



Roadblocks, More Roadblocks, Public Baths and CraZiness

I see the row of automatic weapons glinting in the sun before I notice the cadre of men in green and brown camouflage motioning us to stop. Our trip to Tiaret was so free of any unpleasant events that I expected that this trip would be the same. The car jerks to a stop and three dirt-smeared, greasy, leering men come forward with guns pointed at us. Suddenly, I wish I was wearing a veil.

The leader of the group says something to Moe in Arabic and Moe tells me to give him my passport. I take it out of my purse and hand it to Moe and he hands it to the man along with his American driver's license. Pointing the barrel of his gun directly at me, the leader says "*Americanea*," to the other two men.

"Ah," says the second man in the group, his gun also pointed in the general direction of our car. This man says something further to the leader, and the leader, abruptly and unexpectedly, waves us on.

Moe guns the engine and we fly down the road.

A few minutes later, the roadblock out of sight behind us, I glance at the speedometer. It reads 120 kilometres per hour.

"It's okay to slow down now, Moe," I say, though I am still frozen with fear.

"Oh," says Moe. He is shaking.

"They make me have nervous breakup," he says, spiting out the words with anger and frustration.

"It's nervous breakdown," I correct him.

"I don't care - breakup, breakdown - make no difference. I hate this." He mutters as much to himself as to me.

Then, glancing ahead, he exclaims, his voice showing his disbelief, "Oh, shit. Another."

I look up. In front of us is another roadblock, much more elaborate than the last. Three army trucks packed with soldiers block the road. A few oddly dressed men stand in the middle of the road. This time, several cars are stopped ahead of us. The soldiers have one man from the lead car out and up against his car. One soldier is checking his pockets and running his hands over the man's body, obviously looking for something.

"Shit for this," says Moe. His face turns red.

I grip the holy-shit bar tightly and I don't let go until I lose the feeling in my fingers.

"What are those men doing to that man?" Zohra asks, the innocence in her little-girl voice underlining the danger of our situation.

"Nothing!" Moe yells at her, his voice vibrating with vehemence. "Sit down and be quiet unless you want me to go to jail!"

Zohra looks at Moe's face in the mirror and immediately breaks into a loud scream. Tarek immediately does the same. I turn around in my seat and try to comfort them with soft words but they will have none of it. They scream and scream.

Two men from the side of the road walk up to the car and say something that I can't hear. Moe tells me to give him my passport. I hand it to him and he hands it to a man in a green uniform.

"Americanea," that man says loudly. He says something further to Moe and Moe shakes his head and reaches into his pocket for his American driver's license. The man looks at it and looks at me and then at our screaming children. He hesitates, and I think he would like to say more, but the children's screaming is too loud for him to be easily heard. Abruptly, he waves us through the roadblock.

Moe drives around the army trucks and gets back onto the road.

The children quit screaming. "I don't like those scary men," Zohra says in a loud voice.

"Nice screaming," Moe says to her in English. "You too, Tarek."

"You're funny, Daddy," Zohra says back. "Daddy funny."

I look at Moe and shake my head. "Did you tell the kids to scream like that?"

Moe looks at me and smiles. "No, but they did good job, no?"

An hour later, we round a long curve and ahead of us is yet another roadblock.

"I not believe this," Moe says in his most disgusted way. "This just stupid." I watch his hands start to shake and his face again turn red.

Three men with guns, but no uniforms, come towards the car.

"I think these are bandits," Moe informs me quietly as they approach.

I forget to breathe until Zohra asks if she should start screaming.

"Not this time, sweetie," I tell her. "Let's wait and see what the nice man wants."

Moe glares at me like I have lost my mind.

The largest of the three comes up to the car and Moe rolls down the window. The man sticks his gun inside the car and up against the side of Moe's head.

"Are you an idiot or just stupid?" Moe yells at him in English. "Why do you insist on harassing Algerian citizens? I am sick of you people."

The man with the gun bends down and looks inside the car. He looks at me. Then, he smiles.

You speak English," he says to Moe. "I speak English too."

Moe doesn't back down. He says, "Well, if you speak English, then you can tell me why are you harassing my family?"

The bandit removes the gun from the side of Moe's head. "You go now," he says. "You speak English, I speak English. You go now." He steps back and waves us on.

As Moe steps on the accelerator, the sweat trickles down his forehead and runs off the end of his nose. I take a handkerchief from my purse and blot his face. Again, the speedometer reads 120 kilometres per hour.

“How many more times do you think this will happen?” I ask, speaking to no one in particular.

“Who care?” Moe says, great bravado in his voice and tears streaming down his face. He laughs a little crazily, and adds, “Moe is saved by screaming children. Moe is saved by American wife. Moe is saved by English.” He pounds his fist against the steering wheel. “What this be like if I just simple Algerian workerman? I drive along road – I get put in jail by police. My wife get taken for sex by soldiers. I get shot and left dead by bandits. My country is crazy! Soon, I will be crazy, too!”

Now, he is driving more slowly, but he is crying harder. I ache in sympathy for his pain.

“Why does Daddy cry?” Zohra asks. “Why does Daddy cry all the time?”

“He’s not crying, Zohra,” I say, sure that Moe won’t want the children to know that he is crying. “Daddy just has something in his eyes.”

Moe suddenly explodes, “Not tell her that!” He glares at me.

He catches Zohra’s eye in the rear view mirror and tells her, “I cry for my country, Zohra. I cry so that someday you not have to cry.”

Zohra stares at her daddy. “Here, Daddy,” she says. She tosses her doll into the front. It lands on the seat beside Moe. “You can play with my dolly. She will make you feel better.”

He looks into the rear view mirror at his daughter again, and the trace of a smile appears on his lips. “Yes, my little one,” he says. “Your dolly makes me feel much better.”

We drive on to Mascara without another roadblock.

The situation in Mascara is better in some ways than it was when we visited two months ago. Moe’s sisters are all pregnant again, but they seem to be in good health. Moe’s stepmother is back with his father, which means none of Moe’s brothers visit

their father any more, but his father seems happier. If he wants to visit his sons, he goes to their homes, alone.

The day after we arrive in Mascara, Moe's father asks to be taken to Bou Hanifia. "Bou Hanifia," Moe explains, "is a famous natural spring where people go to heal aches and pains. People come from all over the world to soak in these baths. The water comes boiling from the ground. There are many types of baths. My father says you and I can go to the bath for men and women, but that the water is too hot for very young children and so Tarek should stay home with Abdelghani. Abdullah will go to the public bath for men and Aisha, his wife, will go to the public bath for women and she can take Zohra."

I am confused. "Why can't we take Zohra with us?" I ask.

"My father says that children cannot go into the place where there are men and women together. There are no baths for families."

Because Moe is so anxious to show me the baths, I agree. I don't like the idea of leaving my son in the village with Abdelghani, but Moe assures me Tarek will be fine. We wave at Tarek as we leave and he starts to scream. Seeing his unhappy little face makes me feel worse.

Bou Hanifia is located 25 miles from Mascara and the road is quite bumpy and slow. When we finally arrive, nearly an hour later, we begin by dropping Abdullah off first at the bath for men only. Then, we drive a few doors down and drop off Aisha and Zohra at the bath for women only. Zohra isn't sure she wants to go without us, but like we did with Tarek, we drive off quickly, leaving her yelling in the dust as Aisha pulls on her arm, and drags her through the door of the bathhouse.

Moe and I finally find our way to a building that looks more like the entrance to a hotel than a bath. After waiting in line for a few moments, we are directed into a room where we wait again, until a man comes to take our money. He gives us towels.

The rules are written on the walls of the bathhouse. Moe reads them to me. "We have an hour to stay inside the baths, and then, a buzzer will go off, and we have to come out." We walk down a long hallway and into a white tiled room with a tub the size of a

small swimming pool. Once the door clicks shut and is locked, we strip off our clothes, soap ourselves and jump in. The water comes naturally hot from the ground and it is so deep I can just barely touch the bottom. The water smells like clay and feels like sand against my skin, even though it is as clear as glass. We spend the hour soaking and washing each other. I am disappointed when the buzzer goes off. Moe tells me we have to get out right away and get dressed before the next buzzer sounds or we will have to pay double. I dress as fast as I can.

I feel so relaxed and I tell Moe, "That was so wonderful. I would like to do that everyday."

He laughs. "Yes, that is one thing I miss about my village. Too bad it is almost the only thing I miss."

"How do you know when and where to pick everybody up?" I ask as Moe starts the little Renault.

"I'll drive around and pretty soon they come out and stand on the street looking for us.

Forty-five minutes later, we have collected everybody. Zohra is happy to see us and squeals in delight as we stop the car to pick her up. Her skin is all red, like it has been rubbed raw, and she is wearing a new dress - full length and very fancy like a christening gown, like I have seen dresses on little girls during the moslem holidays when all children get new clothes. I ask Moe about it.

"My stepmother, Aisha, buy her the dress. She try to be nice sometimes," Moe says, and then shakes his head, "but mostly she is just crazy. She also say that she paid for Zohra's bath." Again, he shakes his head with disgust, adding, "I know bath is free for children." He dismisses Aisha with a wave of his hand. "I just ignore her. She too strange."

"I think it was very nice of her to buy Zohra a dress," I tell Moe. "Would you tell her that?"

Moe frowns at me and shakes his head, "I hate even to talk to this woman." Then, he holds up his hand to prevent me from protesting. "But - I will tell her."

Moe turns to Aisha and gives her my message.

She leans forward and pats my arm as if to say that's okay, dear.

I nod and smile quickly at her and look away again.

I agree with Moe that it is difficult to look at this woman. Moe doesn't want to look at her because he doesn't like her. I am reluctant to look at her because she has such bad teeth – all broken, chipped and yellow. Her eyes are sunken into her head. She looks sick to me.

It seems to me that she got a raw deal when she married her brother-in-law and took on the raising of his fourteen children. I have tried to tell this to Moe, but he always shrugs it off. He tells me she was nasty and mean to all the children when they were growing up – and she isn't nice to his father. I can't help but think maybe she has reasons for her behaviour. But, I keep all of these thoughts to myself.

Early the next morning, after a night on a lumpy mattress in Abdullah's house, Moe shakes me awake. "My father asks me to go to a meeting with him to help my cousin who is involved in a dispute about land. The mullahs will be there and many of the town's people. We must help my cousin discuss important matters and be witnesses for him. This cousin is ignorant man with no one to help him. My father wants you to come with us. You can watch the children with the other women in the women's room."

We arrive at 9 a.m. The community hall is a large square, fairly new concrete building. Moe directs me to the women's entrance, and then disappears into a sea of men merging into the building at another entrance. I herd the children forward and step inside. Inside, the building is one large room divided in half with blankets hung from the ceiling. One side is for the women and children, and the other side is for the men. The women are all squatting in small groups, chattering away with each other. I look around. There are no chairs. I carefully lower myself down to the cold terrazzo and lean up against a wall. Zohra and Tarek sit beside me.

Once I am seated, the noise surrounds me and settles in on top of me like an oppressive cloud. I try to focus on a specific sound to see if I can make some sense out of it all. But, the voices come back at me in a jumble of discordant noise – the high sounds of

the women and children chattering, the low sounds of the men's voices, some so loud that they all seem to be talking at once, some angry, some soft, some shouting. Above the din, I recognize the piercing screaming of babies and young children as they try to make their needs known. My head begins to throb.

I reach into my diaper bag for toys to entertain Zohra and Tarek, wondering how long I will have to stay here with little to do and no one to talk to. The women stare at me for a few moments and titter to each other, obviously talking about me, but it isn't very long before they turn back to each other, leaving me feeling even more alone.

Slowly, a few of the local children come forward and talk to Zohra in Arabic. She answers them and when they realize she can speak their language, they accept her. She offers to share a few of her toys and their faces light up at the sight of her dollies and their dresses. Tarek plays contentedly with one particularly dirty little boy.

I sigh. Why can't it be that easy for adults? I watch their children's games. When I look at my watch again, four hours have gone by. I am numb in some places and stiff and sore in others.

Tarek wanders by and asks for something to eat. I have a few pieces of cheese and some dried bread left from a meal on the road, which I offer him along with a bottle of water and he seems content. At two o'clock, large trays of sweet and juicy watermelon are passed among the crowd.

The bathroom becomes an issue for me and for Zohra. I tell her to ask one of the ladies where we can go. She looks around at the many groups in the hall and then skips over to a woman sitting by herself at the other end of the hall. I see her little head nod up and down and pretty soon she comes skipping back.

"It's outside, Mommy. I'll take you there," she gallantly declares. I get to my feet and clutching my belongings, I follow her out the door and down a short path to a tree-protected area behind the building.

The toilet is another *dig your own hole and dump your own waste* place. I find a number of woman and children there all engaged in various stages of waste deposit. The smell is overwhelming. Zohra

tells me where to go as part of the yard is *used* and part of it is *new*. It takes me a moment to understand the concept.

I choose a spot in the *new* area and I squat. A piece of old used Kleenex, found in my pocket, becomes my toilet paper. No water in a cup here.

As I stand up again, my daughter declares, “Mommy, your shoes are poopy.”

She is right. They are, and it isn’t my poop. I try to clean it off the best I can with a paper napkin I find in my purse. I make my way back into the building and find my seat again, up against the cold wall. I wait. All I can think is that I need to get out of here soon.

The other women in the room seem quite happy. Most are engaged in sometimes heated conversations about who-knows-what and others are knitting. Some are breastfeeding.

I watch roaches and ants scurry across the floor gathering up any morsel or crumb they can find. I look up once or twice to see where Zohra and Tarek are, but they seem content to play some game with the filthy little boy they first encountered. When I look at my watch again, it is six o’clock.

Suddenly, a loud argument breaks out in the middle of the room. Two women, one young and the other old, start yelling at each other. Tarek comes running towards me and flings himself into my arms, frightened by the shouting. All the women look towards the noise. A few start to chant something I don’t understand. They stand up facing each other. A loud crack echoes across the room as the older woman slaps the younger one hard across her face. The whole room goes silent. The young woman runs to the other side of the building and holding her face sits on the floor with her head buried in her hands. The older woman sits down, triumphant.

“Why are these people so mean?” my daughter asks, her face white with fear. Unaccountably, at my daughter’s question, I am aware of much sadness in the room. Feeling abandoned and overwhelmed by exhaustion, I burst into tears. I reach inside to find my willow. But, it is nowhere to be found.

My head throbs unbearably. I hear loud sobs, not realizing for

a moment that they are coming from me. The voices nearby me fall silent and I can feel everyone staring at me. I feel that I can't stay in this room another minute. I fight to stop the tears and as they subside and the sobbing stops, one of the women comes near and talks to Zohra.

Zohra asks me, "Are you sick, Mommy? The lady wants to know if you are sick."

I shake my head. "No, I'm not sick."

"She wants to know why you are crying."

"Tell her I don't know."

Zohra relays my reply to the woman.

The woman frowns at me. She speaks harshly to Zohra. Then, she fastens her veil across her face and leaves the building.

My tears are stopped for the moment, but I am barely in control of them. Zohra comes to me and gives me a hug. "That nasty lady said you are crazy and she is going to bring Daddy."

A few minutes later, the woman returns and tells us to leave. I gather up my children and my things and stumble out the door, coming face to face with Moe, who is red-faced and barely coherent with anger.

"Why are you crying? I told you women don't cry here. All these people think I beat you or I am bad to you. Why are you doing this to me?" Moe shouts at me in English as I emerge from the building.

"I-I-I am tired," I stutter. My voice is soft at first. Then I hear it get louder, " - and the women in there are fighting. I have nothing to do, and nothing to eat and I have shit on my shoes." I look at Moe and the dam inside me bursts. "I want you to take me away from here. I want to go home, and if you don't take me, I will scream at the top of my lungs until you do." I thrust my face at him and I scream, "How can you leave me here with nothing for a whole day? I am not the one who is crazy! You are the crazy one!" I hear myself screaming and feel the tears streaming down my face.

The rage builds up inside Moe, the redness travelling up from his neck and slowly making its way to the top of his head. "You embarrass me," he starts, quietly. "I am shamed by you." His voice

grows louder until he is shouting at me. "If I have the heart, I would beat you."

"I don't care what you do anymore, Moe! Just get me out of this rat, roach, ant-infested place and do it now! I won't stay here another moment!" I stand, defiant, in front of him.

By now, both children are crying, not understanding why we are screaming at each other. People on the street and from inside the hall stare at us. Many of them are muttering about my behaviour. I try to stop my tirade, but I can't. I blubber a few more sentences, and then break down into sobbing, sure that I want to die.

Moe yells at Zohra to follow him and he picks up Tarek. Then, he grabs hold of my arm and pulls me, stumbling and blubbering, along the sidewalk to the car. He opens the car door and shoves the children into the back seat, at the same time ordering me to get into the front. He gets in behind the wheel.

Through my tears, I see Moe's father come out of the building and walk towards us. He says something I cannot hear. Moe shakes his head back and forth vigorously as he slams the door and starts the engine. He drives us away from the building and all the way to the edge of town where he pulls the car to a stop and turns to me.

His face is still fiery red and full of rage. His voice is hard and cold. "We go home. I never bring you here again. It is very dangerous to travel now. There are many bandits. If we get shot dead, it is your doing. My father very upset with me. He thinks I do something to you to make you cry like this. I cannot even talk to you until I am home."

Moe barks at Tarek and Zohra to lie down on the seat and go to sleep. He puts on the lights and guns the engine. We fly silently through the night. I don't dare look at the speedometer. We are on the road for more than an hour when the car rounds a curve and careens across the road. It jolts as we go into the ditch on the other side of the road, up and out of the ditch and back onto the road. Moe hits the brake and we come to an abrupt stop.

I start to scream, a long high-pitched scream that cuts through the night like the sound of a wild animal. It stops only when I feel

Moe's fist connect with my chin. The blood pours from my mouth and down my front. The children sit in stunned silence.

We drive on through the night. Motionless, I watch the blood drip down my face onto my clothes. Maybe I will bleed to death and make the whole world happy by my leaving it. I am devastated. I have no resources left. For the past three years, the image of a willow bending with the wind has been my mainstay, my line of defense when I was overwhelmed with sadness or anger, when I didn't understand the customs, when Moe demanded something that I didn't feel ready or capable of giving over to him. Today, for the first time, my willow has failed me - and I have failed everyone.

As we climb the stairs to our apartment, Claude comes out of his. He is about to speak, but catches sight of my face and is stunned into silence. I look away and keep walking. As I enter, I hear him say to Moe, "We are finally moved into the house on Baba Ali and I am getting the last of our things out of the apartment. While you were gone, twenty directors from the Ministry of Agriculture were thrown in jail for economic sabotage." Then he adds, his voice quiet, controlled and dripping with sarcasm. "I thought you would want to know that,"

Moe shakes his head. "Good. I am having meeting with the minister and five other engineers next week so maybe more will be in jail by that time."

Claude frowns, adding, "I heard your trip to Paris is cancelled." He leaves.

"That man is trouble," Moe says as he enters the apartment. "My life is like very bad movie."