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One Morning in Morocco

Eli Mechanic

Eli Mechanic was studying in Morocco from January to May 2003. While there, he kept a journal from which this article derives. When the Iraq war started, the program under which he was studying, The School for International Training, contemplated evacuating students, but Eli and his group stayed, and got to see firsthand how Arabs viewed the war.

MARCH 20, 2003. RABAT, MOROCCO

I woke up to war. The thin walls of my host family's apartment did little to muffle the steady Arabic drone of an Al Jazeera news report that was punctuated by the occasional bomb blast. It was almost as if the war in Iraq were here in Morocco. Opening one eye to the diffused morning light allowed me to just barely discern the mounds of blankets that covered Hamza and Abdelgafour. My Arabic family slept on couches that doubled as beds at night. Jawed, who at twenty-one was closest to my age, was not in his customary spot. Curiosity getting the better of me, I stood up. Bush's deadline for Saddam had ended last night and Morocco had gone to bed unsure what morning news of Iraq would bring. Opening the door to the apartment's main room, I could see Si Mohammed and Jawed intently staring at the television screen. Rajae, Amine, and Khadija were still asleep, their steady snores rising and falling in tune with the televised explosions.

Before turning my attention toward the TV, I whispered "Sabah Al'hair," my morning greeting. The war news was on in full force, absurdly juxtaposed against the plastic Mickey Mouse dolls and the old Koran carefully arranged on top of the television. Al Jazeera, the Arabic news channel broadcast to millions of Arabs from Morocco to Syria and to Iran and beyond, was replaying videos of missile attacks in Baghdad. Jawed was agitated, pacing frantically around the room. He said he had been up most of the night watching the news.

"They tried to kill!" In his haste, Jawed's English was hard to understand. "Boom!" he shouted, slapping his hands together. "Boom — they tried to kill Saddam. But," his hand shot upward, "he escaped!" My host father, Si Mohammed, laughed at this. "The Americans are stupid!" concluded Jawed.

Si Mohammed got up and switched Al Jazeera to FOX news, Arabic to English. Acting on fresh intelligence, American military forces had fired smart bombs on Saddam Hussein in an attempt at "regime decapitation." Jubilant news anchors reported valiant advances by the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division. The reporter was almost breathless, "U.S. troops have already captured the strategic port of Umm Qasir and commandos have seized most of the oil fields."

"See!" screamed Jawed, "they want the oil!" It was hard to take in so early. I glanced at the clock above the television — 8:00 AM — only half an hour to get to

Eli Mechanic recently worked as an intern at Partnership Africa Canada where he prepared a report on gender and security issues in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

my school. The thought of going to Arabic class this morning was unbearable. I felt too overwhelmed to learn verb tenses. For the almost three months my “study abroad” classmates and I had been living in Morocco, known as the *Maghrib* in Arabic, in fear of potential war in Iraq. Although Morocco is far away from Iraq, it shares the bond of being an Islamic and largely Arab nation. Moroccan reactions toward Americans might be calm, or they might be violent. My class had often been warned that if there should be war, we could be evacuated on less than twenty-four-hour notice. Unsure of what either the street or school would hold for me, I opted for the street.

“B’slamah,” I waved goodbye to my father and brother. Grabbing my backpack, I hurried out of my host family’s cramped three-room apartment into the boulevards of Rabat. The main part of the city is composed of concrete apartment buildings and low-slung office towers. My favorite area of Rabat, though, is known as the *medina*, literally *the city*. Medinas were the original Moroccan towns that the French colonized in 1912. The head of the French colonial government preserved the traditional quarters instead of demolishing them as was usually done. Now every Moroccan city has an old medina, as well as a newer *Ville Nouvelle*, built by the French.

Medinas consist of old houses and winding labyrinth-like streets filled with constant movement that, to outsiders, first appears to be utter chaos. Over time I learned that it is really the interactions of a deeply traditional society built upon rigid social structures. An argument between two men is about preservation of honor and face; a woman passes through as quickly as possible because she does not want to draw attention. It is a male space and totally public.

Walking through the medina has become my favorite part of everyday life in Morocco. I revel in the ordered disorder. The infinite movement. The smiles, the frowns. The smells: cumin, saffron, piss, shit, fried meat, mint, garbage. Bumping into people, avoiding motorcycles, returning the smile of a child, recognizing bits of conversation. The blue sky appears in vertical and horizontal slashes above the whitewashed alleys, the old men in pointy hooded jalabas hold hands as they totter down the street, in the stalls are brightly colored cones of spice. A mosaic of color competes with a montage of smells. The beggars sing about Allah, I hear the call to prayer from the mosques and the chanted verses of the Koran drifting out of shops. The experience is so sensual and yet so removed. In the medina I am an outsider surrounded by life never seen in America.

This day, though, something was horribly wrong. Every glance from every passerby seemed different. It was impossible not to see suspicion and anger in those who stared at me. The American! Look at the American! He is to blame for what’s happening in Iraq. Hands in flowing robes might be reaching for curved knives; eyes once curious now seemed hate-filled. The whole world was suddenly sinister. Trying not to glance over my shoulder, I fled back to my apartment.

* * *

When I got back from the medina today I immediately noticed that something was wrong. Opening the door to the apartment I cheerfully announced “Salaam Wehlehkum,” my usual greeting.

“Where were you?” demanded Jawed. His creased brow emphasized the mark on his forehead that many devout Muslims get after a lifetime of touching the prayer mat. I realized in retrospect that I had picked the worst morning to skip class and



tell no one. Teachers from my school had noticed my absence and panicked; several friends tried to call me, but couldn't reach me because my cell phone was turned off. When calling me failed, the school tried my family, who said I went to class. Their hysteria rose. That very morning a representative from the State Department had given a lecture before Arabic class. He warned us Americans to vary our routes each day: "Don't keep a routine, you don't want to be a predictable target." One friend told me that when I disappeared she imagined horrible scenarios of me being kidnapped Daniel Pearl-style.

Now my whole family worries about me. Jawed advised me not to speak any English on the street. "Morocco is safe," he said, "most people have a good mentality. But if one person hears you speak English, well . . ." He opened his hands and shrugged his shoulders. Well what? Another Moroccan put it more bluntly; if I didn't watch out somebody would cut my throat. "Attack Iraq and you'd better watch your back," he warned.

MARCH 26

Earlier today I was in my family's apartment reading, when suddenly Jawed came running in, shouting about dead Americans. "Turn on the TV!" He was excited. "Dead Americans, lots captured. Look!" Sure enough, on Al Jazeera there was a close-up of dead people stacked up inside a building its white bodies with blue and black and red holes torn in them. One had a large jagged split in his forehead. Another had an arm torn off. The video cut to outside, showing an American supply truck riddled with bullets. It looked as though one of the drivers had tried to run, but was gunned down. His arm was stretched out. Whatever he was reaching for, he did not grasp.

"Dead American" repeated Jawed. I couldn't tell if he were happy or not. It was surreal. Besides the revulsion at the gory pictures, something that would never be shown on American television, I had mixed reactions. I felt sad for the quiet broken bodies and anger at my brother's smile. Yet I could understand his reaction. So many people I have talked with here have expressed frustration over the helplessness of Iraq. There is much to be angry about. "Why," they ask me, "do the Americans make war on the Iraqi people?" It is a question I am unable to answer.

Jawed told me that when the pictures of the dead Americans first came on, he was sitting in a cafe. Some people cheered. I recalled what my friend Mustapha said during a speech by President Bush promising aid to Iraq after the war: "You can't shoot a person, then give him medicine and say you're helping him."

The TV cameraman switched to pictures of captured Americans. The soldiers' eyes darted back and forth to their captors. How would it feel, to watch your friends die and know that you are probably next? Iraqis began interrogating them in poor English. The marines couldn't understand what was being asked. Their terror was plain for all to see. Jawed calmed down and my host sister Rajae clicked her tongue in sadness, shaking her head. I asked Jawed if he thought they were going to die. He nodded his head, but added, "This is very bad. Iraqi, American, neither should die."

The images on the screen changed to an Iraqi hospital. A father was holding a baby without a head. My family's faces hardened. I sat there stunned. While Americans see our valiant troops charging across the desert, Arabs see dead children. Because the vast majority of Arab reporters are not "embedded" in American military

units like Western media, most Arab media can only show the civilian toll. Watching Al Jazeera, one sees the invaders as stupid monsters to be killed. Their suffering is to be ignored or even laughed at. It's their fault, after all, for being in Iraq. Look at what they have done; their "smart" bombs are killing babies. Resist them, hate them.

MARCH 31
After finishing a breakfast of Moroccan fried pancakes — rhexa — Jawed and I sat down to sip mint tea and begin out homework. His was English, mine Arabic; our system was to take turns helping each other. During a break I asked Jawed why he thought Americans attacked Iraq. He had told me his opinions on the war before but I wanted to know more.

Jawed replied that there were many reasons. "First, the location is good," he said. Holding his hands in a ball then throwing them outward he explained that the United States would use Iraq to attack countries like Iran.

"Second, Israel is small. Iraq has plenty of land that Israel badly needs."

"Israel is involved?" I had heard this before in Morocco.

"The United States wants Israel to be big. There is a good friendship between America and Israel. If you don't have America you don't have Israel. It was Israel who told the United States to attack."

"Why would Israel do that?"

Jawed replied as if the answer were obvious. "Because they hate Iraqi people and Islamic people. Also because of oil and the problem between Saddam and George Bush's father. Bush hates the Iraqi."

"What will life be like for Iraqis when Saddam is gone?"

"It will be worse, very bad for the people. We have a lot of robbers, thieves," he gestured at the TV that was showing images of looting. "And after the United States finishes in Iraq, then it will attack Iran and Syria because Bush wants to sit in the Arab lands."

"You think the world would let him do this?"

"You find that the Arab world is weak and afraid. Bush is the strongest; he has England and Spain helping. The Arabs now are without dignity. You can't find them together — they are divorced. This is life," he added, shrugging his shoulders in an attitude that appears to Westerners as defeat but is, in fact, submission to God's will.

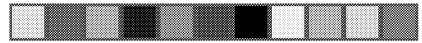
Rajae sat down next to us. "What do you think about this?" I asked in Spanish. Rajae spoke no English, but she did speak some Spanish, just as I did.

"Qué horrible. Many criminals, the people die badly. It is all for petrol."

"Will the United States attack other countries?"

"Why not? I think Bush is a strong person. He has lots of armies." She was mad now and spoke in Arabic. Jawed translated for me. "I hate Bush. If I see him," she drew her finger across her throat, "He is crazy. The Islamic people, Moroccans, they don't hate the American people. They do hate Bush and the whole government who likes war. Kuwait, Spain, they are with Bush also. I say, give Bush to the dogs to eat." Normally Rajae is light-hearted — we used to joke together in Spanish. Now she looked like she wanted to spit with disgust. I had never seen this side of her before.

Jawed jumped in. "It is the Iraqi people who are paying. If one thousand of them die — nothing. One American person, then it's a big deal. The American people don't like to die. Just to eat and to kill. To them, Arabs are animals. Their mentality is that one American equals one thousand Arabs."



My host mother Khadija, who was listening, shook her head sadly. “All Moroccan people cry about this war. Bush is a small man who hates the Islamic world. One day someone will kill him.”

“There is nothing we can do,” cried Jawed with obvious frustration. “If the Moroccan king says ‘no war’ to Bush. Then Bush,” he made a grabbing motion, “Sahara — not yours!” He meant the Western Sahara. Morocco has received invaluable help from the United States in securing the land from rebels who claim independence and without American support the Western Sahara would be vulnerable to rebellion. “If Tunisia says no, then no more tourists allowed,” Jawed said. “Bush controls the world.”

Rajae added; “The Arab world has many economic problems. The United States helps them. But if they don’t follow what the Americans say, then the aid is taken away. You can see that Bush is a robber.” She snatched my pen out of my hand to illustrate the point. “Bush can do that if he wants.”

“In the future, someone like Osama bin Laden will kill everyone in the United States,” concluded Jawed. “The White House, Pentagon . . . Bush has armies, but God is all powerful.”

A^{PRIL 1} My friends Abby, Megan, and I decided to explore Sale, a suburb of Rabat, today. Across the river, it is a very separate city. The movie *Black Hawk Down* was filmed there because of the uncanny resemblance to Mogadishu. It is far poorer and far more conservative than Rabat. The leader of one of the main Islamist groups of Morocco is under house arrest in Sale.

Entering the city through one of its ancient gates we immediately noticed how different it was from Rabat. The medina felt closed in and claustrophobic. Doors were boarded up, the street strewn with garbage. Young men loitered, staring at us, following our every movement with their eyes. The narrow passageways felt like a gauntlet. Unconsciously quickening our pace, we made our way toward the center. Thoughts of Mogadishu and the fate of the last Americans to walk there occupied my mind, especially when people started to yell at us. “Emriki! Emriki!” they shouted, “Americans! Americans!” One reached down and grabbed a rock, hurling it in our direction. I stood in shock as it flew past my head. Megan grabbed my arm and pointed down an alleyway that led to an open square, and we ran as fast as we could, rocks humming by like angry hornets.

* * *

Sitting at a café, just moments later, we collected our breath. We were safe for the moment, though shaken by what happened. “Why all the hostility here?” I demanded from Megan and Abby. “Was it the war or simply because we are white tourists who stick out?”

“The war.” Abby was surprised I had to ask. Our café and the one next door both had war news on. “They hear that all day, every day, and then they see us. What can you expect?”

She was right. Everyone in the square was watching us. Two men sat directly across from our table, staring us down. I could hear Al Jazeera emanating from some TV. The usual words were recognizable, “Emriki, Britania, Irakia.” I pictured the grisly images that were certainly on screen. We finished our greasy chicken sandwiches as fast as possible.

Before we left, a grizzled old man approached, dressed entirely in brown clothing. We handed him our leftovers, a common thing to do in Morocco, and gave him a dirham. Later as we wandered back outside the city he passed us. He smiled graciously, repeating over and over again, “Shukron, Shukron. Hamdu-Allah.” He thanked us and God as he tottered away. As usual, a bad moment in Morocco was instantly made better by the smile of a Moroccan. Already the rock-throwing incident seemed far off.

Unsure of which direction to take, we headed toward the Sale beach. A young man approached us who was wearing a black Addidas tracksuit with traditional Moroccan yellow pointed slippers. Abby and Megan ignored him — Moroccan men approach women in the group constantly. I replied “Salaam,” to his greeting. This encouraged him to follow. Another annoying hustler, I grumpily thought, but I still started a small conversation in Arabic. His name was Assiz and he was utterly astonished that I spoke any Arabic. He shook my hand excitedly.

“Where are you from?” It was the question that I dreaded the most, both for its inevitability and for the conversation that would follow.

I sighed. “I am American.” Many Americans I know in Morocco lie about where they are from. I never do but I still feel like whispering my answer.

Assiz nodded sadly, I probably confirmed what he already knew. Fixing his steely gaze on me, he said, “I have to ask you something — do you like the war?”

I replied that I hated war. “La al Harb!” I shouted, “no war!”

Assiz smiled and high-fived me. I asked him about his views of why the war happened.

According to him, the oil embargo was put in place after the first Gulf War to prepare the country for colonization. “Though you are rich,” he pointed at me, “and have lots of oil, one day you will run out. That is why you attack Iraq.”

“We want to colonize Iraq?”

“Yes. In this way your people become rich.”

We had meandered down to the beach. The ocean lazily rubbed against the shore below us. To our left, across the Bou Regreg River, hulked the castle-like Kasbah Oudiya of Rabat, an Almohad fortress. Behind it stood the proud minarets of the city. The cemetery of Sale was on our right. Yellow, blue, and tan headstones stretched for over a kilometer. Here and there a sparkling white saint’s tomb stood sentinel over the lesser graves.

I thought about dead Iraqis. How many new cemeteries will be needed for this war? A donkey pulling a contraption that might once have been a cart but now was mostly springs and string passed us. Assiz moved on to lighter subjects. “Watch this!” he shouted as he did several back flips over the sand. “Where did you learn your English?” I asked. “Are you a student?”

“I was a student, but I failed out,” Azziz replied. “It was a difficult time.”

I pushed for more.

“My mother took a new husband.” His face clouded over as he said this. “I got a new brother that I didn’t like.”

“Your parents divorced?” This was the first time I had heard a Moroccan talk about this.

“It was so hard. I was so angry, you know. It made me hate everything. Consequently I moved out. Now I am all alone. Working for myself, there is hardly enough money for food, let alone school.”

“My parents are divorced too.”

Assiz nodded his head. "Is it the same in America? Do you have the same feelings, the same anger?"

"Some, yes. Mainly sadness."

"It is God's will. Remember that, we are all human. God is most great." He had to go. We shook hands somberly and then turned away. I joined Abby and Megan as we strolled back towards Rabat. Around us, a multitude of people from Sale were enjoying the weekend. Brown little boys ran around in their underwear while older teenagers wrestled hard in the breakers. Furiously contested pickup soccer games and acrobatics added to the mayhem. Further down the beach, skeletons of half-built boats rose out of the sand. Fantastic blues and reds adorned the completed boats out on the river. I stopped to take some pictures of soccer players, who happily posed.

* * *

Later, after returning from Sale, I joined a gaggle of Moroccans in my friend Mustapha's car. We drove out of Rabat, into the suburbs and slums, while Ackram lit a giant hashish joint and started passing it around. The farther away from Rabat we were, the less modern became our surroundings. Ackram pointed at a particularly pathetic group of dilapidated homes: "Look, Hollywood!" We passed a horse-drawn cart. "A limousine!" shouted Mustapha. Jawed gestured towards a skeletal beggar, "J-Lo!" They laughed hysterically. I was speechless.

We stopped at a café where my American friend Andrew and his host brother Mehdi joined us for mint tea and coffee. We had one of those great international conversations carried on in many different languages. Arabic, French, English, Spanish, a blend of cultures that make up Morocco. Mehdi's girlfriend Maya asked me in Arabic why I was in Morocco. Before I could answer, Mustapha translated it as closer to, "What the hell are you doing in Morocco?"

"A Maghrib belled jaid," I replied simply, saying "It's a good country."

Her reply was in Arabic I couldn't understand. Mustapha and Mehdi laughed a little, then were serious. "It is only a good country if you have money. Then you can have fun, travel around. But if like most people, then . . ." They both opened their hands and shrugged, "then you have nothing. There are no jobs. No future."

In a country that has up to 60 percent unemployment among university graduates, I could see their point. As a comparatively rich Westerner in Morocco, this is something that I have to confront daily. Do I brush off the tenth child beggar of the day or do I give him a measly dirham? And when I do give him a dirham, should that really make me feel better? When I have money stolen from me by my host brother, should I get mad or justify it because he needs the money more than I do? They could laugh at the slums because they were only a few steps removed. I am from another world, one that makes me unable to join their bittersweet laughter.

Mehdi said the lack of future here is why he wants to work in America. Others disagreed. "America is no better," Mustapha explained. "When Americans come to Morocco they get everything. Yet what do Moroccans get when they go to the United States? They get nothing. The American people turn their face sideways. They would rather look the other way than care about a Moroccan." I had no reply to this. How could I when we are mass arresting and detaining without counsel Arab immigrants, when we force immigrants of Arabic background to register with the FBI or face deportation? The table grew silent.

Andrew brought up the latest bad news; the PeaceCorps had been evacuated from

Morocco. The American Embassy gave no reason, but warned us to be careful of terrorist attacks since we were unguarded soft targets. It was hard to ignore this one because my “study abroad” class was the last American group left in Morocco, possibly in all of North Africa. It felt awful to be designated a soft target. The only Americans left in Morocco besides us now were heavily guarded diplomats. Protected by Marines, they had little to worry about.

In fact, if any American left in Morocco had no fear, it was the Marines. My host brother Jawed is good friends with the soldiers who guard the American Embassy. Bored with the café, he told me he wanted to visit them. At first I was opposed to the idea. I admonished Jawed, “Come on, these guys support the war.” I couldn’t believe he was friends with American Marines. He hates the military that he hears about on the news. Our drinks were empty however, and I realized it could be fascinating to hear the Marines’ reactions to the Iraq war.

The “Marine House,” as Jawed always called it, is a large walled-in compound on the outskirts of Rabat. This was not my first time there, though entering the door was always a shock — imagine an American fraternity house that has somehow gotten lost and ended up in Morocco. Inside were pool tables, a huge TV stocked with over nine hundred videos, expensive sound system, plush couches, and an expansive bar (all taxpayer-paid, of course). The fact that five Marines lived there only added to the macho-boy atmosphere. Marine Corp paraphernalia lined the walls. Paintings of valiant combat scenes and steely-eyed generals were everywhere.

Earlier Jawed had taken me to the Marine House for embassy parties. What a weird scene. Aging American diplomats schmoozing it up with young Moroccan prostitutes and hangers-on. Around the pool tables serious crowds of Moroccan men were playing but never drinking. Then a smattering of younger Americans, drinking. Our group usually included a few from my study program, a Fulbright scholar or two, and some American teachers who were living in the city.

Presiding over the whole party were the Marines. During my time spent there I got to know a giant redhead named Eugene and a quiet Puerto Rican named Jose. The three others were a stout, burly Texan, a thickly built and hilarious African American “out a’ Tennessee,” and finally a preppy, athletic type. It felt like a John Wayne movie, where a squad of Marines from all different backgrounds come together and overcome both the enemy and their own prejudices.

Would they open up to my inquiries on war? Admittedly they didn’t know me that well and might not appreciate an interrogation, especially one carried out by a shaggy haired, hemp-wearing college student. During a party I had attended earlier, the Texan had hesitated before handing me a beer. “Ya’ll aint one of them protesters, are ya?”

“No, sir.” I’m just a God-fearing American citizen like yourself, one hundred percent behind our commander in chief. I admit it; for the sake of receiving a beer I had compromised my values. Now, without the beer at stake, I was going to find out what they really thought.

We arrived at the compound. Several utterly serious Moroccan policemen toting well-oiled machine guns demanded our identification. Flashing my American passport, I whisked past them and entered the house. Inside it was dark and only two Marines were there, watching the mobster movie *Goodfellas*. On the screen Joe Pesci and Robert Deniro were beating up some hapless gangster — stomping his face in a violent dance that the huge screen conveyed in every gory detail.

I sank into the couch next to Jose. He smiled and shook my hand, asking,



“What’s up Bro?” I tried to think of things to say as we sat there in silence. I was hesitant about diving straight into war questions.

“So you watch a lot of movies?” Christ, what a stupid question, I thought nervously. He nodded his head and there was silence except for Joe Pesci’s curses rapid-firing out of the TV speakers.

I tried for more asking, “Do you watch the news a lot?” to which I got no response.

I figured I might as well go for it. “So what do you think about the war?”

Jose replied tersely that he was a Marine and was paid to fight, not ask questions about the wars he fought in.

On screen Joe Pesci and Deniro were dragging the badly beaten person into the trunk of a car. There was blood all over the shirts. I tried a different approach.

“Do you know anyone stationed there?”

This did the trick. Jose told me that his old unit was in Iraq. Most of the people he knew in the Marines were involved in one way or another. “I get a lot of crazy calls from my friends. They tell me about all the shit that goes down there.”

“Does it sound rough?” Of course it’s rough. It’s war.

“Yeah. Three of my close friends were killed two days ago.”

The two mobsters had just stopped at Pesci’s mother’s house. They were eating spaghetti while talking with the old lady. After borrowing a gigantic butcher knife from her they headed back out. Jose commented how much he missed spaghetti.

“What happened to your friends?”

“They were in an armored personnel carrier. Someone threw a grenade in. Bang! They didn’t stand a chance — their bodies were spread all over the APC.”

Pesci was loudly and messily using the butcher knife to finish off the person in the trunk. He kept stabbing him over and over again.

“I’ll tell you something,” Jose thrust his gun-like fist at me. “I wouldn’t give a fuck, you know? I will shoot them all down.”

“Who?”

“Women, children. I wouldn’t hesitate. It’s me or them, you know? They’re using suicide bombers, women blowing themselves up. I’d shoot them first.”

“Do you wish you were there?”

“In a lot of ways, yes.” He looked me in the eye. “It’s hard knowing your friends are there. They’re fighting and here I am sitting on my ass.”

“You could die. Does that scare you?”

“Yes, I could die in an instant. But that’s part of the deal, right?”

The other Marine, a new guy named Cecil, added that two of his buddies had been killed also. All three of us lapsed into silence. I glanced at the movie. The dead body was being buried on the side of the road. I didn’t know what else to say, and the two Marines looked like they no longer wanted to talk.

* * *

A^{PRIL 3}This weekend two female friends and I headed up to a beautiful beach town named Asilah. The medina there is a stunning combination of brilliant white and deep blues. It was pouring rain when we arrived, so we ran for cover to the first café. Inside were about thirty extremely somber looking Moroccan men. The heavy smell of mint tea and hashish mixed deliciously together in the humid air. On the

back wall three lamb carcasses hung, their marbled red and white bodies rotating slowly. We sat down. The women with me were both blond, obviously American. We were all laughing because I was telling a funny story about sitting on a plane next to Japanese tourists after backpacking in Alaska for three weeks without a shower. I was describing the look of disgust on their faces when we suddenly realized the Moroccans in the café had the same expression. Everyone stared at us, with gazes of deep hostility and even anger. We sat there, staring back uncomfortably.

A TV blared Arabic news, Al-Arabia, the conservative Saudi station. On it were pictures of wounded Iraqi civilians; one man with a crushed leg, the bone clearly sticking out; a baby screaming, pieces missing from her face. The images were coming from a makeshift hospital in Basra. Splattered blood on the floor mixed with broken glass. We listened intently, along with everyone else, our eyes glued to the carnage. A reporter came on. We understood enough to know that a missile had hit a mosque. The reporter was furious, shouting into the microphone. His body language screamed, "How dare they do this!" I felt strange, very alone, and guilty. I am American. Americans had done this.

The Moroccans in the café appeared to be thinking the same thoughts. Their eyes said, "How dare these Americans enter this space, our Arabic space. How dare they sit and laugh and enjoy themselves while their countrymen are killing Arabs." The tension was palpable. Suddenly, though, new images came on. Protests around the world. People were marching and shouting and getting clubbed by police, showing their anger at an unjustified war. Along the bottom of the screen the small newsbar said where each image came from. At one point the protest was in Manhattan. It took people in the café a few minutes to read the text because it was so small. Someone exclaimed, "New York!" Others repeated, "New York." On the TV were funny images of protesters dressed as Bush. Each one held a globe in their hand while shouting "Mine, all MINE!" Everyone in the café laughed. We laughed, too, and the tension was suddenly gone. After finishing our mint tea we headed back out into the rain. ❀