

## Chapter 1

### The Land of the Setting Sun

It was for work that I first came to the Red City. There's an International film festival held there in December every year, and my new employer was a partner of the festival. I came in Dirty Sally, a 20-year-old van that I bought for next to nothing in Paris to move with, as I had made the decision to live and work in the Land of the Setting Sun after spending 2 weeks of vacation there in the summer of 2009. I really believed that this was a new opportunity for me, and above all, life in Paris was too expensive; I was dropping deep into debt and the cost of living in the Land of the Setting Sun was cheap. I had driven Sally down from Paris to another film festival in the same country; The International Women's Film Festival in Barbary Pirate City, a few months earlier. I had made the trip in three days; Paris – Bordeaux, Bordeaux – Salamanca, and finally Salamanca – Barbary Pirate City, terminus, Monday September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009. The trip had been hard for poor Sally, laden down with all my stuff; a futon, my guitar and amplifier, a few suits and about a hundred silk ties collected over the years, 30 years of "important" papers, finished and unfinished paintings, stretched and primed canvases, paint, easels, a digital camera and an old Pentax 35mm SLR, along with a few books and relics, like a 33 rpm collector's re-edition of Henri Salvador in his youth, one book that I'd held on to for 33 years and that's still with me, while most of the rest has now been lost, sold, or stolen. So, Sally struggled courageously over the Pyrenean Mountains with her heavy load, often in 2<sup>nd</sup> gear. At present she's surely sitting in a graveyard for her species. I abandoned the poor thing on a parking lot in the Red City.

I had arrived too late in Barbary Pirate City for the opening ceremony of the festival but not too late for socializing afterwards. That night I met wonderful Daniela, shining with the warmth of the sun; classy, elegant, full of good humor, about 10 years my senior and an American expat like me. She had been living in the country for about 30 years and had been previously married to one of the most successful men in the country's film industry. She introduced me to her partner, Kassim, a controversial movie director, though it was not at all evident that they were together and I didn't discover it until much later. They were as different as day and night, as well they were each talking in different circles. They never stood or sat together or even really talked with each other as far as one could tell. Kassim is a local man who loves everything about the USA and wishes that he had been born there (like many locals), and furthermore he's cynical and skeptical about everything else under the sun, especially if it has anything to do with his own country. He lives in White House, in fact not even 5 minutes' walk from my place, but at present we never speak to each other.

My employer's office was in White House, and I had rented a furnished apartment in a coastal town, Newtown, about an hour's drive from White House, paying in advance on the web before I left Paris. I stayed there only two months, commuting to work, and travelling once to a Documentary Film Festival in October. When I wasn't working, I was reading, sightseeing, spending time with beautiful Fatimazahra, whom I met on the net, and painting; there are so many really inspiring landscapes and people.

One of the first things I did when I arrived in the Land of the Setting Sun was to buy an English translation of the Qur'an, as I knew absolutely nothing about Islam, and I thought "if I'm going to live and work in this country, I have to know something about the religion". I started reading and rereading it, and of course, it raised many questions. I realize now, with hindsight, that a large part of the population does not follow what is taught, nonetheless, this reading was to transform me into a different person.

## Chapter 2 I Meet an Angel

The Documentary Film Festival is in a small coastal city about 5 hours drive South from Newtown. There's a toll way, but I choose to take the coastal route, both to take in the scenery and to enjoy the refreshing ocean air, stopping from time to time to take pictures and relax. The last 90 kilometers is across a small mountain range, and I have to downshift constantly, but Sally isn't loaded up this time, all my stuff is in the apartment in Newtown. On top of the mountains, I shoot a magnificent pic of a tree in the sunset with the ocean in the background. I get a really great framing from off on a side road nearby. I'm not familiar with this tree, but I love the way it stretches its arms out horizontally, as if reaching out to the ocean and I'm thinking "This would make a great canvas!" (I will soon discover what the tree is, and it's typical of the region, the argan tree, from which argan oil comes, found only in the Land of the Setting Sun.)

I arrive late once again for the opening ceremony of the festival, but not too late to meet the organizer of the festival. She invites me to a nightclub together with other partners of the festival, film directors, producers, companies, and Festival employees. We drink, laugh, dance, and I make a few contacts in the film industry. This small city, like the Red City, has become well known for its nightlife and especially for the girls who walk the streets. I step out the door at about 2 in the morning, having drunk quite my limit (but not more). Even though it's October, the weather is nice, just like a summer's night. I'm on the point of catching a cab in front of the nightclub when a young girl asks me where I'm going. I tell her the name of the square at the Festival location where I had parked Sally, and she speaks to me in French, asking me if she can ride along with me to save her fare. No problem for me, so we ride together in silence in the back, she's sitting to my left. She's only a teenager, dressed up like a lady. Very pretty, a cute pointy nose and high cheekbones on a slender golden almond colored face. She's wearing her silky black hair in a short to long bob, short on the right and back, becoming longer on the left. Her revealed cute little right ear has a string of 5 amethyst studs climbing their way up its lobe, and to balance them there's a long dangling amethyst earring blending into the black cascade on the left. Her short black cold shoulder chiffon dress reveals soft golden shoulders in unbroken curves from her neck and long perfect legs ending in delicate feet adorned by black high-heeled sandals. She's wearing very little make-up, only purple lipstick and lightly brushed purple eye shadow blended to light pink near her eyebrows, highlighting perfectly her beautiful large brown eyes. Her nails, both hands and feet, are also painted purple except the pinky of her right hand, which is painted pink. She's clutching a small purple handbag on her lap. I recognize her perfume, *Coco Mademoiselle*, and I wonder to myself how she could possibly afford it. Her sweet fragrance titillates my senses and I start to feel aroused. Still, she's so young that I would never make a move. When we get to the square it's completely deserted. She jumps out of the cab with me, and no sooner has it sped off her dress is up in the air and she's flashing a teasing smile "Do you like what you see?" Completely dumbfounded, I don't know what to say, even less what to do. She continues... "So, you're parked in the lot here? Can you give me a lift home?" I agree and she climbs into Dirty Sally's passenger seat (which is clean by the way). I don't start the car straight away. I'm curious. I put a Bob Marley CD in the player at low volume "*No Woman No Cry*" (perhaps "*Roxane*" by The Police would have fit the situation better) and start a discussion. "What's your name?"

"Malak, what's yours?"

"Anthony. How old are you?"

"23. Why?"

“You look a lot younger. Do your parents know where you are?”

“They think I’m at my friend’s house, she’ll back me up.”

“Why do you do this?”

“Do what?”

“Don’t take me for a fool.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” With a flirtatious smile she lifts her dress again and I look quickly away out the side of my window, I’m afraid that I’ll fall into her trap, and I really don’t want to get into trouble. I’m an old man, and while sensitive to her tempting, not drunk enough to forget that I could wind up in prison, and in the Land of the Setting Sun, you don’t want to land in that hell. In this country, even sex between consenting adults can land you in prison. You have to be legally married. Of course, in this city, like the Red City, the law mostly turns a blind eye to prostitution. It’s good for the tourism business, and it’s also good for the police, because of hush money. I change the subject as I realize that I’m not going to get the answers I’m looking for. “We’d better get going, it’s late. You’ll have to guide me to your place, I don’t know this city at all”.

“You have French plates on your van, but you’re not French...you have an accent” she questions, “Where are you from?”

“Try to guess.”

“English?”

“No.”

“Dutch?”

“No. Try again.”

“Irish?”

“I’m American”

“But you speak French really well!”

“Normal, I lived in France for 26 years”

“You must have been very young when you went to France!”

“I was 23 when I came to Paris, a student, but everyone thought I was 16. It was really a hassle. Every time I went into a bar, they would give me this puzzled look and ask ‘How old are you!’ Now it’s OK though, I’m 49, but everyone thinks I’m 10 years younger.”

“You see! It’s the same with me, everyone thinks I’m 16! I’d love to go to Paris, or to New York! It must be great to live in the US! I’ve never been out of the country.”

“I’d never go back to live in the USA, it’s not like you think”

“Ha! Anyplace is better than this shitty country”.

“OK, but for now we just need to get you home with your parents, which way?” We chit chat as she guides me through the city. “You’re here for the festival?” she asks.

“That’s right.”

“Are you in the movie business?”

“Not exactly”

“Where do you live?”

“I’m renting an apartment in Newtown, but I’m going to the film festival in The Red City in December, and I’m planning to move there.”

“When are you leaving town? At the end of the festival? Can I get your number? Can I see you again?” It suddenly strikes me that I might be able to convince her to stop her nightly commerce, so I accept. “Here’s my business card, it’s a French number, but just beep me right now and I’ll add you, Malak, right?” She beeps me as we arrive in a really poor neighborhood, no streetlights. There’s trash everywhere. She tells me to stop. “We’re not far, but you can’t come any closer to

my place, someone might see you. Say, can you give a bit of cash?" I was kind of expecting this question, as it's a common one in the Land of the Setting Sun. "Sure, no problem" I say, slipping her a 100 bill, worth about \$10 face value, but worth a lot more here. "Ooh, thanks! Good night, Anthony" she flashes a big smile and jumps suddenly on my neck, pressing her lips on mine before I can do anything. I'm caught in a whirlwind of bliss, her soft hair caressing my face and her perfume invading me. I'm overpowered by this small pretty girl, helpless and unable to resist. We mingle for a brief moment that seems like an eternity. She jumps back and gets out of the van just as quickly as she jumped on me, waves goodbye, and as she vanishes out of sight, I have to pull myself together before I can drive. I light a cigarette. What's wrong with me! Why did I let her do that? Why didn't I resist and push her away? I'm dazed and confused. Driving almost on autopilot, I don't have any trouble finding my way back to my Hotel; I've always been good at that. If I go to a place, I can always find it again. It's a small city as well. As soon as I get back to my room, I get out my laptop and Google "name Malak meaning". Arabic: Angel. So, an angel disguised as a she-devil? I can't sleep, spellbound, I can only think of her. Will I be able to convince her to change her ways? And moreover, should I even accept to see her again? Her beautiful face and perfect body keep troubling my mind. She haunts my dreams for the few hours I manage to sleep.

The festival is really interesting; I'm learning a lot about The Land of the Setting Sun through the films. Two films really strike me; one is about the poor fishermen on the coast. They're forbidden by law to go out with their little fishing boats, while at the same time there are European hi-tech fishing boats with radar and driftnets right in front of their eyes, hauling in all of the fish. Literally *all* of the fish. The filmmaker interviews a captain of one of the European boats. He says that he's always gotten a thrill out of fishing, excitedly shows us the fish on the radar. He's really pleased with his huge haul. "Look!" he says, "We take them all!" All the while, the poor local fishers can't even feed their families. The other film which strikes me is about a circus, but not just any circus. It's a circus school for underprivileged kids called *Shems'y*, and contrary to the previous film, it shines as a bright light of hope. I'm really happy to see that not all of the documentaries are "noir et sans espoir".

My employer isn't happy at all. She tells me that I'm not at the festival to watch films, I'm here to sell. I set up a few sales meetings, but I'm not comfortable selling what I have to sell. It's obvious that with every sale I'm ripping people off. They won't get a return on their investment, and I really can't sell something I don't believe in. I'm selling advertising space in a movie magazine that no one buys or reads. It's a very slim magazine for movie buffs, with articles by film critics. It's given away free at all the film festivals in the promo bag. It's almost all in black and white, and much too expensive for the general public. The boss tells me that she isn't relying on the sales of the magazine to generate revenue; she's counting on the sales of advertising space. What she doesn't understand, or perhaps chooses not to understand, is that for advertising space to pay off, people have to buy the magazine. I suggest that she change the magazine; make it full of glossies and interviews of movie stars and lower the price. Make it something that advertisers will get their money's worth from. She doesn't agree. I continue my job with some reluctance. I manage to sell a few contracts in spite of knowing that I'm ripping people off.

The day before the end of the festival, as I'm getting into Sally in the evening Malak comes running up gaily, a childish grin beaming on her lovely face. She's not dressed like the last time, now she looks like a schoolgirl; tight jeans and a white hooded sweatshirt with an American flag across the front, red Converse All-Stars, small star shaped silver studs are now in her earlobes, no makeup, and no perfume. "Anthony!"

"Hi Malak, how's everything? I thought that you'd forgotten me."

"Forget you? No, I've just been busy. Say, can you do something for me?"

“Do you need some cash?”

“No, something else.”

“If you tell me what it’s about, I’ll tell you if I can help you out, no promises.”

“I can’t tell you here, can we go somewhere?”

“Sure, I’m free. I was just about to head to the hotel, climb in.” I start the motor and she asks, “Can we go buy some beer?” I poke at her with a smile “You’re old enough to drink?” She giggles and pokes back “Are you young enough?” She guides me to a liquor store, and she waits for me while I get a couple of 6 packs. (I didn’t know it at the time, but the sale of any alcoholic beverages to anyone but foreigners is forbidden by law in the Land of the Setting Sun. It’s a really hypocritical law though, because everyone buys alcohol, and the state needs the tax money, so no one follows the law, like for prostitution. Often enough, the police just use the laws to get some hush money) I figure that she really isn’t of age to buy the beer, and that’s what she needed me for. Meanwhile, I let myself ponder the question of her age, maybe she really is 23? “So now that I bought your beer, can I drop you off somewhere?” I think that I’ve served the purpose she needed me for and that’s that. “It’s not *my* beer, it’s *our* beer” she goes on “Now we have to find a place where we can talk.” What could she be up to? I’ll have to be really careful. “Let’s go up in the mountains” she says quietly. She’s not smiling anymore, and I understand now that she needs the beer before she can say whatever it is that’s on her mind. Must be serious.

Against my better judgment I agree, and Sally takes us up into the mountains. I spot the tree that I photographed, the sun is about to set behind it on the ocean just like the other night, and I point to it. “Isn’t that beautiful? I took a picture of it at sunset as I was coming into town. It’s just the same now.” “Yeah, nice!” she chimes, “This is a perfect place, let’s stop here.” I park Sally in the same place on the side road where I took the picture and nature gives us a magnificent show, just the two of us. I’m feeling happy that I could share this with someone, and I’m thinking that this inspiration will help me when I go to paint it. I always paint inside from photos; the moment has to be captured. I pull out my faithful Swiss army knife, been carrying it around with me everywhere for about 3 decades, it’s the Spartan model, not too big to carry easily, but with the necessary corkscrew and bottle opener. I couldn’t count the number of beer and wine bottles it’s opened. I open up two beers. We don’t say anything, we just take it in. No seductive moves from her tonight. She’s another person. Three beers down, and just as the last bit of the sun is sinking into the ocean, she starts to come out with it. “You said you live in Newtown, and that you’re going to move to the Red City...tomorrow is the last day of the festival here. Take me with you, please!” Her face is pleading and she’s on the verge of crying. Taken aback, I can’t think of anything to say so I stall to reflect. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“No, not at all.” she says quietly “No one has ever asked me that question before. It’s a dirty habit though, you should quit. You didn’t smoke the other night.”

“Yeah, I had had more than my dose of smoke in the air of the nightclub. I had one after you left.” I start in... “What makes you want to come with me? What are you running from? What about your family and your friends? Tell me what’s wrong.” She’s sobbing now. I try to imagine her life. I surely wouldn’t want to trade places. “Please, don’t cry. I know your life is hard, but you have to know that everything happens for a reason. We met for a reason, and it isn’t what you thought. You must know that it’s not possible for you to come with me. You said that I should quit my dirty habit of smoking. You’re absolutely right, I tell myself the same thing with every cigarette I light, and yet, I keep on slowly killing myself. You have to quit doing something as well...it’s not fitting for an angel.”

“You know what my name means? My father used to tell me that he named me Malak because I’m heavenly, do you think so? I miss my father so.”

“Yes, Malak, you’re heavenly, and you can do better in this world than walking the streets, I’m sure that you can make a husband very happy, but there’s not a man in this country that will marry a woman who’s got a bad reputation.”

“I know, it’s too late.” she sobs, “My reputation is already shot here. That’s why I have to get away from this place. I knew it was a long shot to ask you, but I just had to give it a try. I could tell that you’re a nice guy. I’m sorry that I played you, it’s because men usually can’t resist me. My father was wrong, I’m not an angel.”

I decide that it’s time to head back to town. I start Sally up, but as I’m shifting from 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> there’s a loud clunking sound, the clutch pedal gives under my foot and hits the floor. No clutch. I cut the ignition and jerk the handbrake. “What happened?” Malak asks with worry.

“The clutch gave out, it’s broken, I can’t shift gears. That means that we’re stuck, and too far away from anyone who can help us out. It’s too dark outside for me to do anything, so we have no choice but to wait here together until the morning light.”

“This is really a piece of shit car for an American to be driving! Why don’t you have a decent car!?” She’s crying now.

“It’s OK, settle down, we’ll be alright. I know Sally’s a piece of shit, but really, you shouldn’t imagine that all Americans are rich. She’s all I could afford. Most of my money goes on paints and canvas. In fact, I’m planning to paint the tree with the sunset on the ocean, that’s why I took the picture. Now, when I’m painting this beautiful scene, I’ll be thinking of you, and the painting will be much better because it’ll be charged with emotion.”

“You’re a painter? It’s no wonder you’re not rich! What did you call this thing, Sally? You gave it a woman’s name? Are you crazy or what? Since when do cars have names?” She’s really upset. She breaks down in a fit of tears. Without saying another word, I move to put my arm around her and she welcomes it. Now she’s crying in my arms, her soft black hair caresses my face and her tears fall on my chest. I don’t feel any excitement, only sympathy. The spell is broken.

I wake up. Her head is on my lap and the day is breaking. I caress her hair gently and whisper softly in her ear “Time to wake up Angel”. She turns her head to gaze up at me. She’s totally calm, but her eyes are full of worry and trouble. “I’m going to see if I can fix Sally so we can move” I say calmly. She pulls herself upright, and we both go outside to stretch. It wasn’t the most comfortable way to spend the night and we both feel sore. I’m used to always trying to fix things myself. I’m not a mechanic, but sometimes you don’t have to be to fix a car. As it turns out, I find a large metal car part on the ground just behind the van. I open the hood and take a look. There’s a rod dangling that goes to the clutch pedal, and it’s easy to see where it was hooked up to the clutch on the gearbox. The large piece of metal fits in between and links the rod to the clutch. It’s a bit hard to put back into place, but no tools are necessary. Fortunately so, because I don’t have any. My hands are covered with grease now, and I have nothing to wipe them on. I start Sally up and give her a try. The gears are working. We can leave. “Malak! It’s fixed, let’s go get some breakfast, I’m hungry, aren’t you?” She smiles, it’s good to see her happy again.

Lights appear on the main road, it’s a police van. They see us and drive towards us. I’m thinking “Shit! This is all we needed!” My hands are still covered with grease. They get out of their van and walk towards us, speaking dialectal Arabic. I don’t understand the words, but the situation is clear from their tone of voice and gestures. Malak whispers to me “It’s OK, let me talk to them, I know how to handle this”. She talks to them only a few minutes and comes back to me. “Gimme 500 dirhams”. I give her the money and she goes back to them. Hush money. That’s how it always works here. The police get back in their van and drive away. I thank God, and destiny, for our good fortune, as I say softly to Malak “God has protected us, the clutch could have gone out as we were

going down the mountain, and where would we be now? It went out here, when we were just starting, and where there wasn't any danger." "Hamdullah" she says.

Sally takes us back down the mountain and we go to a café to eat. We both eat heartily. Not a word is spoken about last night's discussion or events. "Can I drop you off at your home?" I propose. "Of course." she agrees. As we are getting close to the place I left her before, she turns to me and says, "I'd love to see your painting of the tree with the sunset on the ocean, I'm sure it'll be magnificent." As she gets out of the car, she blows me a kiss saying, "Keep in touch, OK?" I say, "Yeah, OK Angel, take care." We both know that we won't. I go back to the hotel and clean up. I have no desire to go back to the festival for the closing. I head back towards Newtown. When I get to the tree, I stop the car and sit there wondering what her future will be like, knowing that there are thousands of other angels living broken lives. Did our meeting change her life? Who knows? Perhaps she'll stop selling herself. I like to believe so. I'll paint the tree, if only in memory of our short encounter, and it will be beautiful.

### Chapter 3 The Red City

In December I leave Newtown and head out to The Red City for the International Film Festival. I bring what's left of my worldly possessions with me, and leave the rented apartment, already having decided to stay in the Red City for an indefinite period of time. I have two months' free stay in a furnished apartment there owned by my employer.

As usual, I arrive too late for the opening ceremony on Friday night. I unload all my stuff into the apartment and head out with Sally to discover a bit of The Red City. It's a really beautiful city; it gets its name from the red color of the walls and buildings, which comes from the color of the earth used to build them. After a quick tour I return to the apartment and get out my guitar. A tune has been trotting in my head from time to time since I left the tree on the mountain. I start to compose a song for Malak, largely inspired by ZZ Top's "*Hot, Blue, and Righteous*". I fall asleep thinking about her and kind of wishing that she was here with me.

The next morning, I have to register and get my badge. While I'm waiting in line I start a conversation in English with the man in front of me (something I do easily, part of my formatting as an American I believe). He looks to be in his mid-fifties, a chubby pale round face with red cheeks, round wire rimmed glasses, the typical mid-life pot belly, a full head of white hair, a relaxed look; white polo and multi pocket khaki shorts, a nice khaki twill outback hat to match the shorts, and brown penny loafers. I'm thinking he'd make a great Santa Clause if he wore a beard. I'm dressed in a black suit and anthracite wool felt hat as usual. It's a bit cool in the morning in The Red City, but gets warm quickly, even in December. "Nice hat! Perfect for the weather, mine gets a bit hot in the sun sometimes."

"A hat lover! Nice Borsalino yourself, It's Italian, isn't it?"

"Yes! I am a hat lover, used to have a whole wall of hats in my youth, for the Borsalino, no, French made, bought it at the flea market in Paris, and paid too much for it".

"Why's that?"

"I saw it, loved it, tried it on, it fit perfectly. Then I looked inside to check the make, to my surprise I found my initials already there!" I take my hat off and show him the inside, where there are two little silver metal ovals, one with an A and one with a B embossed in relief on the inner band. I continue my story. "I made a really stupid move for a bargainer. I showed the initials to the seller and said 'Look, it's got my initials in it!' Of course, the seller knew that I had to have the hat, and

I paid 500 francs for it. That's OK though, I was happy, but I could have had it for much less."

"Incredible! It's a day of coincidences, isn't it?" he says, examining the inner band of the hat

"They're my initials too! Antoine Bovay."

"Pleased to meet you, Anthony Bell."

"Nice to meet you too." (We shake hands) "You're American, aren't you?"

"That's right, and very pleased to have a conversation in English for once. I can't quite make out your accent, it's not French, and it's not quite German, where are you from?"

"Where can you find the best watches and banks for the rich?"

"Ah! You're Swiss, I don't know about much about Switzerland, but I certainly appreciate Victorinox. Carry one all the time." I say as I pull out my trusty Spartan Swiss army knife.

"Wow, this is too much, isn't it? I've got exactly the same model, but I don't have it on me, it's in my car." We've arrived at the head of the line and we go through the badge process. He waits for me as he was first. I have a "Partner" badge, which gives me a bit of prestige. We enter the Palace and are screened for security. The guard takes my Swiss army knife, reassuring me that I'll be able to get it back on my way out. I got a message from my boss this morning and have to go to see the Festival Communications Manager for some business, so I bid Antoine farewell, we exchange business cards. "You're a producer! I'm just a Salesman, but I'm also a painter."

"Really? I collect paintings, not hats (laughing) I even have a drawing by Picasso! Are you any good?"

"I like to think so; I've got a few paintings with me if you want to take a look sometime."

"It'll be a pleasure, later on today if you like, we can meet for lunch and you can show me your stuff, who knows, maybe I'll buy something!"

"OK, I'll call you around noon. I'm thinking, please God, let him buy a painting! In fact I'm almost broke. I look like I've got money, but I've spent everything. The few contracts I've sold are nothing compared to what I've spent in the last two months. And I really don't have any motivation to sell even one more contract. My boss is counting on my performance here in The Red City, but I just want to enjoy the films.

I find the Communications office and present myself. The manager is a typical French lady, Marjolaine, late thirties, serious. With a forced smile she introduces herself and goes straight to the problem. "So you work for Moviemag?" (It's not a question) "The Festival just started last night and we're already getting swarmed with complaints about the DVD movie included in your magazine. I haven't tried it myself, but people are reporting that the movie stops halfway through the film!"

"Terribly sorry, Madame, but I don't have anything to do with the creation or contents of the magazine. I just sell advertising space. I really don't know how I can help you." She continues to bitch. "This festival's image is being hurt by *your* magazine, and I want to know what *you* plan to do about it!" Just to calm her down I promise to talk to my boss about the problem. I see that they've got a huge stack of the December Special Festival edition piled up in the office, as it was included in the promo bag given to all the participants. "Can I have some copies to verify?" (I was planning on picking up a dozen anyway) "I only have the one copy that I just got in my bag."

"Go ahead, take as many as you want, they're crap anyway!" She's hurling threats at me as I leave the office. "This is serious business! We could take you to court about this! You're making us look really bad!"

I watch a film and it's already lunchtime, so I call Mr. Bovay and we arrange to meet. I check my wallet. 200 dirhams, that's all I have left. Enough for lunch and a bit of gas for Sally. It's fortunate that I have an apartment free for two months, as long as I can hold on to my job that long. Not sure at all. I go to the exit and look for the security guard who took my knife. I don't see him.



I approach another guard and tell him that I want to get my knife back as was promised. He pulls out a little box from behind the guard desk which is full of all kinds of knives and cutters. We rummage through it together. My knife isn't there. He says maybe it's with all the other confiscated knives at the main security office and gives me directions to get there. I check. Not there either. No one promises to help me or to replace the lost knife, and even if they did, it wouldn't be a Spartan Swiss army knife. I have no more time to waste; I'm already late for my lunch date. I leave a bit bothered, because I'd had it for so long, and because it's a stupid loss, but not too much, because I've had to separate from "things", "worldly possessions" all throughout my life. I'm used to it and not really attached to material things.

"Hi Antoine, sorry I'm late."

"That's OK, I'm not in any rush."

"What did you do this morning?"

"I had a meeting with a local Director who has a project for a film."

"Speaking of local films, have you watched the film on the DVD in Moviemag? It's in the promo bag."

"No, in fact I threw the Moviemag in the bin this morning, it was crap. No offence, you work for them, don't you?"

"Probably not for much longer. No offence taken, you're right, it's crap. Let's order." We eat while we chat about The Red City, the Land of the Setting Sun, the locals, I tell him about my life-long love affair with painting, and my experience being a "starving artist" in the States and in Paris. I tell him about how I just lost my Spartan. We finish eating and he offers to pay the bill, which of course I don't refuse. I think that he's sensed that I'm broke, probably a sixth sense for the Swiss.

"So, what about seeing your paintings?"

"Yeah, I've got quite a few in my van, it's parked just outside. I have them in the van because I'm planning to go around to all the galleries here and see if anyone will exhibit for me."

"Great, let's have a look, shall we? I'm thinking, this guy has a thing about using question tags all the time, but I don't mind, do I? He even paid my lunch, didn't he? I open the back doors of the van and we go through all the paintings I have there, oils, acrylics, watercolors in a portfolio and others already framed. "You certainly like to do nudes, don't you?" We've gone through everything, with him pausing from time to time to study one. I'm thinking that he's not interested, when he asks to see the framed watercolors again. "I can't take anything framed, because I can't carry it back with me like that, but there's one I'm interested in. It's no problem to take it out of the frame, is it?"

"Of course not, I can take it out right now!"

"I'll get it reframed when I get back home...that is...if we can agree on the price." Now I'm sure that he's sensed my desperate situation. But I don't know if he just wants to help me or if he wants to use my situation against me in the bargaining. I suddenly remember that I told him how I paid too much for my hat. He's in the position of force and he knows it. "Yes! This one!"

"Cascade bleu, one of my favorites as well, did it in just one sitting!" Shit, am I stupid or what, I just gave him another advantage! He knows that it didn't take time. It's a nude, 30cm wide x 40cm high, all done in ultramarine blue, with delicate shading by using water to lift off color. It's a top view looking down on a woman just in front of the viewer. The woman has long hair thrown in front of her face and descending in a cascade like a waterfall, she's sitting on the floor with her feet crossed in front of her, her arms around her legs and her hands crossed over them. It's well executed, especially the feet, which are near perfect. There is no vulgarity, and even no bare breasts or sexual parts showing because of her position. I sigh. "Good choice, I'll let you have it for 1000€"

"500, take it or leave it. You're a risk, an unknown painter. I just like it, that's all" He's got me, and

he knows it. I do some nibbling, nonetheless. "If you throw in your Spartan, it's a deal. You said you have it in your car, are you parked nearby?"

"Great, yeah, I'll go get it while you take it out of the frame."

"I need the knife to do that, I'll wait here." I have a smoke while he goes to get the knife. I have a small stack of CDs of a song I recorded just before I left Paris, I'm thinking...he's a producer, who knows, maybe? When he comes back, I use my new Spartan Swiss army knife to cut the brown paper bands on the back of the frame and to take out the metal clips holding the backing in place. The frame is exactly the same color as the painting. "Can you make me a promise?" I ask.

"You want me to frame it in ultramarine blue, don't you?"

"Exactly, you're a mind reader, aren't you?" I poke laughingly. As he hands me the cash, Euros, I hand him my CD along with the rolled-up watercolor. "I recorded this song in Paris just before I left. Give a listen, maybe you can use it."

"A singer as well, more starving artist's work! I bet you played for money in the metro, didn't you! OK, I'll listen to it. Kristucky. Your artist name?"

"Yeah, I used my Blackfeet Indian name, I'm not Blackfeet, but I was born on a reservation in Montana. Just lately I've been signing my paintings Kristucky as well. Cascade bleu is earlier, so it's signed A Bell."

"Another coincidence, we're both from Montana, aren't we?" We say goodbye.

When I get back to the apartment, I take out the copies of Moviemag and open one up. Kassim, Daniela's partner, just happens to be the director of the film on the DVD. I put it in my laptop and check.... yes, it stops suddenly half way through. I open a second one at random, same thing, a third, well...it looks like I don't have to check any more. I write an e-mail to my boss to inform her of the screw-up and tell her that Marjolaine is upset, to put it mildly, and that she's waiting for something to be done about it. I send a second mail with an updated list of prospects. So, I've done my job in informing my boss, it's really out of my hands. I'm not about to let it bother me.

I can't say that I really put myself into my work; instead, I just enjoy the films, relish the new environment, visit the art galleries, and make lots of personal contacts. I spend some time with Daniela (but not with Kassim), who owns an apartment in The Red City. At a brunch date I tell her about the DVD screw-up, but she already knew about it. We agree that Moviemag is crap. She teaches me a lot about the local customs, what to say and do, and what not to say and do. Daniela speaks the local dialect perfectly. The Land of the Setting Sun was a French colony, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> language of the country is French, so I've been somewhat lazy about learning the dialectal Arabic. (Even now, years later, I only speak a bit of it.) The locals code switch from their dialect to French constantly, and the dialect itself is peppered with French words, so I can often understand people even if I can't speak the language, given that the speech is in a context.

I'm sitting alone in a bar late in the evening, and I've had a couple of Mojitos already. There's a really exuberant girl that I've been watching with fascination. She's sitting at table across from me with a small group, all in their early 20s. She talks a lot, with constant laughing, and even though I don't understand her words, her hand gestures speak mountains. From the occasional bits of French slipping in I make out that she's been involved in some kind of scandal during the Festival. She's noticed my interest and keeps flashing me smiles. Her smile is a killer; it's very large and very remarkable, it seems to take up almost half of her face. What a happy soul, I'm thinking, what could this scandal be about? My curiosity is at a peak when she excuses herself to her friends, motioning to me, and comes over boldly to sit opposite me. Her long black hair falls freely over a black leather motorcycle jacket. She's not wearing make-up except for black mascara and a tiny bit of blue

eyeliner all around her brown eyes. She has a small gold stud on the left side of her nose, a gold “M” on a chain around her neck, and rings on most of her fingers including a big engagement ring. A men’s designer watch adorns her right wrist and bracelets on the left. She’s wearing tight worn-out jeans with holes in the knees and thighs, as is the fashion, and black biker boots. “Hi! You’re here for the festival!” she announces loudly and bubbly. This is easy to see because even when I’m not at the festival I’ve been wearing my badge and carrying my promo bag on my shoulder. It sets me apart from the tourists and also signals me to other festival goers. It’s good for making contacts. “I’m Basma, I’m a star!”

“Really? You’re in the movies?”

“No, not yet, but I will be, Insha Allah. I’m already famous! And I’m a great singer too! What’s your name?” She’s already got my badge in her hands and answers the question herself. “Anthony Bell, Partner, nice to meet you, Anthony!”

“Nice to meet you too Basma, if your singing is as beautiful as your smile, I’m sure you’ll make it to the top!”

“Insha Allah.”

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“OK, just a Pepsi, I don’t drink. You’re American right?”

“Yeah, how’d you guess? Most people here think I’m French, and I don’t have the look of an American.” (I gesture “big and fat”)

“Not a French name, and also, I can always spot Americans, they smile a lot like me!” She’s beaming, I’m wondering if that huge smile ever leaves her face. Her smile has been addictive to me since she walked up to my table. I’m thinking...this girl just likes to have fun! I signal to the waiter and order a Pepsi and a Johnnie Walker Black. “Tell me Basma, why are you famous? Does it have something to do with the festival?”

“Yeah, you bet it does! Did you see the woman who drove her motorcycle on to the red carpet at the opening ceremony?”

“No, I missed the opening, so that stunt was you! You’re lucky they didn’t lock you up!”

“But those assholes took my bike!” Her smile turns to a forced frown for a brief instant and then she’s beaming again. “I’ll get another one, and it was worth it!”

I decide to change the subject. “You’re engaged? What’s his name, Michel? Mohammed?”

“You must be joking! I’d never marry either a Frenchman or a guy from this country; Frenchmen are always complaining, and the men in this country are lazy, jealous, violent, and hypocrites! I’m not engaged to anyone anyway!”

“So, what’s the engagement ring for? And why the M on your neck?”

“The ring was from a rich Saudi Arabian; I changed my mind but I got a nice ring!”

“And the M, don’t tell me it stands for mother...”

“Ha Ha Ha, no, it’s for Messi! I LOVE Messi! He’s the best! So, the interrogation is finished? You see, I’m free as a bird, wheeee!”

“If you continue your stunts, you might just end up in a cage!”

She changes the subject this time. “I like your style, really classy. I love your tie.”

“It’s a genuine 50’s tie, got it from my grandfather.”

She leans over the table and takes my Borsalino, puts it on her head teasingly. She tilts her head and smiles as if posing for a shot “How do I look?”

“Like a star!”

She takes it off and looks it over. “Hey, wow! You’ve even got your initials inside...I bet you got your initials on your underwear too, Ha ha ha! Just kidding!” She obviously thinks I’m rich, in fact, I look like I’m rich, and even smell like it, but my bottle of *Allure* is almost empty, and I surely

can't afford a new one. The 5000 dirhams from Antoine won't last long. "How about we go and eat something, I'm starving!" she bids.

"Sounds like a good idea, I'm hungry too. You know this town; do you know a good place for fish?"

"Yeah, the best! And they're cheap too!" This pleases me, but I don't let on. I pull out my wallet and open it to pay for the drinks and she's staring at it. "Is that your wife?"

"My ex-wife"

"It's nice, but different, looks like an old photo."

"It's not a photo, it's her portrait, I painted it just after our marriage in '84."

"You're kidding me, right? It's a photo, and you're not old enough to have been married that long ago."

"No, it's the truth. Take a closer look. I painted it to look like an old hand colored black and white photo. I always paint from photos. The only difference is that I made the rose twice as large as it was really. By the way, the rose she's holding has a story. Do you want to hear it?"

"Yeah, go ahead, I love stories!"

"We had just come back to Paris from our honeymoon in the states. She had a daytime job, but I was spending all my time painting and singing in a band, and not making any money. Sometimes I would sing in the Metro or make pastel drawings on the sidewalks for some cash. One day I went to draw on the sidewalk in front of the Opera. I drew a really large Charlie Chaplin, spent hours doing it, and it looked really good. Still, only one person had left me money; only 10 francs. On the way home I bought a rose with my hard-earned money. It cost me exactly what I had earned. When I got back to our apartment, she was home from work. I gave her the rose and told her how I had spent my day. She exclaimed, 'Quick! Let's go see it! I want to see your Charlo!' We hurried out the door, took the metro to Opera, passing the ticket barrier both at the same time on her monthly ticket. Just as we arrived in front of the drawing, raindrops started to fall. We watched together as the drawing was washed away by the rain. So, you see, that rose had a lot of value. The painting hung in the entryway of every house we lived in for 22 years. It's up in her attic now; she doesn't want to see it anymore. It's the best piece I've ever painted." Tears are coming into my eyes. She feels for me, and her lovely smile is gone. "You're a romantic. You loved her, why did you divorce?" "Destiny" I reply. Wiping my eyes, I go to pay the bill. "Let's go get some fish." I put on my black leather trench coat, and as we leave the bar raindrops start to fall. "I love to feel the rain on my face" I tell her, and she replies "Me too, but this isn't real rain, I can feel the difference; it's man-made rain. It's not from Allah." We walk in the rain to the restaurant, it's not far. Basma's overwhelming good humor comes back in a flash while we're walking, and she's doing all the talking. She has a way of cheering me up like no one else could have. The fish is really good, and really cheap too (it will become a favorite place). When I get back to my apartment I go to my laptop and Google "name Basma meaning", Arabic name meaning: *Smile*.

## Chapter 4 The Earth Shakes

The Festival is over, it's Sunday and I relax a bit. I'm thinking that maybe I can make some money as a painter. There's an empty apartment just across from mine which is also owned by my boss. The walls have all been torn down so it's just one big empty space. I discovered it the first day I came, because there were two sets of keys, and when the building guardian showed me my apartment, he mentioned that the other keys were for the other apartment, which was waiting to be

renovated. I've been using it as a storage space for my stuff. I ask the boss if I can use the space to paint in, as there is no place to paint in my apartment. She agrees reluctantly, saying that I'm not supposed to be painting but to be selling. It's a great space to use as a studio, because all of the windows open into one big space, and as well it's on a corner with East and South exposure.

I set up my easels and get back to work on a painting I started in Newtown. It's a large format oil on canvas, 89cm large x 1m30 high. I've already named it, "Opening on the Sea", but most of it is only sketched out with charcoal. It's from a photo I took my first week in the Land of the Setting Sun while at the International Woman's Film Festival. A young woman is standing in an arched opening of a fortified wall with the sea in the background. The breeze is blowing her long black hair across her face, and the sunlight coming from behind makes her white tunic transparent. I decide to attack the transparent tunic. The first layer of brown of her arms, chest, and face are dry, having done them before moving. I work quickly on the white tunic, painting over the first layer of brown, and after a full days' work the result is astonishing. I've really succeeded in creating the desired effect of transparency. I'm proud. While I'm cleaning my brushes, I run across a white shirt in my rags that I've used as a paint rag for many paintings, and it strikes me all of the sudden that it's beautiful; a work of art in itself. There are so many colors at random and in all different sizes from all the different brushes that I've wiped on it, it's a real artist's shirt! I decide to wash it, delicately, and to start wearing it.

A lot of things are running through my head. I'm sure that I won't be staying at my job. If I don't get fired, I'll resign anyway. I have to keep playing the salesman role though. I need to get my papers dealt with for a residency card if I'm going to stay, and I'm determined to stay. I arrived in the Land of the Setting Sun on September 28<sup>th</sup>, and there is a three-month limit to my tourist visa, so it has to be done before the end of the month. I have to file for a work visa quickly, and I need to use my current job. I check on all the required papers and see that I need a permanent residence. My current apartment address doesn't fit the bill. Who can help me? I think of Daniela, she owns an apartment; perhaps she'll let me use her address? I call her and we arrange to meet at her place in the morning.

I'm up early as usual. My "Artist" shirt is already almost dry. I iron it carefully using a clean cloth to protect it (and also to protect the iron). The ironing takes out the remaining humidity, and it looks great. I decide to wear it with an old pair of jeans. It's a change because Daniela's always seen me in a suit and tie.

She greets me at the door "Come in, Marhaba, nice shirt! Where did you find it, it's unique!"

"That's right, only one in the world! It's a paint rag that I used on a lot of paintings, it just struck me how beautiful it was and it's the first time I've worn it."

"Sure is a change from your usual dress!"

"That's because you've only seen me dressed for work!"

"I didn't know that you're a painter, that's great, everyone should use their creativity."

"I agree, Picasso said that every child is an artist, the problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up."

"Yeah, I know that quote. I couldn't agree more. Have a seat, I'll ask the maid to make some tea."

It's a really nice apartment, filled with all kinds of local crafts she's collected over the years. "So, how's work with Moviemag?"

"Not too great, but I need them to get my work visa, so the job will have to do for now."

"You said that you needed to see me urgently. What's it about? Not serious I hope?"

"It's about my work visa, I need to have a permanent address here in the country, and Moviemag's apartment won't do it. I thought that perhaps I could use your address if you don't mind." She's a

really nice woman and I'm almost sure that she'll agree.

"If you use this address, I'll have to give you a signed and legalized affidavit saying that you live here. It's something I've already done with other expats. I know the process. I'm alright with giving it to you, but don't use it for anything else than getting your papers, OK?"

"You're a lifesaver Daniela, I was sure that you'd help me if you could. How can I thank you?"

She laughs generously "I'll think of something, maybe you can make me a shirt like yours?" The maid brings us tea with cakes, almonds, walnuts, figs, and dates. This is the standard local habit, which I appreciate a lot. "You're not happy with Moviemag, have you thought about doing translations? Your French is great, you could easily translate sub-titles from French to English for movies, or doing voice-over, you've got good articulation and a nice American accent."

"No, I hadn't thought of either, sounds interesting..."

"I've got a lot of contacts in the business, I do translations myself sometimes, but I work better from Arabic to English. I'll keep you in mind if something comes up."

"You're really a friend. It's true; I really do have to find a way to make my living. In fact, I forgot to tell you that I sold a watercolor during the festival. You would have known that I'm a painter. It was to a Swiss Producer, Antoine Bovay, you don't know him, do you?" (of course, I have to throw in the question tag, don't I?)

"Never heard of him."

"Didn't make a lot though, only €500. I've never been able to live off of my painting."

"Yeah, I know the story. Hey, a lot of Americans teach English, there's a huge demand for native speakers, and the pay isn't bad, you could try that."

"I don't have any qualifications, I'm a Sales Manager."

"You don't need any as long as your English is good, they don't ask for teaching degrees here."

"Well, my English is excellent; my mother was an English teacher. In fact, she told me years ago that she had a dream that I was an English teacher."

"Only God knows what the future holds."

"Yes, I certainly believe in destiny, too many events in my life have convinced me that there's a reason for everything."

"For the affidavit, I'll type it up and we can meet tomorrow to go and have it legalized. I'll need your full legal name and your passport number, just write it down for me now."

"Thanks for everything Daniela, you're a sweetheart. The cakes were delicious! What time tomorrow?"

"Is 9 too early for you?"

"Not at all, I'm up at daybreak, always been an early riser. See you here at 9."

I visit a few galleries with some of my best paintings. I hit it off well with the owner of the Gallerie Majorelle, Driss, and he takes one to exhibit as a trial. We agree on a commission and set the price. I tell him that he can negotiate the price down by 25% if needed. It's "Dream of Senegal" oil on canvas, 60cm large x 80cm high. The owner invites me to have tea with him, which is very common in the Land of the Setting Sun, and of course I have to accept (I learned that from Daniela). "What brings you to The Red City?" he asks.

"I came for work, the company I work for is a partner of the Festival, but I've decided to stay for awhile, it's a nice place for an artist to live."

"So, you want to sell your paintings here?"

"That's what I'm thinking."

"All the paintings you showed me are figurative, you know, you should do abstracts, they sell a lot better."

"I've never been able to do an abstract before, every time I try images just start forming and it turns

into figurative.”

“How long have you been painting?”

“It’s been a passion since I was 10 years old. I got a set of oil paints for Christmas, and it was like something magic happened. I don’t really care for drawing, for me drawing is only a first step towards a painting. The magic only happens with a paintbrush.”

“How old are you, about 40? That makes 30 years of painting? You told me you work for a company, so it’s obvious that you don’t count on your painting to live on. Not many artists make a living off their art.”

“Yeah, I know all about being a starving artist. When I started college at 17, my vocational counselor told me to forget about studio arts because I wouldn’t be able to make a living as a painter. I ignored his advice and continued with my passion...at the time I didn’t care if I would make money or not, it wasn’t important to me. I had already decided that I would never marry, would never have children, and it didn’t matter whether I had money or not. I can remember times when I didn’t have enough money, and I would buy that tube of paint that I *needed* rather than buying food. I had a passion and painting was more important to me than having something in my stomach. But things change; I fell in love in Paris and got married. Everything changed with the coming of my first child. When my wife became pregnant, I’d been spending all of my time, money, and effort painting, exhibiting, and singing in a rock band, and not making any money. She told me ‘Now, the artist’s life is finished, you have to get a job’ And of course, she was right, when you have the responsibility of little mouths to feed your passion has to take a backseat. So, I got a job and my paints went up into the attic. I didn’t touch a paintbrush for 20 years, until I left my wife. When I did start painting again, just 3 years ago, I found the same thrill as when I was 10. By the way, I’m not 40. I’ll be 50 in March.”

“My advice, like I said before, try doing abstracts and you might have a chance. Do you know Omar Bouragba? You should check out his work, he’s succeeded well, his abstracts are great. He lives here in the Red City, and he’s got a vernissage coming up. Your painting will be hard to sell, it’s really nice, and full of emotion, but it’s a portrait. People just don’t buy portraits.”

“I believe that the best paintings always have a story behind them, something that charges the painting, so it’s not just paint on canvas.”

“Dream of Senegal” has a story then, right?”

“Of course, it’s the first good painting that I did after my twenty-year pause. I had just broken up with my wife. I was living in a small studio in a suburb of Paris, and I had brought my paints so that I could get back into my passion in the evenings after my workday. I had already made myself business cards as a painter, and already had an exhibition scheduled in a Café Bar with just two months to go before the vernissage and nothing really good done yet. I was riding the metro back home from work and I noticed this girl sitting across from me. Her face was really inspiring, and I was studying it, trying to memorize it because I didn’t have anything to draw with. It happened by destiny that we got off at the same station. I approached her and presented myself as I handed her my business card marked Artiste Peintre. I was very direct, telling her that I was preparing an exhibition and that I wanted to do her portrait. She had noticed my eyeing her in the Metro, and from her face I picked up that she thought this was just a come-on. I said that my studio was close by and that she could come see my paintings. She accepted, we even visited the Café Bar afterwards, which was in the same neighborhood, and her doubt vanished. She came for a sitting the next day, and what happens sometimes did happen. We fell in love. It was difficult for me because she was just 24, and I was almost 47. She reassured me that the difference in age didn’t bother her, that it was normal in Senegal. It was a short and sweet affair, it only lasted 4 months, but it got me off to a new start. My painting style completely changed. In the 20 year break I had

lost a lot of technical skill from not practicing, but what I lost was replaced with a new bold style. The maturity and courage that I gained in 20 years allows me to jump right in with a loaded paintbrush, whereas before, even if the technical skill was there, I painted timidly. Hope I'm not boring you!"

"No, but I think your tea is cold. People aren't interested in your passion; they just want something which is fashionable. Try your bold strokes on abstracts and we'll see what kind of result you get." I drink my cold tea and thank him warmly for his advice.

On leaving I notice a sign for an English Language Center. Washington Institute. I enter and get an interview scheduled with the Manager. I go home and type out a resume. I worked for the American University in Paris from 1986 to 1990 while I was studying Business, and I still have my "Carte de Professor". They had hired me on a trial basis to do TOEFL preparation for incoming international students. It's good on my resume, even if it was 20 years ago.

Dressed in a suit as usual, I meet Daniela as planned and get the document legalized. So now that I've got a permanent address, I go back to the visa office with all the necessary papers and ID photos and deposit them. They tell me to come back in a week.

I go to my interview with my resume and get hired on the spot. I have an evening class for beginner adults starting tonight. I do a search on the web and go all around the Red City depositing my resume at all the Language Centers. I get some beginner material ready for my first class, easy to find on the net. I teach every night for rest of the week, an hour and a half each night. The classes are small and it's easy work. I'm enjoying it. It's a real change from Sales. They're not paying me very well though, 100 dirhams an hour. I get my pay at the end of the week, 4 nights, 600 dirhams. I'm thinking I can certainly do better.

I spend the day Wednesday painting then go teach my class and come back home. I read the Qur'an for about an hour before sleeping. I wake suddenly...everything is shaking! What's happening? It can only be an earthquake! I'm scared shitless, I've never felt the earth shaking before! It's difficult to say how long it lasts; it feels like a long moment, it's like an eternity. The shaking stops and I'm bracing myself; will it start again? Will the building collapse? Is this the end? I didn't know that there were earthquakes in the Land of the Setting Sun! I check the time, 2:40. I can't sleep. I go back to reading the Qur'an. I look for a passage that I remember having read:

"Do you feel secure that He, Who is over the heaven, will not cause the earth to sink with you, and then it should quake?" Chapter 67. Al-Mulk, The Sovereignty, verse 16. I stop at another verse in the same chapter a few lines down: "Who is it that can provide for you if He should withhold His provision? Nay, but they continue to be in pride, and flee." verse 21

Yes, who is it that can provide for me other than this Mysterious Force? For the first time in my life, I thank this Force for providing for me and protecting me all through my life. I decide that I will embrace Islam. I have many questions regarding what I read in the Qur'an, and although I'm convinced that I've found the right way, I feel that I'm not ready yet.

It's Tuesday Dec. 22<sup>nd</sup>, a week has gone by, and I go to check on my work visa. They tell me that everything is in order except for my work contract. I'm confused, I ask them what's wrong, it's a valid work contract as Sales Manager for Moviemag! They tell me that it's not the contract they need, they need one which is validated by the Work Ministry in Capital City. I call my boss to find out what this is all about. She says that she won't take care of it, that I haven't proved myself anyway and that I have just until the end of January to do so. She says that she'll take care of the contract if I show results. But, I'm thinking, I don't have time! I have less than one week left before my 3-month stay is over. I return to the visa office and explain that I won't have the validated contract until February. They're really nice about it, probably because I'm an American



and I'm well dressed (that weighs a lot), so they give me a 3-month extension. Thank God. I have until the end of March to find a work contract, and to hell with Moviemag! I just have to keep her happy until the end of January, and I have to find another place to live for February.

Another week goes by, teaching in the evenings, I do some work for Moviemag during the days just to be able to show that I'm doing something. I go to a sales meeting with a well-known Film making School. In the course of the meeting with the Communications Manager, she mentions that one of the students is looking for someone to translate sub-titles from French to English for a Short-length film and asks me if I can do that. I accept gladly. It's a small job, with a small budget, but perhaps it's a start, and I need any money I can get. While I'm translating, I realize that it's very difficult to know how to translate certain phrases without having the context; I need to be able to see what is happening to be able to translate the words. I ask her if it's possible to get a copy of the film. She says unfortunately not. I do my best but make a note to always get a copy of the film, or at least the screenplay, for sub-titles in the future.

It's Christmas Eve, a Thursday, the boss at Washington gave me the night off, and I'm feeling the weight of solitude. The locals don't celebrate Christmas, with the exception of the French, and I don't know anyone. Daniela has gone to the States to be with family. I've been very skeptical about the commercial side of Christmas for a long time, and I don't believe that Jesus was the son of God, but I do miss the happy feelings, the warmth of being with my children and the excitement of the day, decorating the tree... It's the first time in my life that I'm not celebrating Christmas. I'm remembering my last Christmas with my children and Michele, their mother, the year before. It wasn't a happy one. Everyone was very uneasy. It had been almost two years since I left. My children, Flora Lisa, just turned 22, Yann 19, and Mason 16, were all angry with me for having left. I slept on the couch. They didn't want my gifts.

I'm really feeling down, who can cheer me up? Basma, of course! I call her and ask if she's free for the evening. She says that she had planned something but just for me she'll cancel. She asks me where I've been for the last 3 weeks. I say working. Rendezvous at the bar where we met at 9. I start to prepare, what should I wear? Yeah, the artist shirt, but this time with a black suit. I try, looks great, should I wear a tie? I start going through all my ties, I find a green and blue hand painted silk tie which looks like ocean waves. Good match. I'm thinking, what about Dirty Sally? Basma thinks I'm rich...do I want her to see my van? I decide not to let it bother me.

I'm at the bar a bit early, I sit at the same table and ask what kind of scotch they have in the house. I order a Glenfiddich, much better than Johnnie Walker. I like a good scotch. I'm remembering how every year at Christmas time I would buy myself one really good bottle, at least 12 years of age. It would last me all year, until the next Christmas. I would just take a small glass from time to time throughout the year. In fact, even though I like good wine, good strong beer, and good Scotch or Irish whiskey, my children never saw me drunk. I always stopped before I got bombed because I can't stand not having a clear head. I'm thinking... once I embrace Islam, I'll have to stop drinking. At least I'm not an alcoholic. I almost became one though after my divorce. I went through a crisis period, and I did get drunk, a bit too often. Fortunately, the crisis passed, and I hadn't become addicted to drinking yet. But unfortunately, I did become re-addicted to cigarettes in that same period.

Basma rushes in brimming with joy a half hour late. She's dressed just like before except this time with black leather riding pants and gloves. "Hi Anthony, wow, nice! Is it a designer shirt?"

"I guess you could say that, it's signed Anthony Bell"

"Like your hat and your underwear, Ha Ha Ha! Oh, yeah, that's right, you're a painter!"

"You want a Pepsi?"

"No, I can see your glass is empty, let's go!"

“Where?”

“Does it matter? Come on, hurry up!” I pay and we go outside. She walks up to a shiny new Honda Rebel and climbs on. “Hey, what are you waitin’ for? Get on behind me!”

“I thought you said they took your bike?”

“They did! But it was shit, look at this beauty! It really flies!”

“Where did you get it?”

“Santa left it in my stocking! You ask too many questions, relax dude!”

“You ride without a helmet?”

“I am today, you are too! Unless you’re scared!”

Oh, well, I think, I guess I’m in for some thrills tonight, at least she doesn’t drink! “Let’s go babe.”

“You’d better hold on to your hat mister, I don’t want you to lose it!” she says as I climb on behind her. I take off my hat and tuck it into my trench coat and she takes off like a rocket. “Youuuu Houuuu I’m free as a bird!” I’m pressed against her, my face nuzzled in her long soft black hair. It’s extremely exhilarating and arousing! I have to hold on tight as she flies through the streets, zigzagging and maneuvering around cars, trucks, busses, horse drawn carriages, bicycles, donkey carts, pushcarts, and people with an astonishing agility, rarely letting up on her speed except to stop at lights. While we’re waiting at a stoplight I whisper into her ear. “This pretty bird is going to land in a cage if she doesn’t take care.” She laughs “Let ‘em try to catch me; they’ll never get me!” We go across the city, very far, into a neighborhood that I don’t know at all. It’s a poor neighborhood, and she finally slows down. We stop. “We’re here.”

“Where?”

“My house, my parents’ house. Come on, I want to introduce you to my mother.” There are kids playing soccer in the street, like everywhere in the Land of the Setting Sun. A ball hits the Honda, and she screams at the kids “Hey, watch it or I’ll run you over!” She whispers to me “Not really, I’d never hurt a kid.” She examines the bike, no harm done. I take out my hat and put it back into shape before putting it on. “Yeah, that’s the look! Come on, she’s dying to meet you, I told her all about you.” As we climb the narrow stairs leading up to the apartment she whispers again “She doesn’t speak French, but she understands, so be careful what you say. Let me do the talking. When she says ‘Marhaba’, say ‘Chokran Barak Allahoufik’, can you remember that?”

“Yes, no problem” I say. I had already learned this from Daniela. This means ‘Welcome’, and ‘Thank you Allah’s blessings on you’.

We have tea and cakes, and Basma talks a lot with her mother. They’re speaking the local dialect, so I can’t understand what they’re saying, but I can tell that they’re talking mostly about me. Her mother keeps smiling at me and telling me “Coul, coul!” I understand by the non-verbal language that this means “eat, eat!” After about half an hour Basma notices that I’m bored. She excuses us to her mother saying that we have to go. Her mother insists that we stay and eat something, and I hear the already familiar word tagine. We leave, I say “another time (in French), Insha Allah.” I ask Basma if she knows whether the fish place is open. She laughs and says of course, that The Red City is a nighttime city. We arrive at the fish place in a flash with her Honda. Upon arriving I say, “By the way, your name suits you well!”

“Yes! It does! Names are destiny. Everyone’s name is written in their book a long time before they are born.”

“I’ve decided to embrace Islam, my name will be Ali.”

“Insha Allah, it’s a good name for you, and you won’t have to change the initials in your hat! If that’s what your name will be it’s because it was already written in your destiny.” We eat heartily, and she succeeds in cheering me up. We talk about everything; she has a lot of opinions and is very sharp witted. As we’re leaving it starts to rain and she tells me “This is real rain, you see, it feels so

much better than man-made rain, it's my God's rain. Can I give you a lift?" she offers. I decline and we say goodbye. She tells me not to wait 3 weeks before I call her again. I promise to see her again soon.

It's the last Monday of the month and I get a call from a Language Center. They want me to come in for an interview straight away. It's a much bigger center than Washington, much nicer too. I tell the manager, Adil, that I'm already working, and he asks me the pay. He makes me an offer of 150 per hour, 10.5 hours a week evenings and the Saturday morning. I make the calculation quick in my head, 1575 a week, 6300 dirhams a month. Not a lot, but a lot better than Washington. Looks like a nice place to work too, and the boss is really friendly. I accept. I'm to start next week, January 4<sup>th</sup>, Monday to Friday from 6:30 to 8 pm and 10 to 11:30 Saturday mornings. I ask about having a full-time work contract for my residency visa. He says that they don't need a full-time teacher for the moment. The pay is undeclared and paid in cash at the end of the month. I ask if there's a dress code. He tells me no, just look clean and professional.

It dawns on me suddenly that my car insurance expires at the end of the month. I'll have to walk to work. It's about an hour's walk from my apartment. That's OK, I like to walk. I get a lot of good ideas when I'm walking.