked the door behind him, and I pulled the duvet off the bed and hung it over the curtain rod, reinforcing the curtains to keep anyone from seeing in. We sat on the bed and looked at each other.

“This is not what I expected.”

“I know. What should we do?”

“Let’s wait until tomorrow and see how things are in the morning. We can always use my credit card to fly out early.”

As spooked as I was, I was thankful to be spooked with Jen, who was

likely the world's most rational tourist. She, a Texan, and I, an Iowan, had bonded on a geology field trip while studying abroad in Ireland. We had decided to go to Morocco after discovering that both of us had tried and failed to get friends to spend part of their spring breaks there. Her compulsive planning skills had allowed me to stress out over which clothes to pack rather than which flights to book, which still left me plenty to stress over because I owned almost no warm-weather clothing modest enough to wear in Morocco. As long as I was following her plans, I felt like we'd be safe.

"At least it's a good time to visit. There hasn't been any kind of bombing in several months," she said.

"Wait, what? Did you say months? Jesus, Jen, this is a good time to visit?"

"Well, relatively, yes. Didn't you do any research on Morocco?"

"Research? Fuck no. I wanted to come because I went to Epcot in Disney World and thought the Morocco pavilion was cool. I bought a belly dancing uniform there."

"That's why you wanted to come to Morocco?"

"Yeah, I told you that. Do you have a better reason for being here?"

"I wanted to come because I'm thinking about moving here someday and working to educate underprivileged youth."

"My god, so all of the youth? Did you notice the scenery?"

Jen opened her mouth to say something politically correct when a siren-like sound whirred on and a crackling voice began booming an incantation in Arabic. Our Arabic was admittedly nonexistent, but somehow we both knew what was going on: that pickup-load of peeved dark men had broken down the hotel gates and was ordering the staff via megaphone to hand over the white women. The staff was apparently noncompliant, because the voice kept speaking. Then the siren whirred again, and silence settled around us. My blood resumed pumping, and rational thought flowed with it back into my brain.

"That must be their call to prayer. How many times a day does that happen?"

"Five times a—"

A nearby scream interrupted Jen. Clearly, those men had caught a woman and were dismembering her outside the hotel walls. I was torn between feeling sympathy for her and feeling grateful that they had taken her and spared Jen and me.

"And that would be a peacock," Jen said.

"Ah, you're right. My grandpa used to raise them. Guess we're not going to get any sleep in this country."

But an evening spent fearing for our lives had exhausted both Jen and me. After checking the closets for suicide bombers, we turned out the lights and

plugged in our earbuds. I thumbed through my favorite playlist and selected “Welcome Home, Son” by Radical Face. I didn’t feel any more at home in Marrakech than I did in my childhood house, but I was alive and on an adventure. I felt closer to my Self than I ever had in Iowa.

My thoughts unraveled to the clink of wind chimes. Welcome home. I drew in air, held it captive, released. One breath for every four beats, every eight. Ships are launching from my chest. I lay down on the ship’s deck, pressed my cheek against the smooth wood, and slipped out of consciousness. I’ve come home. My knife’s cool metal paraframe pulled heat from my palm.

All my nightmares escaped my head. Bar the door, please don’t let them in.

“Kelly!” Jen’s scream blew the ship to splinters, which stuck in my veins, pierced my palms, and pricked against my skin as sweat.

“What!” I yanked out my earbuds.

“There’s someone at the door,” she whispered.

Fists pounded the door. Someone rapped the windowpanes.

“Hello, hello, hello,” called a man’s voice.

I stood and flipped open my knife.

“Kelly, Jen,” said a female voice over the noise. The hotel lady.

Jen unlocked the door, concluding that if the callers knew our names, they likely wouldn’t kill us. I kept my blade open and stood along the hallway wall.

The owner’s wife and the man who had taken our bags stood on our doorstep.

“So sorry to wake. Phone call.”

We had both given the hotel’s number to our next of kin. It was doubtful that my father would dial an African phone number. He preferred to keep communication local. My phone-bill-conscious mother would only call if someone had died. Had Dad died? Improbable. It was far more likely that she was worried about my death. When Mom worried, she called continuously, as if the constant ringing of my cell would annoy my corpse into resurrection.

Before I could ask if the call was for me, Jen was pressing the phone against one ear and her fingers into the other.

“Hello? Mom? Yeah, we’re fine. Because it’s three in the morning and we’re in Africa and my cell phone doesn’t work here. No, you don’t have to call Kelly’s parents. What? Okay, fine. You couldn’t have just emailed me that? Because it’s three in the morning. Okay, love you, too.”

“Thank you so much. Sorry about that.” Jen handed the phone back to the hotel lady and closed the door. “Sorry,” she said, turning to me. “My mom’s crazy. She thinks we’re going to get abducted.”



The next morning, after locking our passports in my duffel and using my spare luggage lock to secure our bags in the closet, we locked our room and followed the gravel path to the main office. Along the path stood the pool and, next to it, an open-air adobe building full of low, colorful sofas and books left behind by travelers past. A perpetual waterfall ran down a wall built up behind the pool. Across the path stood the tiled dining area, covered by a ceiling of interwoven palm fronds and surrounded by lemon trees. Birds and cats tucked themselves into the shade and chirped. Turtles warmed themselves on large rocks scattered throughout the vegetation. We sat on the veranda off the kitchen and ate a breakfast of rolls and pastries while emailing our families, confirming that, yes, we were still alive and well.

“How much did you say this place costs a night?” I asked, scanning the resort-like setup and remembering my dwindling bank account. Student loans and scholarships were funding this adventure. Jen and I were on spring break from our study abroad semester in Cork, Ireland, a city so costly that our entire spring break travel itinerary cost less than a month of simple living expenses. My funds weren’t yet exhausted, but they were well past the “Oh, well, I’m on vacation” rationale.

“150 dirhams a night. We have to remember to get money in the city today.”

“Seriously? That’s how many US dollars?”

“It’s fifteen dollars a night. Pretty good, right? The average wage for Moroccan workers is three dirhams a day.”

“30 cents a day? Jesus. I guess souvenirs will be cheap.”

I later learned the Kingdom of Morocco’s low wages and high unemployment stemmed from their involvement in the mining and oil industries. Nations that export large quantities of oil typically lack diversity in industry. The profit from the oil goes directly to large corporations and the government. These bodies remain unmotivated to invest the funds into job creation because it wouldn’t be nearly as lucrative.

After breakfast, Jen and I each took a picture of the hotel’s single copy of bus number 27’s schedule and walked down the dirt-and-large-rock road to the bus stop. We stood on the side of the paved highway near a scattering of trash and tried to talk about things that didn’t pertain exclusively to the first world. A group of male children gathered across the road to stare. A group of women, also waiting for the bus, clustered farther down the road.

“Shouldn’t the bus be here by now?” I looked from the chattering women to the silent children. One of the older boys waved. The rest giggled. I slipped my sunglasses on.

“Let’s check.” Jen looked at the picture on my digital camera and then at her watch. “So we got here ten minutes before it was supposed to arrive, and we’ve been here for half an hour... It’s either twenty minutes late or it’s going to get here earlier than the next time on the schedule.”

“Great.” I pulled my scarf over my collarbones. The same travel websites that had explained the importance of closed-toe shoes had also suggested that the fair-skinned of the fairer sex wear a scarf to chastely cover our neck and shoulders. Presumably, the editors of such websites had scarves of desert-appropriate cotton in mind, but, being thoroughly unfashionable, the only such garment I owned was a wool scarf from Ireland. I looked down the road and concentrated on not sweating.

Our bus, part of one of the best public transportation systems in Africa, arrived ten minutes past the next time on the schedule. We crowded in and paid the one-dirham-fifty fare in exact change, carefully not showing our 50- and 100-dirham bills. We sat and watched the scenery pass by, unsure of whether returning the bald gawks of our fellow passengers would be bad manners or not.

“I was talking to our hotel lady at breakfast,” Jen said. “Her husband’s the hotel owner. He’s Moroccan, but they met while he was visiting France and she moved back here with him.”

“Wow. That must’ve been a rough transition.”

“Mhmm. She said that it helped that most people here speak French.”

“Morocco was a French colony until pretty recently, wasn’t it?”

“Until the ‘50s, yeah.”

The bus drove over trash-lined roadways and past eerily half-completed construction sites. Sand blew through the skeletal metal frames of the would-be buildings. Nearby, cranes and excavators rusted silently, a parody of growth and development. I had left my iPod in my suitcase, but “Metal Fingers” by Electric President rang in my ears. The song had crafted an image in my mind of the industrialized world as a living being morphing into a grotesque Frankenstein-cum-android. The suburbs of Marrakech looked like they were stuck in the shell-shocked Frankenstein stage of the process.

Half an hour later, as we rattled into Marrakech, the landscape took an unsettling turn toward modernity. Taxis sped past horse-drawn carts. Packed-dirt sidewalks followed manure-covered paved streets. Men in khakis and turbans stood next to reclined camels, hawking overpriced tours of the botanical gardens to tourists. Vendors parked their food carts outside The Gap. I increased the shutter speed on my Fujifilm, but the images blurred together in the camera’s eye.

Our bus vibrated to a stop across from the minaret, an Islamic monument that became our beacon in the adobe maze of Marrakech. Cameras in hand, we stepped from the vehicle into a cloud of diesel fumes and oriented

ourselves on our map.

“The souks are ahead, through the main square. The gardens are back that way. There are a couple of museums on here, but, weird, the map doesn’t say what kind of museums they are. And we passed those camels on the way in. Where first?”

We found plenty of time that week to get lost in the underwatered gardens, wander through the disenchanting museums, and pay exorbitant sums to ride the muddy camels. The souks, however—the markets—were the main attraction. We strode past the minaret, sidestepping the promised piles of manure and mysterious puddles, toward envisioned pots of spices, stacks of pointy shoes, piles of colored scarves. We passed bread carts and stands of the fattest oranges I’d ever seen. Jen claimed they were bigger in Texas, but we bought two anyway. We sat on a bench along a palm-lined path near the minaret and dug our fingers into rinds so thick they pushed back our cuticles. Juice flooded our mouths and splattered the dust at our feet as we bit through the flesh.

We tossed the peels into a trash barrel made of dried palm fronds and walked on toward the souks. We paused to watch a chained monkey skittering on the sand, screeching at color-robed natives and khaki-clad tourists. I raised my camera, but the monkey’s owner glared, pointing at me before rubbing his thumb against two fingers.

“You must pay to photograph,” a dark-haired man next to him explained. Then he smiled. “American?”

I blinked and turned toward the souks. I heard Jen speak behind me.

“Canadian,” she lied in her American accent.

Fuck. I inhaled a lungful of dusty air, trying to displace the feeling mushrooming in my throat. I walked back toward Jen.

The man was already standing next to her. “What brings you to Morocco?”

I circled my fingers around her wrist and gently tugged her toward a row of restaurants across the square.

“We’re studying abroad in Ireland, but we’re on spring break right now. I’ve always wanted to visit Morocco.”

“Yes, Morocco is great country.” The man moved with us. “Marrakech is best place to visit. Very beautiful city, but very confusing for tourist. I will guide you.” He shifted direction, leading us down the street.

Jen had fallen into step with the stranger. I grabbed her wrist again, pulled her back.

“Non, merci,” I said. I turned toward the cafe closest to us.

“Not good for beautiful girls to walk without guide.” He reached for me, his fingers touching an exposed strip of my scarved neck.

“Non, merci!”

The man grabbed my shoulder and yanked me toward him. I jerked away and reached for my knife. Old Trusty. The motion was reflexive after carrying the tool for so long—most Iowans who work with agriculture or livestock in any capacity carry pocket knives. I had never used my knife against a human, but I prepared myself to make the blade’s next destination an African gut.

But several shop owners had stepped toward us by that point. Frustrated, the man shoved me, stuffed his hands in his pockets, and disappeared into the souks.

“Jesus, Jen.” I strode past the men gathered on the streets, who now seemed more amused than concerned.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry.” She pressed her hands against her flushed cheeks. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah, fine. What did I tell you about talking to men on the streets? If they talk to you, they don’t respect you. They’re up to something.” I wiped my palms on my jeans, readjusted my damp scarf.

“I know. I just like talking to people when I travel.”

“Well, this isn’t a pub, unfortunately. There’s probably not even any goddamned alcohol in this whole city. Let’s just get lunch and go back to the hotel. I could really use a drink.”

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Jen and I spent a lot of time visiting the souks that week. That no one attempted to physically reroute us was a main attraction, but the novelty of interacting with young Western women overruled all the guidelines for socially appropriate behavior. Shop owners delighted in holding exotic blouses and belly dancing costumes against our torsos, quoting us hilariously high prices, and, when we seemed unwilling to spend so much, leading us into separate rooms to chip away at our haggling confidence. Younger store keepers wrapped their arms around our shoulders, kissed our cheeks, told us, “For beautiful girl, special price. Special price just for one kiss.”

We got lost one day and spent over an hour attempting to untangle the mess of streets surrounding us as the sun tipped over the adobe walls and began to sink. English disappeared, French disappeared. Moroccans peered at us from under turbans and hijabs. This place was not for tourists.

We finally found ourselves in the map and followed the correct unmarked path back to the markets. Jen and I were so relieved to have relocated the souks that we bought earrings after scarves after bracelets at a stand at the edge of the market with the cheapest prices we’d seen.

“Parlez-vous français?”

“Bonjour. Anglais.”

“Ah, American?”

“Irish,” I said.

“Mhmm.” The shop owner smiled. I found this incredibly comforting, perhaps because I was so relieved to no longer be lost in Morocco. He had a deep indentation in the center of his forehead. I wondered if he’d been wounded battling villains who threatened the safety of young female tourists.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Kelly.”

“Let me write it for you.” He disappeared into his store, returning with a business card and an ink pen.

“In Arabic? Oh, cool. I have my name in Arabic on a necklace from when I went to the Morocco pavilion in Disney World.”

“Disney World?” He laughed, handing me the card. “I would like to invite you and your friend into my store for tea.”

Remembering a web forum on Moroccan etiquette, which had emphasized the importance of sharing mint tea, I accepted. Jen’s head snapped up from a display of earrings. She looked at me like I was deranged.

“It’s okay,” I said when he reentered the store to brew the tea. “We kind of have to accept. It’s a sign of hospitality, and it’s extremely rude to refuse.” Her eyebrows climbed high above her glasses’ frames.

“We’ll just watch him pour it and make sure he takes the first drink.”

“Okay, but you’re drinking it before me.”

“Come in,” he called.

The owner laughed at our skittishness as we haltingly stepped across the doorway. He poured the steaming drink into handleless glass teacups, leaving the mint leaves steeping in the pot. He drank. We drank. The flavor made bagged tea taste like water, made peppermint hard candy taste like Halls cough drops. The cloudy, pale gold concoction warmed my innards, my henna’d hands. I exhaled and took another sip.

“How old are you?” asked the shop owner.

“Twenty-one,” said Jen.

“You, too?” he asked me.

I was twenty, but I nodded.

“Ah, you are young.” He grinned. “You’re just enough to be beautiful and young enough to be nervous.”

“Combien coûte ce collier?” A woman’s voice flattened the shopkeeper’s smile.

“Excusez –moi.” He stepped outside to answer his customer’s question.

I blinked. “Jen, what time did you say our bus was coming?”

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The next morning, when the peacock played rooster to signal the sun, neither Jen nor I moved.

“Hey,” Jen asked. “Would you mind much if we just stay at the hotel today and swim or something? I’m kind of stressed out.”

“Really? Yeah. I thought it was just me.”

We tied on our bikinis and shouldered our laptop bags as the cleaning woman knocked on our door. Walking to breakfast, the gravel poking into my bare soles was much more comfortable than my humid and, as promised, manure-crusted Converse had felt all week. The pool bubbled a cheery “good morning,” and the sun pulled the vegetation’s bright blooms toward the open patio. I picked a lemon from the nearest tree and skipped toward the pool.

My introverted companion climbed into a hammock to read while I swam. Three laps across the pool later, the floating insect carcasses and obvious lack of chlorine became more remarkable than the refreshing temperature. I pulled myself up the ladder and onto the beach chair where my towel was spread, drifting into a nap to the sound of a sun-warmed cat purring nearby.

A rustling near the beach house woke me. One of the employees emerged with a fine-meshed net and dipped it into the water. He peeked over his shoulder at me, and, seeing my eyes open, fumbled a “Hello.”

“Uh, hi.” I sat up and crossed my ankles, looking around for a book or the cat or a mutant-sized lemon to place on my lap. The terrycloth beneath my thighs became conspicuously rough. I wondered if it would be more awkward to cover myself with it, blanket-style, or simply sit there like I was perfectly comfortable.

Am I uncomfortable? I pondered whether the rules of skin exposure still counted within the confines of a tourist hotel. Should I have brought a one-piece? Is the pool just for men? I looked up, where Jen snoozed comfortably, shorts on. Damn.

I sat up, crossed my legs, and piled my pajama pants and tee shirt onto my lap. I hunched forward to an extreme degree and opened my book, holding it far enough away from my body so that it blocked my chest from pool-side view. I pulled my sunglasses over my eyes and looked up just in time to see the pool cleaner disappear down the gravel path.

“Hey, Jen?” I called. “It’s warm out here. I think I’m just gonna go nap in the room.”

“What time is it?” I whispered.

“2:40. Our train doesn’t stop until after 6:00 in the morning,” Jen said.

“Are we at the end of the line though?”

“Close, I think. I’ll check the map again. No, we’re the second-to-last.”

“One of us should stay awake, just in case.”

“Don’t worry. I have an alarm set on my phone and on my watch. And on my iPod.”

I leaned my forehead against the window as the train clattered away from a tiny, lighted station. The motion rattled my scratchy eyeballs, my sleepless brain. I lifted my forehead and looked at the window. No grease spot. The glass was too filthy to show new dirt.

I peered into the empty expanse of dark sand, the Moroccan desert gone cold on the wrong side of the sun. I imagined the train and passengers dissolving, leaving me alone to freeze tonight, to roast tomorrow. I jolted awake when the train’s rumbling paused, hoping we had reached our end-of-the-line stop. Beyond our railway destination laid a taxi to the airport, a plane to Europe, a culture of short skirts, loose hair, and alcohol consumption that Jen and I had a better chance of navigating. But we had a long journey left.

The opening notes of “Metal Fingers” sounded in my earbuds. I immediately paused the music and scrolled through my iPod for a more soothing song.

Our train stopped for no apparent reason. An electric shock sprang from my kidneys, prickling my scalp. I fingered my passport and waited for the sound of gunfire blowing through the conductor’s brains.

Jen and I had heard that the Arab Spring had sprung in Morocco. We’d seen small gatherings of sign-wielding protestors in the main square, but with no English-language news source, we weren’t sure of the level of conflict. My family had been sending semi-frantic emails all day, confirming that we had indeed already left Marrakesh and had not been in the vicinity of a suicide-bombing in the main square. Yes, we left, I had written. And no, we weren’t there. Calm down, everyone.

When we looked up an online article about the bombing, we saw that the ruins were of the restaurants we had spent the week dining in. I reminded myself that bombings happened in benign-sounding places like Oklahoma City, too. The train lurched forward again, and I fell into a restless state of semi-consciousness.

We arrived at our station as the sun stretched its rays toward the horizon. We navigated, bleary-eyed, through the station, into the restrooms. Once again, no toilet paper. I passed Jen a pack of Kleenex under the stall divider. She passed it back. Instead of tucking it into my backpack, I handed it to the next woman in

line on my way out the door.

“Merci.”

I managed something resembling a smile.

We found a taxi to the airport, thankful that this was the last business transaction we’d have to negotiate in a nation that didn’t believe in fare counters. This, we had gathered, was because there was generally a “local” rate and a “tourist” rate. Our taxi driver, however, informed us through a series of English-sounding words, sharp gestures, tight smiles, and finally by simply driving to another taxi station, that the airport was beyond his driving jurisdiction.

Jen and I stumbled from the backseat of the first taxi, avoiding eye contact with the group of men surrounding the empty cars. We stood, bags tightly in hand, while our driver explained our destination to another driver. The second man smiled at us. We moved toward his car, stuffing our bag into the backseat with us so that he couldn’t drive away with them in the trunk after we exited the car.

“Hey. Miss, hey,” the group of remaining drivers called after us.

We climbed into the car.

“Hello, wait.” One pointed to Jen.

I leaned over to pull the door closed.

“Miss, miss.” The man who had pointed jogged toward us.

I slammed the door. Jen and I looked straight ahead as he approached the car.

“Miss.” He knocked on the window.

We glanced up. He held Jen’s international cell phone, which must have fallen out of her pocket, against the glass.

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