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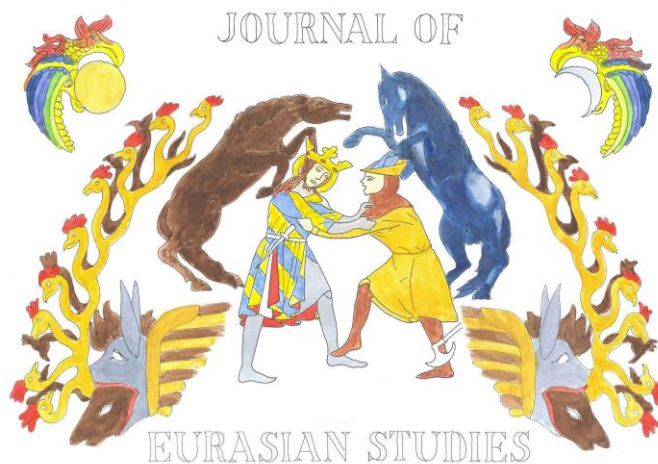
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**Voyage to the Holy City  
of Timbuktoo  
over the Western Sahara**

**Paul Mirabile**

**1972 — 1973**

### Introduction

After a twenty-three year interlude, I have decided to rewrite this account of my travels through the Sahara Desert to the ancient capital of Mali, Timbuktoo. When I first wrote out my article in pencil, a twenty year old 'hero' of African adventurers and filibusters, I had no intention of ever reading it again, much less rewriting it. Now at forty-two, after having roamed through Africa, Europe, Asia Minor, India and China, an intense desire to reread and rewrite it suddenly seized me, as if that particular experience of an eighteen old boy, difficult and painful though it had been, would and should enable me to explain my present inner and outer trials and tribulations with regards to the lands which I can no longer call 'alien'. For now that the mountains, plains and jungles of India and China are my home, in the same way that the desert had become my home in Africa, I can truly declaim that to voyage is no parenthesis in life or 'get-it-out-of-your-system' cliché often heard from very conventional and boring individuals, no juvenile revolutionary's quest of Truth in view of demagog fame, no tax evader's refuge into fiscal paradises. To err is to remain in constant awe of both the wonders and the horrors of our world...

This present version differs in several ways from its youthful prototype: erratic orthography has been corrected (but not too much, why lose the fiery enthusiasm of youth?), the syntax somewhat rehabilitated, the style less fustian, and here and there I have interpolated snippets of erudite and bookish remarks of a more mature vintage! The present version does, however, put into perspective one important difference: twenty-three years of a continuum without any specific goal, any engaging cause, any sparkling land or glamorous rainbow over the horizon. Indeed, the only 'motivation' has been the Road itself, whether stretching forth or serpentine. It has always been there. For it is on this Road, and this Road only that one confronts and completes one's Self with the Other. For without the Other, one's Self is destined to an inchoate existence and eventual perdition...

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*«Do what they manhood bids thee do, from none but self expect applause;  
He noblest lives and noblest dies who makes and keeps his self-made laws»  
Sir Richard Burton*

### The Outset

The voyage to Timbuckoo through the Sahara Desert via Morocco, the Spanish Sahara, Mauritania and Senegal was improvised from beginning to end. Ever since studying about Mali and its arts in High School, it had been an obsession of mine to reach this ancient Muslim light of the desert from where, its great chief, Mansa Musa, left for Saudi Arabia with a caravan so laden with gold that the glittering metal deflated in value when poured into the already swollen weal of the Arabian market! So says the legend. Notwithstanding bardic hyperbole, Timbucktoo was the wealthiest city of West Africa in the late 1500's, and undoubtedly the most intellectual.

When I say improvised that does not mean disorganised: I did have my Michelin map, finely detailed with its 'dirt tracks' (pistes) traced in red, embossing huge yellow coloured portions at the top which indicated the vastness and emptiness of the Sahara; at the bottom fringe, a ribbon of lush green bespoke the beginnings of the Central African jungles.

I knew these colours by heart as well as the names of the oases which peppered the pastel yellow. I knew, too, the names of the bigger cities and towns, the rivers which ran blue through the yellow, and especially I knew each and every road or track that trudged and battled their way through veld and over *erg* and *tell*. The mere touch and smell of that map with its tyre-man looming on the front cover inspired me to venture over these lands without the least preparation, be it material or psychological; it would be my only possession when, a year and a half later, I would be sent back to New York via London from Algeria, dying of malnutrition...penniless.

My journey to Mali began in Casablanca from where I took a train to Marrakech. The 'White City' held no charm for me, so my sojourn was brief. It was the 'Red City' where the royal beginnings of the Sahara Desert lay...

It seemed very odd that the train should arrive in Marrakech at 6:00 A.M. after leaving Casablanca at 10:00 P.M.; the distance, after all, was only 238 kilometres. Upon embarking, though, I soon discovered the reason for this slow-wheeling locomotion: the train made incredibly long stopovers at stations, some up to two hours. Then for no apparent reason, it would stop in the middle of the desert, hours and hours on end. Sometimes I would get up from my wooden bench, my hips aching from lying on them for so long, look out of the bars of the window into the blackness of the night, and try to make out figures which seemingly moved lethargically here and there. It seemed very very unreal. In my wagon lay

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bundles of human beings cuddled up on their benches or on the floor, unaffected by these delays, snuggled warmly in their jallabas, snoring away soundly. They slept in these conditions! It was freezing inside that refrigerated wagon, the icy drafts cutting me in two. And yet they all slept, even the goats and chickens slept. In light of this one must learn to dream awake. And so, awake I did dream, peering into the moonless night, listening to the silence of shifting figures, smelling the freshness of the cool sands.

The train arrived on time. Although having already been to the 'Red City', I did not lose out on that Instant of excitement that a traveller feels when setting his or her eyes on a wondrous sight: the red-ochre ramparts and grovelling markets leave no room for cosmopolitan aloofness or blasé platitudes. And it is because of this Instant that Marrakech is both wondrous and deceptive: the city where your heart leads you is also the city where bus-loads of 'senior citizens' mingle and confer with con-artists, pick-pockets, swindlers, liars, petty thieves, swarming kids and supplicating women with fly-infested babies dangling from their hips. Yet, there are sound reasons for such spectacles: little work or none for the simple Moroccan obliges him or her to 'live off' tourists, which provides them with some income, be it earned, conned or stolen! Who is to judge? Furthermore, the so called 'generosity' of the Western tourist does no good deed to the artisan who is forced to lower the excellent quality of his crafts because of the massive glut of the industrialised tourist souvenirs of poor workmanship that the eager foreigner buys in unbargained quantities at astronomical prices. The ideal remedy to this dilemma would be to educate the tourist in Moroccan crafts in order for him or her to discern between what is traditional and what is rubbish. It is not enough to throw money away on worthless items, or give it away to beggars and children. Here the tourist, that is the wise and educated tourist, could play a large rôle in developing the Moroccan traditional arts and crafts as part of its infra-structure, and not abandon it to pettiness or to the exclusivity of its export market, which in effect does make thrive the one or two percent of the population because of its quality goods founded upon traditional mediums of workmanship. Traditional workmanship must remain a transversal reality in Africa and not a vertical exclusivity supported by a government policy of catering to wealthy foreign clients! And there they were! Bus-loads of enthusiastic tourists flashing their greenbacks, French Francs and Deutsh Marks in the middle of Djemaa el Fna Square much to the hysterical delight of swarming children, experts in thievery and cunning, versed in the art of qualm cajolery. About all this I can speak frankly, I had two wallets stolen in Morocco and conned into lending an adolescent some money for a reason that he never made very clear...

Amidst all this swindling and pick-pocketing, hawkers, tooters acrobats, snake charmers and belly-dancers, all accompanied by ragged clothed children bashing away at tambourines, gathered in the square to earn their meagre living, I plunged and ploughed towards an outdoor café in which several gold-toothed fellows were slowly sipping tea. The sight of my seventy-dollar back-pack and twenty-five dollar boots caused many a fly-infested eye to glare. These items would be sold or bartered for a more suitable weed (along with my father's watch) in the Sahara or in Mali.

I reached a table and ordered a mint tea, a 'nane chay'! It was quickly brought and I thanked the young waiter in Arabic, 'shukran' to which he did not react to at all! I had learned about two-hundred Arabic words, and could rifle off a half dozen religious formulas when greeting and bidding farewell. In fact, I knew more Arabic than French, especially with regards to food and drink. Be that as it may, I had

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never academically studied either Arabic or French (I never studied any language academically!), thus my knowledge was purely practical.

Horribly thin dromedaries were being led by their owners along one of the red-clay ramparts. They were unmajestic, filthy looking beasts, nothing like the ones my High School teacher showed us in her books on African animals, nor blown up on the screens of Hollywood. And indeed, all the scenes that swept before my eyes had absolutely no resemblance to those secure school book photos. And even if there had been some resemblance, I could never have considered those illustrations as really real, seated in that class, scratching out notes from the blackboard, half-listening to the teacher's voice, gazing unenthusiastically at the pictures in the book. Nothing was really real at school; it was all a comfortable illusion to make us believe in its true grit reality, to convince us (I suppose) of its essentialness for our future, like the African photos stirring up 'truth', the captions under them, a label of veracity. Did the others believe in this schoolroom Africa? I doubt it, but I never bothered to ask: I had other blocks of wood to whittle...But who studies reality in school anyway, knowing perfectly well the principal reason for school is to condition the student for social necessity. And since I never believed Society a reality, be it necessary or unnecessary, I rather jogged through it all perfunctorily, waiting for the moment to experience real reality: my own! In short, as soon as I got my diploma I set out on the Road...

A beggar stumbled upon my table and took a seat next to mine. He was blind, or so he feigned. From a tawny shoulder bag he took out a wooden recorder and played a magical tune. He stopped quite abruptly and looked at me through a pair of empty orbits. I gave him a diram and he went on his merry way.

I decided to do the same after paying for my tea. If one beggar came there would be many more, especially since I gave the poor man a diram. The Koutoubin minaret, towering 222 feet, enclosed by a 42 foot garden of blooming Oleanders and Tamarisk, over which spreading palm trees swayed, strikes a glaring contrast with the bustling, sweaty crowds and the filthy lanes and alleyways. The cries and calls of the garden's colourful birds welcome the enchanted visitor. In spite of all this magic, though, I turned my back to this wonderland; it just came back to me that last year in that same wonderland sundry tender young boys, obviously of gay temperament, attempted to lure me into their lovers' nest, a thick foliage of palm and rhododendron in which many a heated passion had been satiated. My reminiscences darkened, snapped brutally by the racking screams of monkeys. The gold-toothed smile of a hooded man appeared before me, he had a strange star tattooed onto his forehead. His three excited monkeys were jumping up and down on his shoulders and on the hood of his jallaba. Without a tinge of haste or nervous agitation he grabbed his playmates roughly around the neck and handed them over to a little boy who stood glassy-eyed at his side. He greeted me and began to converse in excellent English as he took me by the hand and led me through the throngs. We reached a narrow passage which opened up into a maze of alleys, dead-ends and ill-smelling passageways. He explained that he was inviting me to have tea at this brother's café. We strolled ever inward. At that moment the muezzin began chanting the midday prayer *-al-duhr-*: Allahu akbar... Allahu akbar... Ash-hadu an la ilaha illa-l-Lah Ash-hadu anna Muhammadan rasulu-l-Lah Hayya ala-s-sala Hayya ala-l-falah...but the call did not seem to have any effect on my newly found friend, who during the prayer kept bantering away, and only at the pauses after each verse did he not utter a word. Then he stopped; the smile vanished: « Do you believe in God, »



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he abruptly asked. I adjusted my backpack which was becoming heavier and heavier. «Of course I do...I'm Christian » I answered, knowing that God is One for every Jew, Muslim and Christian. He smiled that same gold-glimmering smile, and replied that he had accomplished the pilgrimage to the Mecca on foot. He stared askance at me expecting some response. I didn't give him one. It was stifling hot even in the shade of the high mud walls. The golden-smile of this hooded fellow was beginning to bore me.

We reached his brother's café, a disgusting hole in which were seated ten or fifteen leery looking individuals, all smiling that golden smile. I threw off my pack and put it on a chair beside mine. My attention was suddenly attracted to a noisy incident at the back of this squalid lair. When I turned back to my pack I had an uncanny sensation that it smelt of some foul presence, as if something half-human had crawled inside it. This sensation, so odd, in spite of myself, caused me to shiver and shake. It was in this confused state that I mechanically grabbed hold of it and bolted for the street, followed immediately by the yammering friend. He stopped me and accused me of not trusting him. He then began to touch my face. I pushed his hand away and walked nervously along the endless passages and lanes of that labyrinth. I heard a volley of harsh, guttural screams from behind; I didn't turn back.

With the Arabic I knew, I found my way out of the stifling maze, although I did calm down just for one moment in order to savour a cous-cous laden with mutton and merguez. I had to eat something, for I was determined to reach Southern Morocco as quickly as possible, which meant that I couldn't drink 'chay' with 'friends' all day long in Marrakech: I made a bee-line for the bus station.

Rotten luck! The next bus through the Atlas to the mountain town of Asni would leave the following morning. I spread out my sleeping bag on the floor of the bus terminal and slept with the other morning passengers...I hardly closed an eye that night, however, the rush into the bus at 5:30 shook the sleepiness out of me! No blow was spared as the passengers whom I slept with, and who slept so soundly and peacefully, now red-faced and swearing, strained into the bus, whilst the driver observed the whole scene apathetically, ticking off the beads of his rosary (al-subha)! These moments of intense physical contact can be nightmarish for the ill-prepared traveller. Women, as well as men, become very violent in the pursuit of a place to put one's belongings or to sit down. In the mêlée are mixed animals, braying children and assorted fruits and vegetables. Yet, once seat or floor space fully secured, smiles appear, friendly glances exchanged, and conversation follows; everyone reverts to his or her former amiable, civilised self...

The mini-bus sped from the station and entered the foothills of the great Atlas Mountains along the famous Tizi'Test road. This road, narrow and at times dangerous, winds up over icy brooks and glistening white glaciers. The rising orange sun cast hazy rays upon the skirts of granite grey relief. And as we climbed higher and higher, the spectacle became glorious. The air thinned to icy slivers, yet no one closed their windows (most of the glass was broken anyway!), the half-sleeping passengers just huddled up in their jallabas, and hid their faces in the hoods.

I got off at Asni. A policeman directed me to a mountain lodge where I would spend two freezing nights in spite of the fireplace and bundles of faggots at my disposal. The colours of this region were

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truly striking: the white of the snow-capped mountains glistened, the greens of the grassy tablelands shone, the blues of rushing streams, the roan of horse and soil. But because of the intense cold, for which I was guiltily unprepared, I left, hitch-hiking a ride with an English couple across the mountain chain down on to the coastal town of Agadir. We arrived at midnight, and they permitted me to sleep in their vehicle whilst they stayed at a hotel. As to Agadir, there is nothing much to say: destroyed by an earthquake in the 1960's, the town had been completely rebuilt to the needs of affluent Western tourists and moustached Moroccan businessmen. In short, the modern bore! I headed out that morning for the desert towns of Tiznit and Goulimine, the first a mere blur on a speeding lorry, the second a stop-over for five days, time during which I learned of a peculiar legend...

Goulimine is an ochre coloured town of great beauty, regardless of rusty cans, broken bottles and dead animals strewn here and there. And it was here, amidst the thick mud-packed walls that young Europeans and Moroccans (even the police!) indulged in much smoking of hashish and consuming of hallucinogenic drugs. During their rather torpid fêtes, they constantly exchanged smooth little oblong beads, blue in colour, speckled with black and red. Curious about this rite of exchange, I asked an Englishman, who rather perfunctorily, and in a wheezing pedantic tone, replied that they were the ancient coins of West Africa, probably made in Mali, and still circulated as a medium of bargaining exchange. Here they were traded for hashish...He continued to relate that they were made from the sands of the Sahara. He plucked one from his *handira* pocket (a long tunic) and handed it to me: «A little gift from Goulimine», he laughed stiffly. «Take it with you through the Sahara, it may bring you luck, or even save your life!» With that trite remark, he turned to go. I stopped him. «Why are they called Goulimine beads if they are made in Mali?» He bowed his head for a moment. «They were brought up by the caravans from Timbuktoo. There must have been loads of beads in South Morocco because the women make necklaces with them, then sell them off to either Moroccans or tourists.» Without saying good-bye, he descended the wooden stairway that led from his mud hut to the street.

I did keep my Goulimine bead in my pocket and admired it quite often on my journey through the Sahara...and even further, on the pirogue that took me to Timbuktoo on the Niger River; alas, that river would swallow up my glass-bead companion along with the silver ring that I had purchased in Algiers. Squatting in the cool shade of a mud-brick wall I listened to the muezzin call *al-'assor* (the afternoon prayer), then to his sermon: was it Friday? A young boy sat beside me. I had seen him earlier, hanging out with the foreigners and some policemen. His English was excellent as he turned to me: “the voice of Bilâl! Full of power and tears.” His voice sounded strangely intoxicated: hashish? I shrugged my shoulders. “Meryam! You know...the Imam is now telling us about Allah’s verses for Meryam.” I didn’t know what the hell he was on about. “Your Virgin Mary,” he laughed. His laughter recalled my absolute ignorance of Islam and the Koran. This he fully understood and translated the Imam’s sermon for me. And whilst he does so, let me take this opportunity to recount an incident that would take place some twenty years later in Eastern Turkey, where I was exploring the extant mediaeval Armenian churches and monasteries round the region of Lake Van. One night I found myself stranded in a Kurdish village on the lakeside. The Imam invited me to spend the night at his house. The next morning, still half-asleep on several carpets and kilims he had laid out for me on the floor, he crept into the large room and began chanting *al-fajr* in a very melodious voice. I sat up. He finished his chanting, and said that he had offered Meryam’s voice to me from the Koran because the tones of her Koranic voice resemble those of my

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Christian Mary's! "Is she not both the Mother of God and of the Prophet, Issa"?.. The sermon had ended. The young boy jumped up and hurried away behind the labyrinth of mud-brick walls...

After five days of existing on the plains of several realities whose cross-roads and junctions were difficult to comprehend, nor did anyone really attempt any comprehension of them, I hitch-hiked out of Goulimine and reached the last town in Southern Morocco, Tan-Tan. It is here that the paved road ends and the dirt track (piste) begins. It is thus the beginning of the Western Sahara Desert whose western fringes in Morocco, the Spanish Sahara and Mauritania are lapped by the waters of the Atlantic. It is also in this village, and in its surrounding hamlets that the inhabitants are called the 'Blue People'. Of Semitic origin, the vast ensemble of the Toureg peoples are easily identifiable by their robust, majestic stature, their deep ebony skin and the intense indigo colour of their silk togas. The combination of ebony and indigo is set off by the roan and ochre colours of the town's adobe homes and partially crumbling mud-packed ramparts. I remained in this enchanting ambiance for a few weeks, meandering up and over huge sand dunes which girt Tan-Tan, practicing Arabic and French with the easy-going villagers, making contact with lorry divers who would take me on towards the Spanish Sahara, rolling along at 20 kilometres an hour, the Atlantic to my right. But for this stretch of the Road I wouldn't be alone...

I met two Englishmen who were also heading for the Moroccan border and had already secured their transport. It was a big open vehicle with plenty of room for more. The driver was willing to take twenty or so passengers, if of course, the price was right. The Englishmen escorted me to several Moroccan drivers who were eating, and soon with whom I arranged my lift. Our conversation was short (how could it have been otherwise with the little Arabic and French that I knew), and the affair settled. Two days later, after the prayer at dusk, fourteen bustling Europeans crawled and huddled into a lorry filled with bales of canvas-bundled cotton. The cool night air provided the drivers easier conditions for crossing the desert: the temperatures during the day could rise to 50 or 55 degrees! As for us, the desert cold began its steadfast work of inching through our bodies, gnawing at our joints. We all sought the animal heat of intimacy, back to back or shoulder to shoulder. Some managed to sleep on that tossing and pitching truck as it crashed over scrub weed and sand shoulders, plunged into and over enormous pot-holes. I merely stared into the black sky dotted with so many stars: I recalled those rides along the New Jersey Turnpike on my way to Florida, or to the Washington Peace Demonstrations in the 1960's, the police riding by and with their bull-horns sounded out: "get off the road or your ass is grass!", an expression without whose rhyme meant absolutely nothing to me! Cramped together with dozens of flipped out hippies (that the police labelled 'hippy scum') in the backs of vans or trucks, we conversed in wild tones, reading Abbey Hoffman and Timothy Leary. All that mayhem had been a crucial moment for many of those 'hippy scum': for some it foreshadowed a return to Mom and Dad, for others rehabilitation centres, some reintegrated into the gigantic American Machine, others declined into Burrough's Dream Machine... A few of my travel-mates had been killed or simply vanished. My best friend had hanged himself...Still others, however, continued on their journeys far and wide, either married and supporting families, or alone, surviving as marginals, philosophers or poets, living out their dreams wherever they were permitted to do so. Did Africa provide sanctuary for the disillusioned and the adventure-seeking...the revolting and the revolutionary? After having read Eldrige Cleaver and Timothy Leary the question seemed a childless one: perhaps the 19<sup>th</sup> century explorers and scientists had far sounder reasons for risking their lives in the deserts and jungles of Africa...

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The stars suddenly disappeared, chased away by the first dim glow of white light over the Desert. The orange-red sun rose higher and higher, illuminating tawny sand dunes, warming cold numb limbs, bathing the vast *erg* in a pure white that stretched out over the ocean waters. The Atlantic! I had crossed her on the 'Frederico C'; eleven splendid days. How I despised airflight! Despised the aeroport crowd, their smug, snippy, stony looks, their professional gawkiness of self-importance painted on their faces! I travelled by ship, any ship: passenger, mail, cargo, and upon any waterway: ocean, sea, lake, river...I had boarded and would board more ships than aeroplanes in my travels: Italian, Polish, British, Indian, Irish, Chinese, Turkish, Russian...the authentic voyager travels by ship for Time is his; it belongs to no one else! The longest and the slowest ship...Listen not to the scorn of the air-borne traveller in cohorts with dull-headed, unimaginative governments that scrapped their passenger ships in order to eliminate competition for the benefit of the airline companies and undoubtedly double the value of government shareholders in those companies: American Airlines, Delta, Turkish Airlines, etc. Ship travel, too, represented the dour-faced Immigrant: the potatoe-famished Irishman, the fish-monger Sicilian, the escaping Jewish Communist or Anarchist, the Black Sea bumpkin from Trabzon...Modern travel required a newer image, a brighter world image of the clean businessman boarding his plane, business class, of course! Modern countries effaced the ugly Immigrant and replaced him by the joyous, upper middle-class globe-trotter who boards his or her glamorous, mammoth cruise ship, where a costly atmosphere of programmed entertainment and fun attempts to inject a bit of amnesia into a boring, foot-shuffling existence! World-cruises for the rich and bored and the aeroplane for the 'man-on-the-go' are indeed our modern signs of progress! Signs of Mafia decision and lobby-rule...But never despair true travellers, many countries still maintain their passenger ships, and there still exist the irreplaceable cargoes. Time is yours...it belongs to no one else...

The sky transformed, slowly, into a deep azure which towering sand dunes longed to touch. I worked my way to the other side of the truck in order to scrutinize the point at which the sands met the unruffled waters: that point of Creation, of that primeval scene in which the Encounter of Earth and Water made surge those first life forms. I saw on that forlorn beach Captain Riley and his fateless crew, washed ashore, plunged into a Time that linked a Past of slavery to some hapless, ill-forming Future. Our lorry continued to roll and rattle onwards as its gummy-eyed passengers began to stretch their stiff limbs...

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### The Desert Sands

The track on which we travelled was the only route through the Western Sahara, at least as far as vehicles are concerned. Caravan passages, weaving from one oasis or water hole to another are indeed traced on the Michelin map, but this type of travel required an excellent command of the Arabic language and customs, robust health, wide experience in dromedary riding, and especially the courage to admit to oneself that you may never be seen alive again. I possessed none of those aforesaid qualities...

The track was but two narrow tyre treads, now visible now swept away by the winds. It wound its way around gigantic sand dunes and over sweeping salt deposits. In one of those enormous glistening salt lakes we halted. A Taureg strode up to the driver's window with an outstretched tin cup, he was asking for water. I spied out the surrounding emptiness: where had this nomad come from? An Irishman who had not stopped talking to me for hours informed us that these tribesmen lived on handouts from the hamlets and villages, wandering the desert in search of food and water. I was in no position to decide whether this explanation was sound or not. However, our short halt became a very long one in view of a broken axle and two flat tyres. The accompanying driver built a fire, asking us to fan out in the sands to fetch as much Wormwood and Aslawood as possible. After the faggot-gathering, he cooked some rice, and when we had thrown down as much wood as the surrounding desert offered, at least as far as we dared to venture into it, he handed out fresh dates and tomatoes. I then climbed up a dune, sifting the soft brown sand through my fingers. The grains felt like silken threads. I covered my head with a shirt from my pack. It was a flannel shirt, bought from an Army Surplus shop in New York City. All these clothes were much too hot for this climate: jeans, thick, long-sleeved shirts, sweaters, boots! My feet were sweltering inside them, sticking to the only pair of socks which had accompanied me since my excursions into the mountains of Tennessee on the Appalachian Trail. And that was a long time ago...I would have to get rid of all this weight, and the sooner the better. The engine started. The fire was stamped out.

We hadn't been moving very long when just over a chain of sand dunes emerged a wooden hut nestled between two gigantic white dunes. We all stood up and stared unbelievably at this hovel in the middle of nowhere. The lorry stopped on the track just in front of the hut from whose curtain door the owner appeared, smiling a golden-toothed smile, waving his arms. He was all agog!

As we jumped off our vehicle the owner ran over to us obsequiously, and invited everyone to sit down on straw mats of various colours, in front of which had been placed tea glasses, tiny silver spoons and large cone-shaped sugar. These miniature mountain cones are broken into pieces and dropped ceremoniously into the tea. The owner did just that, serving everyone, foreigners first. He dashed about excitedly, gesticulating and speaking at great speed. The Europeans began talking about their former and future travels, sipping tea and studying maps. A wooden board was passed around on which everyone was to sign their names and write the date with a piece of chalk. I noticed alongside one name the date 1965. Did the lorries pass over the tracks at that time, or did that hearty wayfarer undertake the journey with the slow-moving camel caravans? This brought to mind the fascinating life of Isabelle

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Eberhardt, the 22 year old Russian girl who, disguised as a Muslim boy called Mahmud Saadi, roamed the Sahara for years, saved once or twice by a French lieutenant, Toulot, from being swallowed up in the swamps, but unfortunately, was drowned in a flash-flood at a very young age. This woman loved the Sahara Desert, the hot, yellow, sandy air, the impenetrable emptiness, the noble life of nomadic plenitude... But here I must cut my day-dreaming short because the driver is already in his seat whilst the others are digging into their pockets to pay the cheerful owner.

Back on the road the sun climbed hotter and hotter into the now white sky. I stood up, peering out into a heaving, sweltering horizon. Watery images appeared to dance in the distance, frolicking over white crested sands and green cacti. I looked down onto the salt lake that we were presently crossing, perfectly flat and gleaming in the pearly solar rays. And like that first primitive scene at the beach, here too Creation had offered the Earth a huge lake from whose waters lush vegetation had grown. This deep green foliage had given way to the withering yellows of death, to the whiteness of extinction: this foliage and its civilisation survive no more, save the few time-eaten pillars and *atriums* of its once former caravan cities which lie scattered throughout Northern and Central Mauritania. I had been told once that all great civilisations were wrought from the desert sands, and all great religions forged upon the nomadic anvils of suffering and hardships of desert life. Only a few doughty adventurers had revealed what lay buried beneath those oceanic dunes: the Sir Richard Burtons, the T.E. Lawrences, the Théodore Monods; they knew and understood this civilisation and its religion. They knew as well as the nomad had known, and undoubtedly still knows...

We skidded by serrated rows of Cacti and Tamarisk. We steered round hillocks of ebony coloured sand and there the lorry came to an abrupt halt. The sun was sinking rapidly over the distant ocean, streaks of iridescent beams illumined the darkening waters. The drivers had alighted from the vehicle and had laid out their prayer mats upon the cooling sands. They cupped their hands over their ears, bending low and knelling towards Mecca, their backs to the deep blue, fig-like waters of the Atlantic.

When they finished, the habitual night cold had already settled in. The lorry lumbered off into the blackness. But soon several yellowish lights were discerned just ahead of us; we were approaching the lonely Moroccan frontier post Tah, a godforsaken place which consisted of one tiny white-painted domed adobe residence, seven metal shacks, in which were stored canned sardines, a clay-baked oven in a hackney wooden hut, and about seven or eight inhabitants. The lifestyle that these people must have led was well beyond anything I could have ever imagined anyone to lead. Perhaps I read about them in my school books; but had taken it all for granted!

Three Americans and myself slept on straw mats in one of those metal shacks; other Americans and Europeans pitched their tents just behind us. Since the Spanish Sahara frontier was closed until Monday, we had to wait three days, willy-nilly, for the Spanish authorities to open it. Lanterns were provided by the kind inhabitants (one or two of them speaking French) which enabled us to discuss our travel plans or read what few books we had. I myself was involved in the *Hobbit*, and used the pages that I had read for toilet-wipe, coarse though it was on such sensitive zones. It was during one of those nocturnal discussions that I convinced Bill and Joseph to accompany me through the Sahara to Senegal. The other American, a sulky looking fellow, felt that he was unprepared for that voyage and had decided to take

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the boat from El-Auin, the capital of the Spanish Sahara, to the Canary Islands, and from there board another ship to Dakar, Senegal where he would meet us. This meeting would never take place: two years later whilst convalescing in New York, I heard from a fellow traveller whom I had met in Libya that this poor American had completely disappeared in spite of all attempts by his family to trace him. He wasn't the first to have dissolved into the deserts sands, and the list of the 68 missing Americans that the consul general to Algeria showed me in his office a year later when I had fallen very ill and was without money, either confirmed the hazards of travelling through Africa, or the truth of the sundry Vietnam War draft-dodgers wandering listlessly through North Africa, especially in Algeria, a haven for Black Panthers, escaped prisoners, draft-dodgers and soldiers gone AWOL.

During the cooler hours of the day (very few), I explored the surrounding desert. The sea could be heard when the wind lifted, and although only a few kilometres away, it was advised not to walk there: the heat was truly oppressive and the sands scorching. I had been lucky in Tah, trading off my Western clothes for a beautiful yellow jallaba of light cotton which did indeed provide the body an excellent garment of protection against the glaring sun. This certainly lightened my backpack, and all that I needed to do now was sell or trade off my boots. As to my thick woolen socks I buried them in the sands where the stench would offend no one besides perhaps a curious camel...

A flat, stony desert lay monstrous on all sides of us. Circumambulating cacti and Wormwood, I noted dome-like nomad tents around which dromedaries were either kneeling or standing. I bent over a cactus and was about to open its coarse green bark when a terrible thought struck me: my hunting knife! It was neither in my backpack nor in its sheath on my belt. In a flash it all came spinning back: the smiling golden-toothed 'friend' leading me by the hand to his brother's café, the altercation in the back, the smell of unhealthy humanity that drifted out of my pack, the uncanny feeling of loss or disorientation. The golden-smiling tea-drinkers had pinched my sixty dollar hunting knife: that trusty blade of the Everglades and of the Tennessee mountains. So be it! Without further self-commiseration, I opened the thick bark with a stick causing a creamy white liquid to ooze out. I had read in some desert survival manual that this liquid alone kept a man alive for days. Catching the dripping ooze with my finger I placed a few drops on my tongue. It was vile stuff, and soon a tingling sensation began to burn the tip of my tongue, gradually creeping its way into the whole cavity of my mouth. I washed my mouth out with water and spat out saliva for two or three minutes. So much for survival manuals. To get all this out of my mind I trained my eyes on a flock of wild dromedaries that were screaming and trotting about over the sands. They appeared so thin against the backdrop of such vastness.

On Monday morning before the air got too hot, we all walked the two or three kilometres to the Spanish Sahara border where we were detained hours on end. Our bags were thoroughly examined, our passports stamped three times (there were three borders!), our application papers verified, stamped and stamped again, all this done with extraordinary meticulousness and with an exaggerated lethargy that created a strange tension and nervousness. The bus that finally transported us towards the capital, (El) Aiun was stopped three times, and each time our passports and bags were checked, rechecked and checked again. During these monotonous interludes Joseph, Bill and I planned to lodge in Aiun for a few days so as to pick up supplies for the long journey through the deserts of the Spanish Sahara and Mauritania.

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The road was a beautifully asphalted one: an ebony ribbon cutting through the yellows and whites of now flat now hilly sands. Several hours later we were all dropped off in Aiun, some heading directly for the beach, others scattering out towards the interior of the city. At a quick glance Aiun appeared to be a huge military installation for conscripted Spanish soldiers, retired army officers and wild filibusters or merchants out to have some fun with the 'Arabs'! In fact it was a vast military complex, from whose sinister cannon-fodder the fascist patriots of Franco had been led into Spain to fight the Republicans in 1936. There were many policemen strolling aimlessly about in the streets, all of them of Spanish origin, sporting thick black mustaches, clad in that familiar grey uniform so representative of Spanish. Located a few kilometres from the coast, Aiun attracted no vacationers from Spain, most of the Spanish 'jet-set' preferring either the Canaries or Majorca, in spite of the local 'Arab' colour and exotic thrills for males. What did Spain want with this thin strip of sand? Franco's arguments were sound: training camps for Spanish soldiers and recruiting stations for the indigenous who couldn't care less whether the enemy was Republican, Communist or foreign. The Spanish Sahara also served as the *impartibus infidelium*, or more simply put, the exiled political or religious misfit who wouldn't keep his mouth shut. Economic benefits were to be reaped from the Rio del Oro. But was there really gold here? Not really, but much phosphates that Spanish technology had not quite yet been able to exploit, so deep were they buried under those golden sands. Their veins run across pockets of crude oil. In 1966 a referendum was held, and the 50,000 or so Muslim population of the Spanish Sahara voted that Spanish protection be maintained, and that the 19,000 Spanish population, of which 10,000 was military, remain in their shops, bars, barber shops, taverns, villas and military installations. One cannot blame the Saharians, Morocco and Mauritania have had their covetous eyes on those phosphate deposits every since the French grudgingly granted them their independence.

We checked into a hotel whose high ceiling rooms were large and airy. Both the outside and the inside walls were roughcasted in shimmering Andalucian white; the interior decorated with photos of bullfighters and bullfighting, whorling Flamenco dancing girls and a few oil portraits done by local Spanish artists. On a large dresser a beautifully designed 'abanico' had been opened. This was the closest I had ever come to Spain.

High narrow windows opened out on to a small balcony whose lattice rails were ornamented with blooming red and white roses, clusters of scarlet and purple geraniums, intertwining wisteria. In order to escape Bill's insipid comments on what he considered to be the Spaniards' 'gaudy' tastes, I leaned over the black iron-wrought lattice and observed the movement in the streets: an excellent view; we were on the third floor of this 'posada'. Directly below someone was listening to 'Viva España' on the radio, and just across the street in a tavern, also of roughcast, over whose doors read 'cueva', *rumba* and *pasadoble* rhythms were blaring out.

The narrow streets were filled with mustached Spaniards attired in Western style clothing. The European women generally dressed in ample white blouses and skirts whilst the 'locals' were jallabac-clad, the men a few steps in front of their veiled wives who followed dutifully behind. At a glance, I had the impression that the Europeans out-numbered the Saharians. All the signs were in Spanish. Now and then the Arabic translation would be printed below. But this was a rare concession. Spanish rang out from all quarters! This Iberio-Saharian admixture inspired no success: the out-going bombastic



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Spaniards intermingling with these grave, solemn, introverted desert nomads proffered no harmony of contrasting cultures. But was the interpenetration of cultures the intention of the Spaniards? No! Nor was it the Saharians'...Only ideologists believe in such miraculous assimilations or integrations. The realists accept the Master/ Slave dichotomy, the cynics remain amongst their own peoples, quite content with their 'pure' heritage...

We spent three days in Aiun collecting food supplies for the desert-crossing, getting polio and tetanus vaccinations, stuffing our faces with tacos, paellas and café con leche, wandering about listlessly. Bill's sarcastic or asinine remarks knew no bounds. Joe was more easy-going, but tended to agree partially or wholly to whatever stupidity Bill vomited. Bill was the typical American college graduate: pedantic, lofty, full of himself, yet nine times out of ten full of cliché! Joe had been a car mechanic in Canada (if I remember well) and took himself less seriously, which was a courageous, truthful attitude, since he never was. He learned things the hard way or he didn't learn them at all. He did teach me one curious practice that he had learned from his father: instead of getting up at night to go to the 'piss-pot' (as he phrased it), his father would whip it out and piss in the wash-basin. Bill, an upper middle-class snob and mommy's favourite, was absolutely repulsed by this degenerate rite. However, Joe tried to explain to him that their 'piss-pot' was outside, and outside in Canada meant 30 degrees below zero during the winter! Was it not more convenient to do it in the sink? Bill took no heed of this argument, although I will add here that this did not prevent the repulsed college graduate from secretly getting up at night and pissing in our room's little sink. Perhaps his gesture was a contemptuous one because it wasn't his American upper middle-class mother's sink!

Our last night in the capital was spent strolling about the neon-lit streets and eating at a very expensive restaurant which served us Valencian paella (rabbit), tacos as a side-dish and gazpacho. We drank Tio Pepes and Spanish beer. Prices were exorbitant, but we did eat to the live rhythms of Jotas, Rumbas, Flamenco and Fandangoes. The restaurant was jam-packed with singing and dancing people, all of them of course Spaniards or other Europeans. The waiters and kitchen slaves were obviously of local 'colour'. We paid and left: the streets were streaming with night-strollers, the 'masones' crowded with drinkers, the 'cuevas' teeming with nocturnal excitement. Rio de Oro? No metaphor here...

Bill chose to ignore me completely, Joe reluctantly taking his side, throwing me side glances every now and then which I deciphered as either pity or scorn. A sharp feeling of unwantedness overwhelmed me for a moment and this feeling would grow sharper and more precise as our voyage through Mauritania grew longer and more painful.

I hardly slept that night. Bill's sardonic voice echoed hollow through my angry mind. I knew perfectly well that to travel with these two fellows would be senseless since our world views and experiences could not be shared. I concluded, nevertheless, that I should stick to my original plan and work my way down with them...for the better or the worse. After all, covering thousands of kilometres of desert on my own might be too risky. As I would learn through experience, however, the only way to cross the Sahara Desert was alone...

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The following morning we got a taxi that took us to the city checkpoint where we had our passports cleared. The Spanish police, three of them, told us to sit down and wait for the lorries going either to Villa Cisneros or to the first town in Mauritania, Bir Moghrein. And there we waited...Hours and hours passed. The sun rose and with it the heat. All five of us sat under the shade of a tree, the police gradually getting on our nerves, speaking so quickly and with so many slang words that I couldn't understand. I did get on with Spanish quite well since I had worked seven months at a Miami Beach hotel, the Colonial Inn, with Cubans and other South Americans. All these Spanish-speaking dish-washers, bus-boys, sweepers and waiters, most of them refugees from South American squalor, who now found themselves in Miami City or Beach squalor, taught me a lot Spanish, beginning of course with all the dirty words and those of the Bible. When Bill learned that I could communicate with the policemen he assailed me insult: my Spanish was worthless, as worthless as my French and Arabic! Although I would not want this to be taken as a cheap retort, I shall confer, nevertheless, that five years at an American college produced a Bill of little linguistic value. He flaunted his 'Bachelor of Arts' about like a peacock fanning her showy tail. The American graduate knew little French, less Spanish and one word of Arabic, 'em-she' which means 'piss off'!

At last, towards nightfall a huge lorry filled with bales of horse manure stopped. I jumped up and with my 'worthless' Spanish got us a ride straight through to Bir Moghrein. The fee negotiated, we climbed on to the well-packed bundles of manure and arranged comfortable spaces in which to sit or lie down: it would be a long ride to Mauritania. The driver chatted with the police, then with a cry of 'vamos' the lorry rolled out slowly over the paved road. The three policemen, the same three since seven in the morning, waved to us as we disappeared in the thick black night.

I made myself comfortable and gazed at the dimming city-lights of Aiun as they grew smaller and smaller, somewhat like shooting stars. Celestial figures sprang up here and there out of that jetty black: the sharp Crescent, the Big Dipper, the North Star clinging to it, lamely. Lying on my back, I let the soft winds blow over my hot, tired face. The constant light jolting of the truck lifted me up and set me down gently on our cushioned cargo. Something suddenly made me remember my reading about the Desert: the warring nomads whose captured enemies were either sold into slavery or slaughtered on the spot. Those glimmering pearly sands stained with human and animal blood. Scimitars hacking away at women and children. Dromedaries butchered for feasts, the king's domed tent a theatre of orgy and intrigue. Something in the Desert made surge the cruelty and the generosity of those ancient kings and their fierce warriors. All this I had read somewhere, and at times would sense it in the intense glares of the hooded Saharians, in their nervous gestures, in their unlimited generosity. Something in the Desert caused two truths to coincide: cruelty and generosity. Suddenly the vehicle veered off the road and crashed over some large rocks in the sands. The driver jumped out, swore in terrible pathos. Two tyres had blown out...

They were speedily replaced by the second driver, a bald, skinny Saharian who never tired of smiling his golden smile. Even lifting those heavy rubber bands would not efface those immutable thick opened lips! He took over the wheel and we were off again. The wind picked up and the chill of night ran through me. I unrolled my sleeping bag and wrapped it round my shoulders. Then the lights of Bu Craa appeared over the road. It was at this tiny desert town that the asphalt road ended and the dirt track

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began. We stopped and had a quick bite to eat, the two drivers procuring oranges from a small shop in Bu Craa. We completed our meal with bread and sardines. I slipped back into my sleeping bag and fell asleep. Not once did I wake that night, nor did I recall any dream...

The sun rose round and ruddy over the edge of that desert tableland: the sky brightened white white. The two drivers had laid out their *seccade* (portable prayer mat) and were finishing the *al-fajr*, the prayer at sunrise. The Prophet had permitted Muslims to pray on the *seccade* when travelling if a mosque were not to be found, their murmurs echoed in the chilly of the desert morning. I felt so refreshed that particular morning, even Bill's touting on about Joe's farting and belching did not unnerve me. The prayer finished, we moved sluggishly over the unsmoothed track, and soon regained an asphalt road where we picked up speed. This part of the desert was exhilarating: the strengthening sun's rays illumined roan-coloured plateaus on whose fissured surfaces heaps of giant grey boulders loomed large, as if some cyclopes had arranged them according to a special scheme. The track came to a halt in a canyon; that is, the road, now a dirt track, wound through a corridor of steep faces of rock of radiant colours: veins of obsidian blacks, ochre yellows and mica greys ran through the rock. It was truly a glorious sight: a weird assortment of little mountains, higher mountains and mountains neither too big nor too wide...

Here we had a breakfast of rice and bread, naturally washed down with mint tea. The skinny smiling Saharian was busy baking bread in the desert sands: forming a circle with the smoldering embers of the camp fire, he dug a hole into this circle of ashes and sand and buried the dough under them. He squatted and waited for a few minutes, then dug through the ashes; he brought up a half-baked piece of bread. Our baker, all smiles, turned it over and reburied it in the same hole. Again he sat back on his haunches and waited. Several minutes later he handed us a round piece of golden baked bread hot from the 'oven'. And although a few minute particles of sand were baked into it, we ate the bread greedily washing down these Saharian particles with mint tea. A big pot of cooked rice was then set before us. Everyone stuck their right hand fingers in and formed little balls of rice which they tossed into their mouths. It was really gluey stuff, but the starch was good for keeping stomachs content. Since the water we had could only be used for drinking, we washed our hands, glasses, even the other pieces of baked bread that our friend was still making with sand.

Guelta Zimmer was the small frontier town of the Spanish Sahara and Mauritania. The Spanish driver took our passports and, accompanied by the Saharian, went to have them stamped at customs; that is, a tiny shack built under a spreading willow. I had obtained, in Rabat, a three-day visa: this of course was a joke...who could cross one thousand miles of *erg* in three days? I saved a lot of money, however, for Bill's and Joe's one month visas cost them thirty dollars. Mine had cost five! I would just face the consequences at the other end. Bill, with his customary debonair, harped on that they would lock me away in some dank, putrid *ergastulum*. He was obsessed, by the way, with that word *ergastulum*, which he probably read in his Latin classes at the university. Our passports returned, we carried on swerving through *wâdis*, following the *oueds* (dry river beds) wherever possible. Leaving the canyon, we gradually penetrated the bleached white sands of Mauritania, a vast waterless ocean...

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### Over the Desert Ocean

The colour of Mauritania on my Michelin map was a deep yellow save the most southern fringe which glowed a lush green. Indeed, the width and breadth of this enormous country was an *erg*, and besides the capital, Nouakchott, a few towns and outposts and several scattered oases deep in the desert, there was nothing else! It did, however, possess a train: but of this famous train I shall speak later...

When I was struggling through High School (perhaps the senior year), instead of going to classes I would ensconce myself at the public library just across the street and pore over maps and articles related to Africa. In one particular review I recalled these facts: Mauritania's ethnic stock was a mixture of Moorish, Arabic, Berber and Black African, these latter comprising the slave population. These tribes and clans waged endless wars on one another, primarily because throughout its history, Mauritania has had a balanced ratio of nomad population (500,000 today) and a sedentarised one (900,000)! The North is virtually empty, whereas 90% of the sedentary live in the more fertile South. The State religion is Muslim, and besides the few Black African animists, and the Christian European (mostly French) workers, all these different ethnic groups are Sunni.

Agriculture is Mauritania's principal industry; alas in that very year 1972, not one drop of rain had fallen: the long, terrible drought was reaching a dramatic apex. Cattle were decimated, crops withered, skeleton-like dromedaries were led into towns and villages by hordes of famished nomads, like caravans of Death. The village wells were drying up, the oases emptying. Help was indeed reaching these poor people of the desert from the outside, but it was rain that they all prayed for, not just sacks of food and water containers. The Sahara inched further and further southwards gnawing away at former farm and pastureland. And as it did, the rolling, curling sands continued their tradition of the Lieu of Death; if the Berbers and the Touregs are known to be of open hand and heart, it is because the Sahara is not!

These library notes drifted into the reality of my present circumstances: the arid, nakedness of this vast sand-filled country. At first, however, we moved under foliageless mountains, squat and smooth; soon, though, we plunged into a sandy tableland dotted with tall straight silvery trees towards whose glistening leaves dromedaries would stretch their necks to nibble. Gradually this rather pleasant relief declined into the pure yellows of my Michelin map: 850 kilometres (or miles?) of yellow crossed only by this one black ribbon of road. The 800 miles or so that stretched East to West embraced only dreams and visions: tremendous sand dunes shifting under the whipping winds which the Mauritians call *guebli* or *chergu*; that is, 'dry, eroding wind', immense salt lakes whose shimmering waters 2,500 years ago irrigated ancient cities and flourishing oases, but now entombed these cities with treasures and memories. All this was accessible only by dromedary whose caravaners advanced a mere ten kilometres a day, travelling silently over wavy *mezoueds* (dromedary tracks) and undulating *barkans*, those crescent-shaped dunes whose clichés pepper the pages of travel or guide books.

Our truck was kicking up so much dust that the three of us had to take refuge in our jallaba-hoods. The particles blurred out the strong rays of an intense white sun. Fleeing dromedaries screamed to our left. From under my hood I noted Joe's dour face and Bill's wry smile, which slowly curled into a snarl.

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He knew what we were in for, and the blond-haired college boy hated himself for letting me talk him into this desert jaunt. And this was only the beginning...how he must have despised me at that moment...I turned to the fleeing dromedaries (which Joe called camels!) and peered at the point of the horizon where the sky and the sands met.

Whilst bounding over one of those *barkans*, a high-pitched explosion caused the vehicle to veer and skid from rock pile to rock pile, finally coming to a jarring halt in a deep *oued*. The two back tyres on the right now lay squashed in a steaming mass of Michelin rubber. We all jumped down. These blow-outs would take time to repair. And it did...Not only due to the innumerable acrobatics the driver and the mechanic had to perform in order to replace the melted blubber, but when the operation appeared to be happily concluding, a sandy yellow light, eerie and dense, suddenly loomed large all round, as if some alien force were about to engulf us. The wind picked up and with it all the grains of the *erg*. The driver signalled to us to dive under the lorry, and did so just in time, for the sand tempest that swept past concurred very accurately to those you see in movies or read in books. Enshrouded in arenaceous obscurity, the storm lasted only a minute or two: soundless, a silent fury unleashing its wrath against the desert interlopers. We covered our heads. Suddenly birds were heard. Could that be? Then the sky cleared as supernaturally as it had yellowed, and become her old, infinite periwinkle blue. With red eyes and dry coughs, we jumped back on our desert-camel. Off she screamed, kicking up dust and black bellowing smoke.

When the dust cleared, it occurred to me that we had left the track and were speeding over sand! There was no sign of any road whatsoever, although now and then heaped up rocks, in pyramid form, outlined what I imagined to be the contours of a road. The driver stuck his head out the window on sundry occasions, pointing to those rocky cairns. Sometimes the tyres sank deep into the soft moving sands. Other times we crashed through Wormwood and cacti, and more than once the driver followed the *oueds* which provided him a natural way through the desert, hard-packed and smooth. Towards twilight we sighted Bir Moghreïn...

Bir Moghreïn cut no lively figure: it stank of the epitome of poverty. This was my first encounter with the terrible drought and famine that raged through this region. Crumbling white stone buildings, built for functionaries, had been encircled by two rows of barbed wire and guarded by military. The adobe-made villagers' homes lay scattered around the barbed wire. Between this rusting barrier and the mud-packed huts lay piles of rubbish through which mangy dogs, chickens, goats and naked children rummaged. Other naked children were gambolling in the rubbish strewn street (there was only one dirt road in Bir Moghreïn) chasing chickens and kicking the emaciated goats. The women were veiled and wore long colourful robes that swept the filthy streets. The men were rather tall, some light-skinned, others very dark. Those big, juicy African flies were relentless in their antagonising pursuit of local and foreign odours, buzzing ferociously about in the oppressive, white heat that still lingered tenaciously in the twilight. When the white grew fiery orange, and soon declined, the flies vanished...

We paid the lorry driver and proceeded to the police outpost for our entry stamp. This tiresome procedure would have to be done at each village or town police checkpoint from now on, the desert being a favourable haven for lost, wandering Europeans, some of whom had been taken and sold into

slavery by various desert-tribes, so reported several unnamed sources. Young women were asked not to travel alone, nor even in groups of twos or threes. I for one would have never travelled with a girl in this part of the world, married or not!

As usual we had to wait, and this we did just outside the make-shift 'police station', a gaudy stone building surrounded by three or four rows of high barbed wire. Children and adolescents stared at us through the wire, laughing and pointing. The police called us in one by one, asked a few questions, then stamped our passports. On our way out, pushing through the throngs of kids, dogs and chickens, two toga-clad men stopped us. They inquired, in good French, whether we were heading on to Fort Derick, the next outpost deeper in the desert. We nodded. One of the men pointed to a land-rover parked in front of a spreading willow, and explained that he would be leaving tomorrow for Fort Derick, and at a reasonable price would take us there. The fee was agreed upon, which indeed was very reasonable, and we decided on the place and time of departure. This was an excellent stroke of luck; I couldn't see myself spending days on end waiting for a ride out of here, something which I endured in the desert oases of Algeria, especially in El-Golea where I spent three wretched weeks at the hamam fighting off food poisoning and several silken-skin homosexuals.

Searching the half-mile length village, we found a suitable place to pitch Bill's tent; that is, far from the adobe huts near the barbed wire. Up till now, I had had no problem sleeping outside either in the towns or in the desert. Sometimes nocturnal merry-makers would wake me up from deep sleep to say hello, or groups of cheery bumpkins would dance around my sleeping bag, tossing me flowers or plying me with food. All this had always been done in good spirits, in that wonderful North African hospitality. Yet Mauritania was neither North nor Black Africa: the drought was making its onslaught, political and social tension had been steadily on the rise. The government had even threatened to invade the Spanish Sahara, defying Morocco's own claims for eventual occupation and exploitation. These circumstances rendered the Mauritians prone to quick and unmeditated acts of violence.

Be that as it may, Bill had made it clear that only two could fit in his pup-tent: I thus would have to sack it out alone outside. He thought this would upset me, and I admit that at first, this delight which he gleaned whilst making all this 'clear' to me in his nauseating, nasalized tone, triggered a double feeling of hate and fear. But when I unzipped my sleeping bag and crawled in out of the night cold this feeling quickly transformed into pure pleasure: sleeping inside a stuffy little tent with the likes of those two would have deprived me of what Lawrence had said about the desert to an American reporter when asked why he enjoyed being there: « It's clean! ». I indeed was immersed in this cleanliness, though not particularly in Bir Moghreïn. I'm speaking of course in general. Be that as it may, besides a few women who stopped and pointed at their vaginas, guffawed and sped off laughing hysterically, nothing stirred. Now and then I detected a soldier tapping the butt of his rifle on the posts of the barbed wire, but he never said a word to me. I followed the silvern moon as she made her way through the Night, and the stars, those joyful voyagers, as they kept pace with her. That night I counted four shooting stars: where had their remains fallen? On Earth in that very desert...the Sahara absorbed many such fallen projectiles. Somewhere in Algeria a few months back, I think, the driver pointed excitedly to a massive charred object to our right. He exclaimed that this was no mirage, and that Allah had sent it to the nomads of the

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desert. A piece of divinity...a numinous monument erected in the middle of nowhere: a diminutive Ka'ba?

I was up before *al-fajr* to take a pee. I knelt and relieved myself, then covered the urine with sand. Neither Bill nor Joe urinated as the North African Muslims did, thinking the whole rite belittling. Yet, the kneeling position prevented others from behind you to see the streaming waste, a sight not fit for others to see! This very simple reason never convinced my travelling companions, who when urinating in the presence of the Muslims were subject to mockery and barely dissimulated opprobrium...

The shepherds had already assembled their thinly flocks and were leading them out to nibble on what was left of the vegetation on the devastated tableland. I went in search for a place to have tea or coffee. I was told, by some early risers, that the only place to have a bit to eat was the *Four Corners of the World* restaurant. They pointed to a lane that twisted amongst a gaggle of cracked adobe huts. I was about to check out the place when from behind Bill's raucous voice rang out; he informed me that everything was packed and ready. I directed them to the aforesaid lane where we side-stepped the more grotesque heaps of human excrement and other types of innards that my pen refuses to relate. At last we pushed the fly-curtain away and entered a dark, squat wooden hut, penetrating thus the *Quatre Coins du Monde*!

This was no restaurant that lined the streets of Aiun! It was of sinister demeanour: filthy, smelly, unhealthy! The owner limped out of the 'kitchen' and asked us to be seated at a table whose wooden surface groveled with black flies, fighting over granules of sugar and grains of hardened cous-cous. Bill pulled a disgusted face but sat down nonetheless. Joe called to the owner to bring him camel meat since no vegetables were available. Nor were there any eggs. The owner smiled a golden smile: did he understand? Joe yelled to him in English, then in Arabic 'jamal!' 'jamal!' The limping man nodded and disappeared in the kitchen. He came out in a few seconds and tossed a French magazine on the fly-laden table which sent them swirling in cloudlets round our heads! He pointed to the cover which showed Niel Armstrong walking on the moon, grasping the pole of the American flag in his hand. He laughed and said in guttural French: « c'est pas possible...pas possible. » I shook my head up and down and replied that it was 'très possible', and that 'ça était fait!' But the adamant owner would not take yes for an answer, and continued his « pas possible! Pas possible! » Since explaining Armstrong's exploit was 'pas possible', we handed him the magazine. Who could blame the poor man: what the hell did he care about people walking in space or on the moon? He was too busy scraping out an existence in this fly-infested hole at Bir Moghreïn: les *Quatre Coins du Monde*! He probably thought it all some piece of science fiction or Western propaganda against the Muslims. And indeed, one of the greatest human achievements didn't really seem to make this man any better or worse for it. Nor any of the villagers of Bir Moghreïn for that matter. And I'm sure that the millions and millions of people all over the world who did know the truth about the moon-landing perhaps just shrugged their shoulders and said: « who gives a shit! » A few seconds later the owner put three plates of mutton stew on the table. Bill examined it closely: pieces of fatty meat floated lifelessly in an equally fatty stew.

«This is not camel meat», he remonstrated, turning to Joe. «It's mutton! What the hell is the word for mutton or sheep in Arabic?» And he unconsciously turned to me. I shrugged my shoulders, I was no

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walking dictionary, and besides, this was all Joe's doing. Bill lifted his head and yelled to the owner: «Mutton! Mutton!» in French. The gold-toothed smiling owner acquiesced and bid us 'bon appétit'...

I ate mine because I knew that the trip was going to be long with nothing between Bir Moghreïn and Fort Derick. All I had in my pack were dates, tomatoes and those greasy canned sardines. Joe, too, gobbled his down, probably thinking that it was camel meat. As to Bill, he took his plate and flung the brew out into the street. Suddenly five or six kids scrambled to the curtains, fought over the chunky pieces of meat and fled. Bill laughed sardonically: «at least someone ate it». He got up and left without paying for his meal. Joe paid it without a word or gesture of disgust. I left after a café au lait.

Bill had retrieved their belongings, and was impatiently waiting alongside the land-rover. The driver was late. I ran back to the barbed wire and put on my backpack which I had leaned against the wire fence. One of the soldiers had been kind enough to keep an eye on it for me. You may ask why I placed such confidence on a sallow-faced underpaid soldier to watch over my belongings, and quite frankly I have no answer to afford. At that time I didn't even dream of asking that question to myself. I placed much confidence in the people of the Sahara, much more than in any American of city or town that I had traversed or lived in! When I got back to the land-rover the toga-clad driver had arrived. An indigo, moiré toga set off his dazzling ebony complexion as the light filled the sky behind him. He appeared to be enshrouded in a sort of divine aura, like the hallowed mystics of Islam or Buddhism. He beeped the horn. Everything had been made ready: three large plastic water containers were aligned at the back of the vehicle. On the roof two spare tyres had been properly secured. Four small jerry-cans filled with petrol were strapped over the headlights. Bill and I climbed into the back whilst Joe sat in the front. We decided that every two hours we would take turns sitting next to the driver.

The driver spoke good French, so we were able to communicate with him to a certain degree. He agreed to drive us through Fort Derick into the little village called Zouerate, where we would board the famous Mauritanian coal train which left for destinations further into the desert. It was a four hundred kilometre journey to Zouerate...We roared out of Bir Moghreïn on to the track, Bill and I bouncing and crashing into the metal bunks, off the walls and into the top of the vehicle. Both of us suddenly realized what was in store for us: 400 kilometres of hell.

To begin with the land-rover wasn't furnished with cushioned seats in the back; we were forced to sit on metal bunks, our backs against metal plating which bristled with screws, bolts and other sharp oddities. We had to find a comfortable place on our packs to brace ourselves against the tossing, pitching and bucking. As I said, we decided to take turns sitting in the cushioned front seat every two hours: that meant four hours of terrible anxiety and pain. Bill and I were thrown about like toy dolls. Was the driver mad, crashing over and through the deep sand and furrowed *oueds*? Sometimes he bounced along at break-neck speed when veering back onto the track. Indeed, he was bent on getting us to Fort Derick before nightfall.

And there was no letting up to the driver's determination: even the front seat proved to be no sanctuary. I tried to tell him that he was killing us in the back. He smiled, that gold-toothed smile, shrugged his shoulders and indicated the vastness that lay ahead: the track had completely vanished,



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only a rocky and tree-stumped eroded earth stretched far into the white horizon. I did, however, manage to compensate somewhat for the hellish journey; during one of those very short stints in the cushioned front seat I sold my father's watch to our impulsive driver. He gave me, without even negotiating, 25 dinars which was a pretty price for that part of the world. I could buy about 50 meals with it, or sleep 15 days at a rancid hotel...

The hot day lingered on with all its grimness. The endless stretches of *hamada* (flat, stony plains) compressed my beleaguered thoughts, made my head feel like a vice. We stopped only once to eat and drink. Only once, and only for a half an hour. I was letting off steam by punching my backpack and cursing aloud. Bill said nothing: he would look at me with hatred and clench his fists. His face was lobster red, his lips monstrously swollen. I tried to talk to him but he kept telling me to shut up!

At one particular tract of desert, a salt lake surrounded by tremendous mountains, the land-rover suddenly bucked into the air like a wild horse. I was sent up into the top then hurtled into the side. The screws tore through my thick jallaba and pricked me. I got up and shouted at the driver. Joe was in the front but he didn't make any sign; perhaps he was nodding off. Hadn't he felt the jolt? The driver did not even stir at my shouting. He wouldn't turn around. My head burned with anger and confusion. I think at that point I must have lost control because Bill was screaming at me to settle down and leave the driver to his driving. I wouldn't take no for an answer, and kept on yelling and yelling for the driver to stop the damn jeep. I don't even remember what language I was shouting in. In any case, he just ignored me, or I thought he just ignored me. I was about to risk getting up and tap him on the shoulder when Bill grabbed my arm and pushed me back down on my backpack. All his pent-up ire and hatred was written on his swollen, red face. The college graduate, too, seemed to have reached his limit; he, so generally mild mannered. I told him to keep his hands off me. I then added, rather childishly I will admit: « That's what your five years at a college has taught you: to take careful notes, study hard, get good grades and keep your mouth shut? You should read *Catcher in the Rye*, you might learn something!» His face reddened, and like a wild animal he jumped at me. The land-rover bounded over the high edge of a *oued* and the enraged Bill smashed his head into the top of the jeep. He crumbled to the floor clutching at his face. I stared at him in fear, I didn't want to tangle with him, first because after all we were travelling companions, and second he was much bigger and heavier than me. But as soon as he came to himself he reached for me. I put out my hands and grabbed his shirt. The back of the land-rover was so compact that we couldn't really swing openly at one another, although he did manage to strike me several times in the head with an open hand. I pulled him down on his knees by the shirt-collar, trying to pull his sweater over his head. But he was too heavy, and being stronger, let himself fall on me with all his weight. He had me pinned, more or less, between the baggage and some rope. I don't know why, but without really hitting me (I think), he pulled himself up, and plopped down on the metal bunk in exhaustion. He just stared emptily at the back of Joe's head, who apparently had been sleeping. The driver made no sign to us either. In fact, neither of us told Joe about the silly squabble. Nor, on the other hand, did either of us make any attempt to apologize to one another. True, there would be no more fighting or tussling, but it was clear, hence, that we would have to split up at one point on our desert voyage...

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Soon it was my turn again in the front seat. Blackness crept in. The lights of Fort Derick were still not perceived in the distance. The driver stopped. He took out his map. After mumbling to himself, he veered the vehicle off the track and sped crazily into the Night. The contours of some hillocks appeared. We weaved in and out of them until the lights of Fort Derick popped up through the darkness. The driver smiled and pointed excitedly: he knew the way perfectly in spite of the obscurity. We reached the village by way of a paved road and at the main square the land-rover came to a long-awaited halt. Everyone climbed out, I rushing to a fountain to clean my face; I felt very strange, as if I had sea-legs...I almost toppled over to my side. Bill stalked off to have a coffee whilst Joe, moving sluggishly, just sat down on some yellow grass. Suddenly we heard the driver call out: «Vite! Vite!», signalling for us to climb back in. With moans and groans we did, and this time Bill sat in the front. «Zourate!» cried the driver pushing the land-rover into high gear.

He sped along those 12 paved kilometres like a maniac! He plunged into the sleepy village, honking away, then screamed to a full stop in front of a stone-built restaurant. There he deposited our things for us, took his money and kissed us all on the cheeks. He hopped back into that iron camel and disappeared...

We enjoyed a solid dinner: soup, salad and bread. The owner of the restaurant asked us where we intended to spend the night. We shrugged, staring at each other under heavy eyelids. He informed us that no hotel existed in the village, but if we wanted he would let us sleep in the back garden of his restaurant. He added that he would not ask for any money. We nodded happily, finished our tea and followed the owner through the kitchen into an empty lot. The silver rays of the moon illumined a small, grassy plot of sand. Bill and Joe pitched their pup-tent, I unrolled my sleeping bag on some soft clusters of grass. I hardly slept that night: the bruises, the sullen looks, the childish fight, the stars falling galore, dipping in and out of lunar beams until vanishing. When the morning light broke through the darkness, I didn't know whether I had really slept or not. I rolled up my sleeping bag, woke the other two and washed up in the restaurant kitchen. There we had a quick breakfast: eggs, bread and tea, then made a bee-line for the town square.

Zourate was my first experience with Black Africa; that is, the whole population of the small town was dark-skinned. Small, stocky men strode about without tunic or shirt. Others, much taller and slimmer, were clad in silvery white tunics with either skull-caps, *rezas* (small turbans) or wine-coloured fezes. Amphora carrying women were moving through the dusty streets with grace and ease, smiling white pearly smiles, heavy, gold pendants renting the lobes from the rims of their ears. Some *handire*-clad men stopped us at the town square and asked where we were from. Their smiles faded when they learned that we were Americans (perhaps they thought we were French). Apparently they didn't like our president (but who did?), he who supplied arms to Israel in order to kill Arabs; he who imposed his international law on the exporting of petrol; he who ordered his armies to kill Vietnamese peasants; he who sent his spies throughout the Arab world, and so on...He rifled this out to us in good French and very politely, too. Since Bill disdained to speak to him and Joe couldn't think of any suitable reply, I merely remarked that I had left America so long ago that I didn't even know who he was talking about, nor did I really care. (I think Nixon was reelected!) He took this very good-heartedly, and then asked where we were heading. «Le train de charbon» I replied. They signalled to someone sitting in a land-

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rover, and in a minute a moon-faced man with a beautiful white turban studded with fake gems had raced his vehicle alongside us. He exchanged a few words with the other two in Arabic then turned to us. «On y va!» Before scrambling inside we made sure the price was fixed. It was. In less than fifteen minutes we were standing in front of a huge roan-coloured mountain, myriads of frantic Africans, and the hundred-wagon coal train. Scores and scores of people and animals poured on to flat and coal cars. Burlap bags brimmed over with colourful fruits, huge leather water skins wobbled in the movement of the mass, wooden crates formed ramparts along the flat cars, women propped their babies up into the crenellated palisades. It was bedlam! The train was scheduled to depart at four and it was only ten! Without further ado, we crashed into the swaying vortex, a living bulk of moiré colours, tangy smells and high-pitched cries. Women were tearing and pulling at their children who were trampled underfoot. Goats and chickens were kicked and pummelled towards the wagons. Crushed, sweet-smelling fruit lay strewn on the sand. Drove of oxen were driven through the crowd unmercifully to the rhythm of screams, cracking leather whips and bamboo sticks. The police were having a regal party, beating the hell out of men, women and children either with clubs, fist or foot! This was the type of 'public work' the African police really took to heart: the sound thrashing, the well-deserved bastinado! In this the African policeman went about his job of 'peace keeping' with extreme enthusiasm, impeccable commitment and gleeful zest...

We battled heroically onwards towards a flat car where soon we sat resolutely amongst intrusive women and grim-faced men who glared at us with unembarrassed eyes. They had wrapped themselves up in their indigo blue *bo-bos*, a sort of long toga of cotton or silk. The babies and kids ran around us screeching in our ears. Below, the swimming mass tottered and buckled under its own weight, under the blows of police and other 'authorities'. Behind it, the iron-ore laden mountain loomed large, every now and then an explosion was heard, followed by wisps of rising smoke. This was the largest iron-ore mine in Mauritania, and the longest train in Africa (or so I was told) that transports the iron-ore to Nouadibo on the Atlantic coast. The train passed through some of the most desolate regions of the country, and for this reason the government permitted passengers aboard without fee. And indeed how else was a poor Mauritanian to travel from North to South if he or she didn't own a dromedary or a land-rover? The track was dangerous because of the shifting sands. In fact, during the entire voyage south, I only spotted two or three lorries plodding through the Desert...

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### From Zouerat to Chinguetti

And there on that crowded flat car we waited...and waited; the heat pressing in lower and lower, the kids screeching louder and louder. Everyone was defecating as best they could, discreetly or indiscreetly. In Africa one learned to overcome his or her inhibitions! But the overcoming of inhibitions, wherever they were evacuated, invariably caused the air to thicken with flies and other disease-carrying beasts. They swarmed in and feasted greedily. Nothing would keep them away when crawling into babies' tearful eyes and crying mouths, into the open wounds of feet and legs. The African did nothing: he let those chunky pests incrust themselves in any orifice available to them. It was four o'clock: the train remained motionless.

It slowly thickened with people, beasts and flies. Dust rose from the sands, and with it the nauseating stench of stool, urine and vomit. Babies were shitting and barfing all over the flat car. I caught sight of Bill's face: it was a mask of horror! Joe seemed lost in some hypnotic state, mumbling to himself, mechanically swatting away flies. The sight of Bill's face reminded me once again that I had talked him into making the journey through the Sahara: I felt a pang of guilt. Would he ever forgive for me? I doubted it. Hadn't I once dragged a good friend into the Algerian Sahara many months ago (I think)? We had long since parted trails, and without any pathetic 'adieu'. He had gone through a hell which I deemed a heaven! An American whom I met in Libya told me that you had a fifty-fifty chance of getting out of Africa alive. Would I get off this train alive? I couldn't look at my two travelling companions, so I stared into the fly-laden eyes of emaciated men and children. All this was so unreal: how I would have loved to pounce on those pounds of immobile flesh and beat it, scream at it, throw it to the dogs. I wanted out...out...out...like in the Washington D.C. Peace demonstrations, out of the violent throngs of hippy-hating cops, strung-out junkies and Black Panther militia.

My thoughts were like some rubber-band stretching and relaxing to the rhythm of buzzing and coughing, whining and droning, heaving and wailing. Then the train jolted forward. It stopped. And jolted again. We began to move...faster and faster, the quickening speed of the train cooled the sweat on my face and neck, swept away the flies from eyes and mouths, cleansed the air of evil-smelling excrement, piss and puke. We were finally on the way to Chum, the first stop of this soul train where the majority of the passengers were to get off. It was at Chum that lorries and land-rovers would link the capital.

I relaxed and enjoyed the yellow-white sands that slid before me like a film, like a thick book whose photos of the Sahara I would rapidly leaf through without reading the captions. Now that the train was chugging along, people, nervous and agitated, began to stumble over their animals, belongings...each other; apparently it was time for dinner! I got up and pushed my way to the other end of the flat-car where some goats had been tied together behind a metal wall. I huddled in amongst them, in spite of the stench, thus escaping the nervous agitation, the cold wind that knifed through the crowd, and most of all, Bill's and Joe's dark looks. I squatted and followed the orange sun sink into the cooling yellow sands of the West.

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The West...The tale of Captain Riley's shipwrecked crew on the shores of the Sahara crossed my mind. Killed, sold into slavery, beaten to a pulp by Berber tribes, the tales of this ill-fated crew were not to be taken lightly. Movement certainly had an unusual way of enveloping the traveller in a mantle of security, be it real or phantasmagorical, a sort of keeping Death at a comfortable distance.

The speed of the train refreshed my swollen, chapped lips; they were monstrous, and I had nothing to sooth the aching throb. However, it was a relief not to have Joe's and Bill's faces in view, their heads had long ago fallen and disappeared between their curled up knees. The gloaming emptiness of the Adrar Plateau lay awesome: a silken, saffron yellow which the ruddy rays of the dying sun had transformed into a billowy-crested ocean. Here gigantic ashen craters, there tremendous dunes of cinnabar. The air was so dry that the eye could discern even the slightest movement...there was none! My eyelids dropped. A jolt and they opened. How long had it been? The hot wind sapped the moisture from my lips which I had kept applying to them with the tip of my tongue. I scanned the desert under half-closed eyes: there was absolutely no vegetation! Only long rolling sand dunes, wavy and ripply, rising and ebbing in dreamy, wind-formed reliefs. Occasionally a cluster of Wormwood or Tamarisk suddenly appeared, lone and solitary, injecting specks of winy purple or withering violet in some narrow crevice. But these flashes of gay colours which snapped the monotony of yellow and white were few and far between. In all the months that I had traversed the Sahara in Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and the Spanish Sahara, I had never seen such a wasteland. The Desert is real. More real than the false reality of consumerism, nationalism, patriotism; of the eight-hour day, the good citizen moral. The Desert is real. It is here that I feel human...humane...I feel my Self untainted by that wretched imposed 'we'... The first step was to overcome Fear; the Fear of Reality...of the Desert, its vastitude and emptiness. Its natural fullness and social blight. The erring and fraternal 'we' of lands without memory, of voluptuous self-exile and of ANABASE and the quest of the Sea! The Sea! The Sea! Reality: a myriad grains of sand?

Whilst fumbling in my jallaba pockets, deep and roomy, I came across the goulimine bead. I examined it. The tiny black-speckled bead shone glossy in the silvern rays of the gibbous moon. What a lovely souvenir of the Desert...

Again I rummaged through those deep pockets and dug out some dates. My stomach ached and contracted as the smell of cooked rice and mutton whiffed through the air. The owners of the goats, who had been peering at me rather suspiciously since my arrival, now smiled their pearly white smiles and offered me some rice, mutton, bread and tea. I tried to converse with them, first in French then in Arabic, but they didn't seem to understand. A group of jallaba-clad men, all of whom were sipping tea and breaking sugar cones, told me in French that my eating companions were *zenaga*. I shrugged, so they turned back to their meal. I would learn later that this term designated the Berber tribes of Mauritania. Be that as it may, neither this dearth of knowledge nor lack of communication hindered my appetite. I pretended not to notice Bill and Joe casting ugly glances at me over their shoulders as I wolfed down that rice and bread. My Berber friends even had butter! And as we ate and smiled the train glided over the now lunar landscape of the sand-swept *hamada*...

I believe the voyage lasted four or five hours. The train never stopped. At one point the light of the moon suddenly vanished, and the passengers began to scream hysterically. We were thrown into utter

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darkness! The goats panicked, brushing violently against me. I kicked them away by bracing myself against the metal wall. In fact all the commotion boiled down to an expiatory rite of the Mauritanian whenever the coal train penetrated the Tunnel of Chum, supposedly the longest tunnel in Africa. It was so narrow that I could have easily reached out and touched the rocky walls. The goats were hoofing about crazily, and the longer we chugged through this Edgar Allan Poe coffin, the hotter it got. The tunnel was certainly very long. The goat owners were beating the hell out of the poor beasts, causing them to stampede about even wilder. I crawled out of that brawl and felt my way over woolen jallabas, sweaty bodies and moiré fabrics. A faint light dimmed before us and slowly we emerged: at the back of the train an enormous mountain loomed. We rolled slowly into Chum...

We were in the middle of nowhere! Was this Chum: no huts, houses, tents...nothing? I walked towards Bill and Joe to plan our next move when everyone suddenly leapt from the coal cars and dashed towards a dimly lit area under whose hazy yellow lamps rows and rows of lorries and Renaults were parked, their engines running. We grabbed our gear and flowed along with the streams of grim-faced passengers, then promptly were washed up into a tiny Renault. I felt like a piece of wood tossed and pitched on some mighty sea, jammed into a rocky crevice. There must have been at least forty people in that six-seat Renault. When everyone had made themselves comfortable, the driver pushed himself in and we sped off towards Atar, the administrative capital of the district.

Up and up we ascended into the highest reliefs of Mauritania, the Adrar Mountains. This observation I only assumed since I couldn't see anything out of the windows. The Renault smashed along the earth-hard track: everyone was knocked about, although the heavy woolen clothing, silk turbans and fleshy flesh provided excellent padding. How odd that drivers in Africa must race their toys at break-neck speed knowing, I think, that the roads and tracks over which they raced were not laid out for such exhilarating adventures! I caught sight of Joe, he was staring at me funnily. Sickness seemed to possess his eyes, and as one man once had the occasion to tell me, the eyes are the windows of the soul. Joe's eyes revealed a soul enveloped in dull oblivion. As to Bill's, shouldered violently against the back window, they were closed, his head hanging lethargically like a puppet on a string, swaying now to the left, now to the right...slowly. What would his soul have revealed? We roared into Atar.

Through the throbbing mass of flesh and garment I perceived many lights which brighter and brighter grew as we screamed into the town towards, I presume, the main square. There the driver halted his mad vehicle. Everyone rolled out as best he or she could. To my surprise, Atar appeared very different than other Mauritania desert towns: the streets were clean and well-lit. Neat rows of stone homes, some girt with thick foliage, aligned the very straight streets. I threw my pack down and sat on it: the thought of the three hundred kilometre excursion today made me cringe. How many more thousands lay ahead? I felt sick to my stomach. I had a strong urge to puke the whole voyage up...

If the town appeared pleasant to the eye the people were far from it: when we had recovered our senses, we erred through the deserted streets looking for a restaurant. People whom we came across didn't even attempt to help us. And when we did find a place, a large, well-lit café which served eggs, rice and cous-cous, both the personnel and the customers stared at us fixedly, unceremoniously. Our meal was brought accordingly, but with neither a kind gesture nor a smile. The chief of police, whom we

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went to see afterwards, kept a cool aloofness, and wouldn't help us at all concerning transport out of Atar. Thoroughly exhausted and demoralised, we straggled out of the town and pitched the tent in a copse of gigantic palm trees, through which a brook babbled, and into which silvern moonbeams filtered. Alas our little Eden suddenly turned into a Hell when a tremendous sandstorm lifted and swept into the copse. Joe signalled to me, so I crawled into the tent. And there we lay, the three of us, listening to the howling gales, the sands pecking at the canvas, the huge spreading palm leaves swishing. Would an uprooted palm tree crush us? And so the bizarre night passed: who could have slept? Yet something uncanny, enchanting, 'Arabian' filled my head. The tent swayed to every blast of wind. My two companions had managed to fall asleep; they were snoring! And how I hate snorers! I continued my nocturnal vigil, absorbed by the magical violence of that Night...A four-verse stanza burst into my head:

*«Wend now thy way with brow serene,  
fear not thy humble tale to tell:  
the whispers of the Desert-wind  
the tinkling of the camel's bell»*

Odd really, I had memorised so many of Burton's stanzas, but only that one remained imprinted in my mind...

The magic of the Night foreshadowed doom: although the morning skies were sparkling clear, the greens of the palm leaves glistening emerald, the blue of the brook waters a veritable lapis lazuli, the air, still cool, resounded of huge vicious flies that launched attacks upon us when we emerged from the tent. Bill and Joe told me to wait whilst they inquired in town about transport. They swatted their way through the copse and trotted into Atar. As for me, to sit down was out of the question: the enraged beasts surrounded my head as if it were a lump of fresh camel dung! To walk about the 'Eden' also proved useless. The buzzing cloudlets followed me everywhere, harangued me, wore me thin. I fanned them away with a palm leaf: this doubled their wrath and tired my muscles. I ran about crazily, swinging my arms, swatting and screaming; how could I escape this Bedlam? I took refuge in the tent. It was like a hamam, but anything was better than those tormenting savages. I lay down and pulled the hood of my jallaba over my face. Unwashed, lips swollen and cracked, body bruised and undernourished, I really thought that this would be the end of the long road, the last voyage, and like some 19<sup>th</sup> century African explorer, die a lonely, heroic death. And yet all those white explorers did die lonely, heroic deaths. That is exactly what motivated them in the first place, venturing into the vortex of horrors...Glory! Glory! This is what encouraged and emboldened their firm footsteps into the Heart of Darkness! Into the face of Death. What? The privilege of dying so as to live for ever...The hero scratched from the slate but eternally embalmed in the shroud of immortality...What greater privilege was there to glean?

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Bill and Joe had returned: they were all agog! I had never seen Bill's face so beaming. He even slapped me on the shoulder. Joe explained everything: they had spotted a French family standing round their car. He tried to talk to them but since they didn't speak English, and Joe only a few words of their language, the only thing understood was that the family could give us a lift down South. But Bill wanted to be sure, so they came running back for me. I excitedly packed my belongings, threw the pack on my shoulder and hobbled towards the road. Joe pointed to that car, where indeed some smartly dressed Europeans were busy buying fruit and vegetables. I stopped short, left my pack on the ground and told the other two to wait. How I was strangely attracted to that pretty little car, so clean and white, so comfortable looking. I brushed back my long, greasy hair, smoothed out my wrinkled jallaba, kicked off the dust and filth from my boots: I tried to make myself look somewhat respectable.

I approached the father of the family with an outstretched hand knowing well that the French always shake hands, even when they don't like you. A short, stocky man, he broke into a wide grin when he saw me, and as I babbled away my memorised formulas, my badly learnt phrases, my choppy consonants and unsweet vowels, this friendly, discreet man nodded in affirmative to all that streamed from my monstrous lips: had he really understood? He pointed to my friends, dirty and bewildered, cringing in humility in the middle of the fly-infested market. «Bien sûr! Venez avec nous. Vous pensez rester comme ça ici?» He had understood! I didn't know what made me happier, the fact that we were leaving this hell-hole, or his understanding my French so well! Whatever it was, we soon found ourselves seated comfortably in cushioned seats in the back of the car, our packs stored carefully in the boot. This friendly Frenchman, his wife and two daughters had saved us from ignominy. But as we rolled on the smooth hard-packed track, the Frenchman driving slowly and carefully, self-conscious thoughts again overwhelmed me: what did the women think of our appearance, they being so clean and well-dressed? Did they like Americans? Did we smell? I hadn't had a bath since leaving Aiun. How I missed those hamams: the rising steam which formed a veil through which burly, hairy figures drifted dreamily, dreamily over the silken waters; dense, soothing, cleansing waters...The massage, brutal yet penetrating, the manly company (although most of it was homosexual!), the blue tiled walls dripping with humidity and nobleness. I still smelt the filth slithering from my sweating body, felt the clammy soapstone on my skin, tasted the sweet mint tea that the towelled men brought in the cool refreshing alcove after they had wrapped me in soft woolen towels.

The car moved so smoothly along the track that I almost fell asleep; however, the wife and daughters were curious about our 'state', and shot out so many questions that I lost all record of what they and I were saying. They certainly made efforts to speak slowly, and even corrected me on sundry occasions, yet I was so exhausted that my mind couldn't keep pace. Nonetheless, everyone was in a jovial mood. In the back with us, too, rode the African servant. He knew the region very well and explained, in good French, that he was a *haratin*; that is, a freed slave. It was he who translated that word on the train that still rang in my ears *zenaga*, and warned us that legal black and white slavery still persisted in Mauritania, although practiced deeper in the desert amongst certain Arabo-Berber tribes. Some chiefs, so he had heard, sought white women for their tent pleasures.

The vehicle suddenly banged on to another track, much narrower and very bumpy. Driving steadily through *wâdis* (valleys) over dunes and *oueds*, we ploughed deeper into the desert. High rising ochered



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canyons encircled the track, now and then enormous ripply dunes threw shadows upon their skirts. Dromedaries, tended by their owners, screamed and ran behind dunes at the approach of the Renault. At times, because the car didn't have four-wheel drive, it crashed into deep pockets of sand and lay stuck. We got out to push her, the sand being so deep that the Frenchman had to retrieve two long wooden planks that he kept in the boot and place them in front of the back wheels. The planks served as traction for the buried tyres, but without our hauling and pushing would have been absolutely useless. At last, after another hour of repeated towage, we veered into an *oued* and there stopped short. The 'chef de famille' jumped out and told everyone to follow him. Everyone did in high spirits.

He led us onto a rocky path which serpentine the *oued*. It wound its way through a narrow corridor between high *dhars* (cliffs), opening onto a flat plain. I stopped short: in front of us floated an oasis of extraordinary beauty. Lean and graceful date trees arched into one another from whose emerald fronds low arcades, dark vaults and groined ogives were configured. Mesmerised, I penetrated this enchanting wonderland: budding Oleander lined recently swept roan-coloured tracks, peeping reds and whites guided the wayfarer through the vaulted Viridian. Nopals had been cultivated in front of neat huts of stone and wood, perfumed Strobilus grew in tidy clumps. Six foot high cacti girt those charming abodes, whilst just behind them large-leafed palm and date trees hung like royal parasols over the flat roofs. The sweet smells of Sandarack resin were veritable breaths of Paradise!

The villagers, smiling their gold-toothed smiles, waved to us: some, except for a loin-cloth over their privies, were naked, others, dressed in moiré *bo-bos* (togas) or woolen jallabas. The women strode gracefully from well to hut, balancing huge goat-skin bags atop their heads. Since arriving in Africa these were the most primitive peoples I had yet come across. The African servant came up to me and explained that because they were virtually cut off from the main road, the villagers lived on dromedary meat and milk, eggs, a white spongy cheese from their goats, dates, oranges from their grooves, vegetables from their gardens, and of course bread cooked in roadside kilns.

It would be many months later that I realized we were in the famous mediaeval oasis-town of Chinguetti whose archeological importance had been discovered in the late 1960's by both French and West African archeologists and historians of art. Here and there five foot high mud brick walls, partially excavated, attested to a settlement far from nomad: this, as the African servant expounded (he had taken me by the arm as we strolled about causally), was one of the sedentary zones of Mauritania, especially during the great Almoravid Empire which stretched from Southern Spain into the Western Sahara. Chinguetti had been a shelter and haven for fleeing tribesmen of Sunni confession: here Sunni teaching, prestigious in its piety and erudition, knew no peer. We followed several baked brick walls, which led into an opening which had been a house. The walls were no longer extant but the square stone tiles piled up in the corners alleged to wealth. Oddly enough, the level of the floor was much higher than the street, I imagine to keep the rain out. Some of the other houses that we visited had some good walls, indented with triangular niches, some of which framed by a border of uncomplicated geometric motifs, painted in ochre colours. Perhaps they placed their protective house idols in them: the servant couldn't really say. We then ventured quite far off the lanes to the south of a huge *oued*, where an agglomeration of excavated ruined walls and house foundations lay. As we penetrated the low-lying complex I had the impression that the excavations had been abandoned. We weaved in and out of the heaps of stones that

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had been assembled either in piles or into reconstructed partitions, sandy lanes on whose sides deep excavation pits had been dug in which walls, house space and niches, criss-crossed with rope and string, passed enormous mounds of earth under which further treasures had yet to be discovered.

As the kind African directed our steps over the ruins and the surrounding countryside from which Chinguetti drew its inexhaustible resources, he came to a sudden halt in front of the crumbling arcades of the mosque whose exposed contours were surrounded by damaged homes, some of which reduced to their foundations. Huge blocks of finely sculptured stone lay scattered at the foot of the high wall of the *kiblah*. We entered the arcades: square stone tiles encumbered the former prayer room, some piled high, others, broken or chipped, in a jumble; short squat columns lay either fissured or intact, having been propped against the remaining walls; a small, protruding oval shaped wall might have been the *mihrab* (altar). We side-stepped the confused masses of stone and baked earth, exiting into a complex of foundations via a dilapidated wall. In one particular courtyard rose an ochre ornamented staircase whose rich geometric motifs had been set against a background of paint or roughcast. This house was inhabited by a goat-rearing family who occupied only the ground floor, so the servant explained. It was obvious from these ruins that this community had achieved a status of civilisation. Suddenly from afar we heard the strident voices of the two young daughters; they were imploring us to come and eat! What an excellent idea: I was starving. The servant put on his skull-cap and disappeared within a copse of palm trees, I believe to perform *al-assor*, the afternoon prayer! The girls had run along a *oued* to catch up to us. I was amazed, they seemed to know this place by heart. They stopped abruptly in front of me and let flow a stream of words that caused me great confusion. I guessed that they wanted me to accompany them. Giggling and laughing, they ran on ahead along the neat narrow tracks until reaching a clearing over which towered the craggy shadows of mountains and the swaying fronds of date and palm trees. We ran as fast as we could.

The villagers had brought the French family (I think they knew one another very well) dates, oranges and tomatoes. To add to this fête, the family had spread out a white tablecloth over the soft sands, and on it was placed a picnic basket. Everyone sat round the tablecloth and shared a copious lunch: cold meat, fruit, cookies and beer! I hadn't eaten like this for months. I made a glutton of myself, I'm sure of it. Bill, for any number of unknown reasons, practiced self-restraint, and Joe, with a strained smile, voraciously shovelled food and poured beer into his mouth. He was decidedly drunk and certainly made a pig of himself. The meal provided me an excellent opportunity of practicing French. The two daughters, one fourteen and the other sixteen, were all ears; they knew no English, or very little, so they listened to my cacophonous unliaisoned words with coquettish giggles, slyly asked personal questions which reddened my face (or was it the beer and the heat?), unpedantically corrected pronunciation, mischievously completed or filled in words for me (some of them, I believe, of dubious nature for their mother frowned and reprimanded them on one or two occasions!) when my prattling found no lexical exit. In short, we had a wonderful time. And as all good things must end, when the air began to cool it was time to depart.

We trudged heavy-headed back to the car and were soon on our merry way. The father suggested we sleep at his house that night. We would arrive late anyway with no hotel to accommodate us. Besides, he

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had to go to the capital the following day, and so offered to take us. This news was most heartily welcomed.

We did indeed arrive late into Akjouit. All the roads of this town were well paved and well-lit. We stopped in front a long two-storey villa surrounded by arching palms and clusters of blooming rhododendrons, all illumined by strategically placed red, blue and white spot-lights. A guardian came out from the gardens. We descended and he drove the Renault into a garage. Whilst the wife and her daughters disappeared into the house, the 'chef de famille' ( I never learned his name, nor the names of his wife and children) led us to an adjacent workshop where electrical equipment hung from hooks on the walls and a gigantic workbench stood against a tool-filled panelled wall. He said that we could sleep there, indicating a wash-basin and toilet behind one of the make-shift partitions. He rapidly explained that he was a French government engineer, employed by a Franco-Mauritanian company. He had been in the country for five years. His wife suddenly stepped into the workshop. She had put on a glimmering black silk gown embroidered with geometric motifs; she was a very pretty woman, perhaps in her early forties. Long blonde hair touched the moiré blackness of her gown. She set down a basket of fruit and cookies on the workbench and bid us a good night. The husband, too, wished us a good night. So we found adequate places to lay out our sleeping bags (I unrolled mine on the workbench), and crawled in, each of us happy and refreshed after such a wonderful day. It had all been like a dream, a kind hand reaching out to us in this parched Hell...then a familiar sound caused my ears to prick up: I shuddered and quickly donned my jallaba, pulling the hood over my head. There was no way of escaping them! They zeroed in on us speedily, 'blitzkriegingly', sadistically, landing on face, hands, ankles, shoulders and back. And as flies regale on gummy eyes and unwashed orifices, mosquitoes prefer veiny ankles or fleshy fingers and hands! And so that wonderful day ended...

At the call of *al-fajr* and the first light of dawn the mosquitoes vanished!

Sleepily I worked my way out of that sweltering sack, scratching or caressing the lumps on my hands and arms: the filthy savages had managed to slip into my jallaba. Joe was in a horrible mood, his hands and face swollen. Just then the husband appeared gayly at the workshop door. He asked us if we had slept well, and so as not to offend him we nodded in the affirmative. (After all, the mosquitoes weren't his minions!) He then told us to put our things in his car, which we did at all speed.

Five minutes later he was chatting with his gardener, partially hidden by the white and violet balls of rhododendrons. His villa was magnificent, with its bay windows of lattices and white-washed walls, veiled with slender creepers and thick, woody climbers. He signalled to us and we promptly left for a nearby bar where he invited us for eggs, milk and bread. He refused that we pay for anything, and added that he would be leaving for Nouakchott at noon. We fixed a rendez-vous point in front of the bar door.

In reality, Akjouit was no different than any other Mauritania desert town, although somewhat cleaner: little brats pestered you wherever you walked, big brats stared at you out of Glaucoma-infested eyes, bigger brats sneered and muttered contemptuous remarks. Near the market place the minaret of a stone-constructed mosque towered high above the whole town. It was brand new and shone proudly in

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the morning sun, revealing to the world the unparalleled art of the craftsmen's green and lapis-lazuli tile work. We strolled around the medina crowded with bustling buyers, shrieking sellers, sleeping donkeys and squawking chickens. The smells of saffron and henna intermingled with those of human piss and donkey dung. We decided to return to the bar: it was ten thirty.

At eleven forty-five the Frenchman arrived in his usual nervous, bouncy gait. He happily showed us a cake that his wife had baked especially for the trip, carefully wrapped and tied. At twelve sharp we were speeding out of Akjouit, after having picked up his family. It was a long ride to the capital, two hundred and sixty kilometres, more or less. But the road had been beautifully paved, making the long kilometres peel off smoother and faster. Here in the South the desert was a very choppy one, clusters of Acacias and Tamarisk garnished the roan and ochre-coloured sands. Yellowish grass grew on the sides of the road, occasionally a huge Jujube tree bent over the asphalt. The Acacias become more and more abundant as we moved further south: we were in the savannah zone. Only once did we stop, and that was to devour that delicious cake. The Frenchman stretched his legs a bit, but jumped back in even before I had time to kneel and urinate. He wanted to get to the capital before nightfall...which he accomplished as planned!

It goes without saying that the majority of the 90% of the Mauritania population who live in the South reside in Nouakchott. The low-roofed buildings of the modern city stretch out far and wide when seen from afar or above. There is nothing particular or exciting about these ugly buildings and banal homes: it symbolised Africa's surge into modernity! That is, mimic Western ugliness to the detriment of its own traditional architectural beauty. In short, Nouakchott, like many 'modern' African capital cities, lay spread out in orgulous financial ugliness and bloated contempt, a despised glut of metal and concrete severed from its traditional spirit and Saharian life-style. We slowly made our way down the main street called Avenue Nassar. Tall, lean men, dressed in their indigo blue *bo-bos* gave the dreary walls and treeless streets a dash of colour...of Africa! Laughing women were communicating to one another on opposite sides of the street, a diagonal communication which I would observe in South Africa and Botswana some years later; a sort of 'profile to profile' exchange and not a 'face-to-face' one!

The Frenchman turned off the Avenue and entered a protected area encircled by a high wire fence, heavily guarded, where several sumptuous villas had been built. He stopped in front of a one-storey, white-washed mansion whose gardens of Jujube trees of the Mauritanian type (*Zizyphus*), of Acacias in the elated form of parasols, of bush-like trees such as *Drinn* and *Scoparium* and of other various 'bottle-trees', whose swollen trunks were pregnant with water reserves and whose names I have either forgotten or didn't know, were being meticulously watered by two or three African gardeners. A guard came running out to drive the car into the garage. His two daughters and wife walked along the garden path towards the front door whilst we followed the husband round the back over a pebble-made pathway whose convex form allowed water to trickle into gullies which fed neat rows of Tamarish and Rhododendrens. The Frenchman indicated several flowering plants whose names I haven't retained. This was his second residence, rented to him by his French firm, and he added without vanity, his favourite! Once in his back gardens, in which two or three arboured clearings had been constructed, he proposed that we pitch out tent under one of them: « c'est mieux qu'un hôtel, n'est pas? » he beamed in his cheery voice. We agreed and thanked him profusely. Indeed his generosity knew no limits. He brushed all these hastily articulated thank-yous aside with a wave of his hand and announced that

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dinner would be served at eight. He jogged off, and Joe and Bill put up the tent under the shelter of woody vine and leafy green. I chose the asylum of a Parasol tree whose massive fronds provided shade during the day and meditative configurations at night.

For three days we stayed with this French family at their 'résidence secondaire', enjoying their conversation, food and drink. Many stories of travel were traded, and I must admit that I, as the French say, 'frimé' shamelessly. It was certainly not due to the effects of the red wine or the Claret that we delighted in (as Bill sarcastically suggested), nor by 'amour-propre': my outspokenness bespoke an immense appreciation for the French language that I was just beginning 'to feel'. I yearned to sound out new words, correct my pronunciation, tackle complex phrases. Whether this ardent enthusiasm was imparted to my polite listeners is difficult to gauge, although once I told their little dog « assis-toi », and he did just that, much to my surprise! In any case, save Bill's sour glances and Joe's strategic giggles, everyone got on quite delightfully.

Nouakchott was no 'Gai Paris': here life dragged on in languid hebetude, which I found particularly morbid. The two girls, since they had no school at that time, took us on guided tours. Bill accused me, unjustly, of flirting with the sixteen year old (as if it were his business!), whilst Joe, from under his newly acquired baseball cap, kept winking at me, whispering to put in a good word for him. For those three days we ate and showered regularly. We were served delicious French food cooked by both the young girls and their mother. Yet, in spite of all this pleasantness, I itched to get on: Nouakchott was a boring hole, there was no medina, only an old section with nomadic tents, more or less on the outskirts of the city. The girls, too, communicated to us a sort of colonial ennui, for except their comrades at the French Lycée, their lives wallowed in dream-like solitude, trudged on with every rising and setting sun; they had no African friends! They longed for their holidays during which time they would return to France with or without their father. They didn't really know when their father would finish his contract and leave Mauritania.

My visa date had long since expired. In vapid raptures, Bill and Joe evoked the *ergastulum* which awaited me at the Senegal River! I inquired at the central police station about prolongations. My passport was taken, inspected and stamped. «But my visa has expired!» I exclaimed. The policeman, without looking at me, handed me back my document: «ça va, tu verras à la frontière». And so I would...he then told me to get out, which I did. Neither Bill nor Joe could make heads or tails of that stamp; it did look official enough to be a prolongation, yet no money was asked for. Anyway, the officialness of that stamp kept their mouths shut for a while.

I asked the girls about transport to Senegal; they informed me that at one particular place trucks carried people to the frontier town of Rosso, on the banks of the Senegal River. That same day they accompanied us to this lorry 'garage', knowing perfectly well that we would never have been able to find the place alone. The 'garage', in fact, was simply an open lot filled with trucks, dirt and women selling food and trinkets. They spoke to some of the turbanned drivers and located a lorry that was to depart at three: it was then nine o'clock. Without hesitating I decided to take it and made arrangements with the stout driver. Bill and Joe shilly-shallied at first, but soon agreed. They were getting soft on French food and showers every hour!

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A grand farewell lunch was served to us by the family: roast pig with mashed potatoes, washed down with Burgundy wine. It was tough for Bill and Joe to get up from the table, but that ride to Rosso was waiting for us. And to top off their hospitality, they drove us to the 'garage', where the Frenchman, in excellent Arabic, confided something to our driver, something to the extent that we were his good friends. Truly, these people were by far the kindest that I would ever meet in Africa: we departed fifteen minutes later...all three of us in the front! The family had stayed on to bid us all a safe journey.

Rosso was two-hundred and forty kilometres away. Although it was a tight fit in the front, we weren't with the goats and their herdsmen in the back. At sunset the truck stopped. The driver and the goatsmen laid out their *seccade* in the direction of the Mecca: the fourth prayer of the day, *al-maghreb*, was chanted at sunset. Allah's chant, too, had to be heard, first in standing position, that of a man, the Muslim cupping his hands behind his ears in order to hear and understand His call, recitation or Koranic cry, then he places his hands on his knees and bends forward, the animal position, and finally drops to his knees and touches the earth with his forehead in the plant position. By these *rak'a* (stations), his prayer summons all of Allah's life forms. This life-summoning gesture is repeated three times, after which the worshipper sits back on his legs and chants the final verses of the particular prayer. He rises and repeats the *rak'a*, or the prescribed postures of the prayer as many times as it requires, *al-maghreb* necessitating three repetitions...

It would be many months afterwards, and only after living with the Touregs, that the Islam religion had any profound effect on me, without, however, any serious consideration of conversion. Yet, living amongst the Muslims, be they North or South Africans, the fraternity, the solemn fervour and the wholehearted devotion towards the Creator put into relief, and thus provoked reflection on my experiences with the slum cants of a Catholicism practiced in the Catholic Missions of the southern states of the United States, and especially with the excessive ebullience of a Protestantism that I had been subjected to whilst living in and out of the Salvation Armies, attending Billy Graham's or other demagogic reverands' moral-mongering herd-gatherings. Did they really expect a bunch of derelicts, outcasts, drunks and rowdies to answer to the Gospel Call in one eventful night of regeneration, conversion, adoption and sanctification of *ordo salutis*? Were we to grasp fully the Believer's Voice of Victory? Graham's, Booth's, the Reverand's Words of Faith? Perhaps...Or was it that Allah's and the Christian God's voice, be it Catholic or Protestant, intoned the same message? I think it did, but whose tonal strains caused the heart either to skip or stop...

We reached Rosso around midnight...

The night was cool near the Senegal River. Moonbeams cast streaks of ripply light on the dusky, fast-moving waters. It is Senegal's longest river, four-hundred and thirty seven miles. Where I stood it measured about fifty feet in width. Short, stocky men smiled their pearly white smiles as they passed me on the banks. One woman stopped and offered me two bananas; when she espied Joe and Bill coming down to join me (they had paid the driver), she stopped, walked back and handed them four.

«Are there alligators in those waters?» queried Joe, gazing into the blackness. « There are no alligators in Africa, » Joe reminded his travelling crony rather bluntly. «They're crocodiles here.» «Well, whatever

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they hell they are, I hope they don't come out at night in search of prey, » Joe sneered. Four or five men who had been listening to our conversation greeted us in the appropriate Muslim custom: «Selamunaleykum (peace be on you), to which we responded: «aleykum selam». Making it clear that our Arabic was far from workable, they told us in French that they would bring us to a safe place where we could put up tent. They added that the river banks were no place to sleep.

«The alligators! The alligators!» Joe cried out hysterically. Everyone ignored these shrill outbursts. We were led from the banks past a few wooden shops or huts then to a camp of nomad bivouacs. Berbers were milling around two or three campfires, some carrying kids on their shoulders, others faggots or burlap bags. They didn't even give us a second look as we unrolled our things, pitched the tent and settled in for what was left of the night: I, as usual, outside, next to Bill's tent, perhaps fifteen feet or so from the Berber campfire. They were roasting mutton. My stomach growled...

From afar I heard the rushing river, and only a short distance away the crackling sound of mutton grease falling into the orange flames. The roving aroma drove me crazy! The beating of drums and the shooting of stars combined to numb, blissfully, my tired senses; I promptly dozed off, snubbing both the odious mosquitoes and the redolent odours of fat-dripping mutton.

The chatter of our Berber neighbours woke me very early. I tapped on the tent and my companions shot out of their shelter; we had to pass through customs before taking the pirogue across river. We were down by the river in ten minutes: rows and rows of dancing pirogues had either been fastened to long thin poles stuck deep into the shallow, muddy fringes of the river, or hauled on to the sandy shores of deadly thorny green vines and broken bottles. We passed a water pump where fifty or so African men and women were carrying water skins and metal ewers on their heads. Then to our left loomed the customs 'office', that is, a make-shift hut of wood and straw in which one man sat behind an equally make-shift table. We stepped in, humbly of course, and before he asked us, handed him our passports. Bill grinned at me from over his shoulder. This was the moment he had long waited for. This was where I would have to 'take the bull by the horns' as he would so obnoxiously repeat. And indeed just to the right of the seated official a man lay fettered in a foul unlit cell: Was that Bill's *ergastulum*?

Bill and Joe had their passports stamped. I stood there alone. The official flipped through the dozens of multi-coloured visas and supplement pages of my document. He examined my three-day visa (we had been in Mauritania for over a month, I believe!), lifted his ink-smear stamp and slammed it down with a violent gesture. He gave the passport back without looking up. I thanked him like an obsequious servant and charged out of that shack. Bill stopped short when he saw me; I must confess that I was beaming in delightful triumph! Bill pulled a disgusted face: 'the luck of the Irish, hey?' I reminded him that I was Sicilian. He ignored the remark...

Down at the river, hordes of people were climbing into the pirogues. We waded into the shallow water and jumped into a ten-passenger craft, paid our 'ticket' and waited for the rowers. Two shirtless men, one in the front and the other in the back, paddled us across the glimmering waters towards Senegal. Women were carrying bundles of bananas and pineapples. In fifteen minutes we had crossed

the river, passed customs, (I had a one month stamp for Senegal) and sought out a 'taxi' which would take us to Saint Louis, the first large town on the Atlantic coast.

The taxis in Senegal are the best means of transport: they accommodate six or seven people, stop very seldom and are cheap. Lorry drivers will only accept hitch-hikers for an astronomical fee. As soon as the taxi filled up we left the banks of the Senegal and headed south. I must say that Senegal held no great charm for me: it merely represented a passage between Mauritania and Mali...a hyphen between two great swathes of Desert...



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### Sub-Sahara: Senegal

The road, straight and smooth, arrowed through the Senegalese savannah: on each side of the rough asphalt Date Trees sprung out of low grassy land, now marshy, watered by the great Senegal River, now dry and yellow due to slight altitude rises. Copses of 'storeyed trees', whose spaced branches resembled rearing phantoms, dotted the countryside under which tired Africans huddled, cleaning their teeth with whittled twigs. The Cassia Obovata and the Zizyphus Lotus disappeared in favour of the umbrageous Acacia Raddiana, shielding the 'Caatinga' against the trialing rays of the high sun. Jujubes and Willows enshrined bushy Aristida.

The passengers in our taxi spoke excellent French. Senegal is undoubtedly the most 'Gallicised' of all the former West African French colonies, although the 30% Ouolof-speaking population has affirmed its linguistic unity by imposing Ouolof as their first official language, French being the second. It is a Muslim country with pockets of Animists located in the South along the Gambian border. Islamic conversion began in 1076 and slowly won adherents in Niger and in Mali. It was the Muslim religion that consolidated, nourished and sustained the great Empire of Mali in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, of which Niger and Senegal were part.

The taxi rolled quickly on: the soft green transformed into deep patches of jungle around which huts of bamboo and straw could be discerned. Goods-carrying Africans waved and smiled whenever we would stop to let someone off or in. We were truly in another world, far from the horrid desert. Yet, dromedaries were strolling lazily alongside the asphalt, grazing in flocks, stretching their necks into the tiny leaves of the Acacias. Crossing a tributary of the Senegal River via a small metal extension bridge, we drove into Saint Louis (the final 's' in Louis is not pronounced!). The taxi transported us right in front of a charming hotel for no extra charge.

Stiff and hungry, we climbed a wide wooden staircase past squawking orange and green parrots. There, in a large lounge, huge leather chairs and canopies had been arranged in such a fashion that the visitor was able to embrace in one glance the five or six lion, antelope and water buffalo skins laid out between chair, table and canopy. Stuffed animal heads hung pathetically from freshly painted white walls, whilst other beautiful moiré skins undulated back and forth on the walls under the rotating waves of air sent by the four ceiling fans: this was no rat-hole; it must have been a 'white hunter's' haunt during the colonial field days!

We checked in, despite the cost (whose price I do not recall). Upstairs, I laid my pack on the big soft bed over which swiftly spun a noisy ceiling fan. Bill and Joe fell on the other two beds. The spacious room was furnished with two dressers, a writing table, four chairs and a wash-basin. The toilet was just opposite our door. I say three beds. Sleeping in hotel rooms with travelling companions can be very embarrassing if there are more companions than beds: to sleep alongside a fellow whom you don't really know, and oftentimes whom you don't really like can become problematic. I always chose the floor, but many a traveller cringed at this idea, believing that their spent money should be properly consumed. So two or three fellows would slip into the same bed...with or without their clothes! I met no foreign

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homosexuals in North or West Africa. As to the Africans, especially the North Africans, decoding the attitudes of 'being very friendly' and 'homosexual advances' was no easy task, and there was no simple code to decode it! You had to play it by ear or not play at all...To each his own deciphering system or particular penchant...

I took a short nap then stepped outside, leaving my snoring companions. After an hour or so of walking through the empty streets I had a strange feeling of being the only white man in town, mind you, not a paranoid feeling, but a very self-conscious one, like when you haven't changed your socks for a long time and believe others may be put off by their stiff, rancid odour. It seemed that everyone was glaring at me. Were they? I'm sure it was an illusion. In fact, no one really took notice of me, methinks; I walked undisturbed through the town. And it certainly was a colourful place: all the homes were made of wood and painted with seemingly no rime or reason; yet for the Senegalese there existed a reason. Which one? All the paved streets were clean, and the one or two-storeyed homes that aligned them well kept. A little metal bridge took me across a stream; in five minutes I was on the beach. It was beautiful: clean golden sands slipped into the green tinted waters of the Atlantic. Little children were gambolling about, making sand castles or just rolling big tyres in and out of the water. They simply ignored me! Strangely enough, I felt a bit slighted... There was no rubbish strewn over the sands, no signs 'Do not Litter'.

I slowly made my way back to the hotel to have a bite to eat, and whilst I did, decided to leave for Dakar the following morning, early, with or without my companions. They had hinted to me that enough was enough. Furthermore, Joe couldn't stand my face anymore and expressed that implicitly when I dared compare the architecture of Saint Louis to that which I had enjoyed in New Orleans during the Mardi Gras Festival in 1972 whilst erring crazily about the French Quarter in and around Jackson's Park. He remonstrated in his miserable squeaky voice that I had no taste for architectural comparisons, and that these improvised remarks stemmed from deep ignorance and not from deep reflection. I waved this all off: the college graduate had never been to New Orleans, as Joe would inform me one week later in Dakar where I met him quite by accident. They had had a dispute, and apparently exchanged scathing words: a lovers' quarrel? Joe also resented Joe's sadistic habit of crushing ants whenever the occasion presented itself: he would leap up and land on them with two feet, giggling like some maniac! Or else, he would spy them out from afar, take one long stride and exterminate them. This, plus Bill's continual wind-venting at night (Joe always told him that he had a 'rotten arse-hole') put an end to that African honeymoon!

Without bidding the honeymooners farewell, I left their love-nest and walked many kilometres before reaching the outskirts of Saint Louis: there under a spreading Acacia, next to a bamboo hut, I set out to hitch-hike the 275 kilometres to Dakar. Above me hung bundles of palm leaves from thin ropes. Villagers passed by, smiling and laughing. Some gave me bananas, others squatted in the shade of the Acacias, observing me listlessly. After two hours of waiting, a bald headed little man emerged from the thatched hut to bring me a cup of coffee with milk. He sat with me whilst I drank. Curious about those hanging palm leaf bundles, I inquired about them. He rolled his eyes in a strange way and said in French: «bon augure». «Mais qu'est-ce que c'est?» I insisted. He looked over his shoulder then approached me: «l'après-naissance...le placenta.»

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From what I gathered, the women wrap their 'after-birth placenta' in palm leaves and hang them from the Acacia as a token of appreciation to their gods or to God. He smiled a pearly white smile, took my glass and disappeared into his hut.

The sun rose steadily: only a dozen vehicles had passed. None had stopped! A few Senegalese students on foot explained that hitch-hiking was very difficult in their country due to the lack of vehicles and sympathy towards the 'auto-stoppeur'! I thanked them and flagged down the next taxi. It was worth the three or four dollars. True, my money was slowly but surely dwindling, however, I had calculated that if I lived on 25 dollars a month I would be able to reach Israel, which at that moment was a haven for roadies, where sound, healthy work on a kibbutz restored one's energy and morale to continue the voyage ever onwards...

Donkeys, dromedaries and streams of people flashed before me as we sped on, stopping only at Kebemer, Mekhe and Thies where people got on or off. Through thick copses of Acacias I caught glimpses of the Atlantic; it was over a year that I had been on this side of it. I remember distinctly a moment on the beach at the Colonial Inn Hotel in Miami Beach, yes, I remember clearly now, when I threw a stone out into the Atlantic, screaming out as I observed the stone's flight arch into the white-crested waves that I would be on the other side of her...

Dakar is the third largest city in Africa, dwarfed only by Cairo and Johannesburg. 500,000 people live and work in the capital, 80% of which are Muslim. As I mentioned before, the official language is Wolof, although French is widely spoken amongst many middle and upper-class families and even preferred in certain work sectors. I was dropped off in the main square, 'Place de l'Indépendance', thoroughly Western in its conception: a banal symmetry of grey skyscrapers (ten or so storeys) crowded amongst fancy-windowed Travel Agencies, dress shops, beauty parlours, and expensive parked cars, of which several limousines. This was certainly no African city that I knew of, even Casablanca and Algiers did not flaunt such Western 'success'! I felt quite estranged here, as if Africa, and the Sahara in particular, had been a mere dream, a frontier that had shifted to another land, perhaps further South or East! I only regained Reality when I stumbled upon the so called 'African Market', a half-hour walk away from the bustling modern city-centre! This colonial concession, as I would learn afterwards, was part of the mentor's plan not to destroy the traditional 'African' market places, and build the newer sections of rising modern cities near them. If I'm not mistaken it was Louis Massignon, a French Orientalist scholar, who had proposed this urban strategy to the colonial powers in the forties or fifties. If it hadn't been for this Islamic scholar and fervent lover of Humanity not one African market in the former French colonies would have withstood the onslaught of the white man's unrelenting 'progress'.

As I wandered by the cement, metal and fast-paced businessmen I rather regretted those burning sands of the Sahara...even the flies and mosquitoes! I ran into two German girls, accompanied by an American who were travelling through Africa in a van. They invited me to eat with them that night in the back of their huge vehicle. I agreed without hesitation.

The sun was setting rapidly over the fig-coloured ocean as we drove through the maze of streets in the 'African Market'. The driver knew the city very well for she never vacillated once in her many

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skillfully articulated lefts and rights! Finally we left the city behind, rolling on a well-packed dirt road which twisted towards a darkened, isolated peninsula. The van pulled up just at the brink of the rocky shores. Everyone stepped out and scanned the bay which separated us from Dakar's clustered skyline: above the highest building in the Place de l'Indépendance soared the minaret of the biggest mosque in the capital: 160 feet of immaculate glazed green and white tiles, located in the middle of the medina. It appeared so out of place, a smear on that cooperative conglomeration. We all stood gazing out into the choppy, darkening waters as the orange and red disc dipped delicately into the underworld...suddenly the skyline and minaret burst into light. How good it was to be out of ear-shot of Bill's invective tongue and Joe's asinine comments. These three travellers appeared intelligent enough to respect one's idiosyncrasies and especially faults...

The American was a college graduate, but no sickening braggart like Bill. The two German girls, who spoke fluent English were off on an existential voyage; they had been on the Road for years! They cooked us a magnificent meal in the make-shift van kitchen where they also had installed a toilet, dormitory-type beds and cupboards. They even had a small cooler! Over a pull-out table we chatted about our travel experiences and future plans. They, too, were headed for Mali but via Gambia, a journey that would take them a month. They were eager to have me aboard with them, but I explained that my plans were to cut straight through Senegal on the Dakar-Bambako train. The girls intended to leave tomorrow so they offered to drop me off at the main square.

The American and I retrieved our sleeping bags and laid them out next to the van near the rocky shore; he told me that he always slept outside, and had been travelling with the Germans for two months; it had been paradise! The girls did all the cooking and driving whilst he did the repairing, bargaining and paper work. As a parenthetical aside, he disclosed to me, lowering his voice, that there was nothing sexual between them; he even hinted that they might have been lesbians! But this assumption, of course, was pure speculation, he reported with a slight, dejected tone. I drifted into a deep sleep, refreshed by the balmy winds, the pleasant conversation and the healthy meal.

The next day being Saturday, all the embassies were closed; I would have to wait until Monday morning before procuring my visa for Mali and Niger. The girls dropped me off at the square where I sat on a bench eating some bananas. The hotels were very expensive here, so I resolved to sleep either in the parks or under parked cars (I had done quite a bit of that in Algeria without any problem!) But luck came my way. Whilst peeling one of my bananas, a Danish couple bid me a good-day and began a conversation. Their English was better than mine! They couldn't have been over thirty, but they had been on the Road now for over ten years, mostly in Asia and Africa. The boy didn't think it a good idea to sleep in the parks so suggested that I keep my back-pack in their hotel room, but sadly added that due to the proprietor's intolerance of people sleeping 'à dix' in the rooms, I couldn't sleep there. He proposed that I sleep on the beach, no one ever went there at night, and it wasn't too invested with mosquitoes because of the cool winds off the sea. He said that I could shower whenever I wished in their room and join them in their meals. His girlfriend was a beautiful blonde, blue-eyed girl who spoke discreetly and with a charming accent.

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I dropped off my pack at their hotel room then we spent the day together strolling in the medina, eating merguez and cous-cous. These Danes were seasoned travellers. The girl, although fair-skinned was far from the soft, celestial type that one may meet: she was tough! Neither she nor her boyfriend came off as blasé flower-power hippy rip-offs or freak-outs; nor soul-seekers or Manson-like curs: they were intelligent, cunning and generous, neither credulous nor patronising. They had been forged on the hardships of the Road, and had been wandering in Africa now for over two years after having spent a year in India and another year hitch-hiking from the sub-continent to Egypt.

It began to get dark. Back at the hotel I retrieved my sleeping bag and set out for the three kilometre walk to the beach. The streets were empty save a few stray dogs sniffing round the rubbish dumped on the street corners. It got very dark, and at one point I had to ask a soldier the way to the beach. He pointed the way without a word... On the beach I found a comfortable spot to settle down, a sort of sandy clearing illumined by the moonlight, surrounded by bamboo parapets perched on a small cliff, overlooking the white crested waves. Thanks to the parapets I was not exposed to the strong winds, yet could still hear and smell the sea. Had I not achieved the ANABASE: The hero returning from the desert of self-exile? For three or four nights this would be my den; undisturbed I would lie except for the rats that scurried over my sleeping bag. Cloudless were those four or five nights, whilst I mused over the revolving moon and stars. An infinite array of moons and stars that twinkled far beyond the vault of Aristotle. And during those wave-lapped nights, sleepless for the most part, I would feel estranged, as if I had been back on the ships that took me across the Atlantic, peering into the Blackness of the sky: who was moving, the ship, the Earth, the heavenly bodies? The gentle sound of the waves against stone and sand nursed me not to sleep but to an alchemical fusion between the inkiness of the sky and the sound of the sea, transported me back to the yellow dunes of the Sahara that posed as some mobile frontier between Berber and Black African! A shifting border between Semitic slave-traders and slaves! A physical barrier between civilisation and culture... Is it not the Road that offers abundant meaning to life rather than one's destination? Similarly, is it not the Act that proffers ontic plenitude rather than the results of that Act? This, I believe, was Burton's philosophy of life! The Road to Mecca, to Harran...to the love of languages... A sudden gust of wind shook my precarious parapets. The air was so clean, pure...the winds, freshening. Only those horrid rats brought me down to earth, causing me to curl up in my sleeping bag and feign sleep.

It was Sunday. I dropped off my bag at the Danes' room then bought a ferry ticket for Gorée, the notorious slave-trading island whence Europeans and Americans procured the human capital for their industrious and illustrious systems of infinite progress. The island was such a peaceful place: clean cobblestone streets separated red, green and brown wooden houses. In 1444, the Portuguese used Gorée to transport slaves to the Americas; apparently the population at that time was over one thousand, including 200 slaves. Since 1944, the island has been classed an historical monument, and is much visited by both Africans and Europeans. That day I met one Frenchman with whom I exchanged a few words. The African children, living on the island, followed us here and there, albeit at a polite distance, asking for 'bonbon...bonbon...'. He did, in fact, bring candy with him, and dutifully distributed it to the five or six kids. « C'est mieux que de l'argent », he added, turning to me with a smile. He had been to Gorée on sundry occasions, but I never learnt why he had been in Senegal for so long.

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Large Acacias lined the narrow lanes of the tiny town, its fern leaves brushing the tips of the brown stone, whilst the round white and yellow fallen flowers formed colourful beds beneath us. There was no hectic atmosphere here: the people picnicked in the little parks, couples strolled gayly from one historical point to another.

I left the Frenchman and soon arrived at the 'Maison des Esclaves', a solid stone edifice in which the slaves were chained awaiting European transport ships. Inside, seven or eight dank cells testified to the way in which the White man, and his African business 'partners' treated the 'native'. From these cells a low narrow passage led to a rocky opening of the house, then to the ocean from where a gangplank was extended. There the slaves were put into rowboats then oared to the big ships anchored far out to sea. Our high school manuals had taught us all those pious lies of the good-hearted Abraham Lincoln who had declared war upon on the South to free the poor, black slaves from aristocratic infamy so that there would be equality between 'we' and 'them'! Many years later, after having perused several British historians' works on the American Civil War, I would realise that Lincoln's burst of humanity translated a bigger burst for cheap black labour in the sweat houses of the industrialising and thus militarising North! He despised the black man as any white man did at that time. Yet, despite this scorn, the North required fodder to feed its furnaces, and the freed black man from the South provided excellent fuel. Customs die hard: in Chattanooga, Tennessee at the Catholic Mission the Blacks had to eat and shower separately from the Whites! And that was in 1972!

I climbed the stone stairway to a large terrace atop the house from where Dakar could be clearly seen. Turning my back to the capital, I noted many soldiers carrying rifles, parading back and forth along the high walls of the enclosure. The Frenchman in effect had mentioned that the Slave House had been converted into a political prison! How ironic...I spotted an approaching ferry, so I quickly made for the small harbour.

Back in Dakar I immediately headed for the medina where a restaurant which served good 'che-gogen' could be found. I had eaten here yesterday with my Danish friends; this dish was their favourite. It consisted of rice and fish smothered in a hot brown sauce. After having wolfed down two plates I washed my hands (the dishes are not accompanied with utensils) and stepped out the door; I was suddenly swarmed by ten or eleven hobbling lepers! Those without legs pulled themselves along on make-shift carts, those without arms used the stubs and their under-arms to carry burlap bags, some had deep holes which had gnawed through noses, ears and lips. I had come across lepers in North Africa but never in such motley gangs. Those who had hands held out tin-cans, jingling them, letting the coins tap against the rusting metal: the eerie jingling intermingled with articulated grunts and mutters. Giving money to beggars in Africa had never been my policy, not that I was hardened against this universal practice, but I could not sympathise with them perhaps because I had seen and smelt so much squalor in New York City ghettos, in red-neck towns in Georgia and Mississippi, in Catholic Missions and Salvation Army shelters. However, leprosy was something altogether different: these people, because of a genetic affliction, had been ostracised from their communities, herded into colonies, treated as outcasts with absolutely no opportunity of social intercourse, save amongst themselves. I tossed some coins in their tins and sped off...

Another pleasant night at the sea. The rats left me in peace...

Monday was a busy day: I quickly obtained my visa for Mali then purchased my second class (or third?) ticket on the Dakar-Bamako 'Express', a 1.800 kilometre run that took at least 33 hours. This was to be no joy-ride, but hitching across Senegal was out of the question. And anyway, I was told that from Tambarounda to the Malian border there was no road! It was also on Monday that I ran into Bill and Joe at the post office. It certainly wasn't a very pleasant surprise; nonetheless, we did talk over 'good old times', and they invited me to spend my last night in Dakar at their hotel room...on the floor.

All in all, my short stint in Dakar turned out to be rather relaxing, even though the city itself offered no fascination or comfort for me; these huge modern African cities imitated, on a smaller scale, our Western jungles, save the lepers; I hadn't come to Africa to admire Western ugliness! It always disgusted me to see the lissom African sporting a tie, wearing tight black shoes and socks, carrying a brief-case and jumping into taxis or cars like the actors in American movies. But was this not what everyone really wanted...deep down? To be the responsible, aggressive man who conquers the world, opulent and 'above it all'? Only the courageous resisted this mechanical, consuming contamination, but they did so only in clustered exclusion or in solitary martyrdom. I thought of my high-school hero, Chinua Achebe...But that thought flitted away as quickly as it came...

At four o'clock I thanked my Danish friends, who were staying on for another month or so. Then I bid farewell to Bill and Joe who had decided to split up as a result of their constant rows. I left them in deep consternation about their future Roads.

My backpack loaded with six oranges, two loaves of round bread and one very expensive apple, I headed for the train station. The old train was scheduled to depart at six-thirty. When I located my compartment, two other Americans were already seated next to the window: the first a bearded giant Cyrus, the second a short, nervous college graduate, Tim. They, too, were heading for Bamako. Cyrus was a farm-boy enjoying himself in the wilds of Africa. He said that all this reminded him of Nebraska! I couldn't agree or disagree with Cyrus since I had never been to Nebraska...As to Tim, he had had some unfortunate experiences during his sojourn on the continent which, I assumed, had accentuated an already edgy disposition. Of these experiences I shall relate in due time. At present, we chatted away observing the decrepitude of our compartment, our wagon, the train as a whole. All this being said, with a whistle it pulled out promptly at six-thirty, and save a group of tunic-clad men and three fruit carrying women, we were the only passengers in the wagon. I peered out the windowless window: this was better than first class!

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### The Epic Train Ride

Through the window, marshy tablelands, clumps of woods and forest, clustered thatched communities in front of which haystacks had been neatly stacked, and enormous flocks of birds jutted out like embossed work on a fiery streaked backdrop. The sunset blazed a bloody red! At nine o'clock the train pulled into a station. Our wagon rapidly swelled: men wearing *chezes* and *bo-bos* scrambled in, pushing and shoving for a seat. They stank of sweat! It was quite obvious that they had no reservations. Their wives followed shortly, struggling under the weight of baskets, bags and crates of fruit, cereals, and colourful cloth. And it was of course the women who either dragged their screaming kids behind them or bore them on their chunky hips. Five or six of them made themselves comfortable in our compartment; that is, they pressed us, politely, against the windows. Little hands tapped me on the shoulder from outside: young girls were selling milk in large oval wooden dishes. Whilst all these flutterings amassed round me, I took refuge in some milk and topped it off with two bananas. The smell of piss and unwashed bodies grew pungent. Babies were barfing on the floor and on their mothers' colourful clothing, goats were shitting pellets in the aisle. Beggars barged their way into the wagon: blind, legless, monsters...the whole of mayhem filed theatrically down that bulging aisle, spitting, coughing, puking, cursing, wiping snot on each others' *bo-bos* or *handiras*. The polio-stricken came charging into the wagon, each orifice of their tortured faces aswarm with vicious flies. Their presence became unbearable; women pushed them away, the men struck at them with sticks or fists. Three policemen stormed in and beat them out the doors; an ugly, macabre scene which reminded me of some Keystone cop film! The train finally lurched forward. Outside, blackness mantled the villages, punctuated only by small fires and gas-lamps...

Twelve thirty: Tamacunda! Here a deafening deluge overwhelmed us; never had I experienced anything so dangerous. Hundreds upon hundreds of people flooded into the wagons through the doors and windows. On the platform, a full moon exposed the horrors of pandemonium: police were savagely beating and pummeling men, women and children who attempted to climb make-shift barriers, erected a hundred metres or so from the train. I heard children crying and their mothers shrieking, the grunts of men struck, and the thudding blows of police cudgels, men fighting bitterly, cursing and retching, clothes torn and faces slapped and punched. Then I heard Cyrus screaming for air and Tim whimpering in the corner against the window, smothered under arms and legs. A mass of flesh and clothes had poured into our wagon and spilled over into the compartment. Sickly, emaciated old men collapsed onto our feet begging for air, women tore at one another for an inch of space, their fruit smashed on the floor, the pulp of which became thick gluts of pasty dough clinging to peoples' bare feet or sandalled shoes. I couldn't believe what was happening; I had become the committed observer of my own nightmare; a vision that had always frightened me.

Tim had been literally crushed to the floor; he was howling for help. Cyrus, the giant, came to his rescue. With unbelievable strength he tossed off Africans until he got hold of poor Tim; yet the sheer weight of Africa made him buckle; he fell to his knees holding Tim by the waist. I began to panic! My arms were pinned to my sides, and no matter what direction I turned, couldn't free them. Cyrus



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managed to get to his feet with Tim at his side. His face was red and puffy, full of wrath. Hysterically he kicked and punched at the human wall, pounding on necks and backs. He had lost all control of himself. Funny enough, the Africans didn't respond; they absorbed his ire like so many punching bags. I gathered courage and used my head to break through the throbbing bulk, hardly aware whether it was a woman, man or child. I freed my arms, bent down and grabbed my bag of food. Outside the police had gone berserk: those who tried to get in through the windows had their fingers and hands cudged pitilessly. Up at the front of the wagon the heaving, pulsating mass suddenly toppled like some rotten wall, floundering in fruit pulp, sweat, puke, piss and shit. The train jerked forward and began to move...

There were about twenty-seven people in a compartment for six! Gnawing cramps crept up my pinned legs; an old man, his toothless mouth opening and shutting as if it was chewing the air, lay across my feet. On top of him were two baskets of fruit whose owner, an enormous buxom woman, sweaty and stinking to high heaven, had discharged her wares in a gesture of despal, then promptly plopped her fat ass down on his legs. Over Cyrus' kinky-haired head on a wooden shelf I had thrown my backpack: how was I to get to my two oranges and one remaining loaf of bread? Then a terrible thought struck me, how were we to relieve ourselves when nature beckoned? Were we to piss in our pants, hang our arses out of the window and let it fly? True, in difficult situations as such these Western toiletry inhibitions were generally discarded in a gradual, abdicating way...who would have imagined that six months from that moment I would be shitting my insides out in public, surrounded by curious women and children, and in a hotel room in southern Algeria (perhaps Colombo-Bechar), suffering from chronic diarrhea, I would take off my lice-infected shirt, lay it out on the floor, crouch and evacuate the waste: luckily it was hard! Who would have dreamed that I would then tie the sleeves of the shirt around the fuming hillock, open the window, and like David slinging his stone let my stool sail over the street onto a roof top opposite the hotel where it landed with a gratified, muffled thump! And again I thought: fortunately it was hard. I soon felt something warm and oozy dripping off my right sandalled foot: had the buxom bird puked up on me? I looked down: she had and the stench was unbearable...

The hours crept by without respite; at every stop people poured in...no one got off. I couldn't sleep. Cyrus tried to cheer up a half crazed Tim who shuddered and shivered against the window. In fact, I found his humour quite attractive: he laconically commented on the pungent smells of underarms, the nauseating stench of unceremonious farting and belching. Even those belches stank for some unknown reason. But poor Tim was in no mood for Rabelasian jesture...

Oddly enough, it was in this morose mood that little Tim recounted his sorrowful adventure at Tindouf, a south-western Algerian town near the Moroccan border deep in the Sahara: he had gone alone, getting a ride with some Moroccan land-owners through the desert. How could he have ever fathomed that the whole zone was militarised, and subsequently, prohibited to civilians without special authorisation? How could he have ever envisioned his arrest in Tindouf at machine-gun point, his face slapped when attempting to explain in his very unpractical French, his three day stint in a disgusting gaol, touched by two Algerians who desired to embrace him, lay with him...be 'his friend'? Enough was enough! he had fought them off for two nights. On the third morning he called over his torturers and slipped each fifty dollars. He was released and told sternly to get his ass up to the district capital, Colombo-Bechar in order to have his visa reviewed and re-stamped. The soldiers gave him a kick in the

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arse to remind him of his mission. They then sent him packing...Thus spoke Tim of his first misadventure in the heart of Africa...

Whilst I listened to Tim's whimpering words the chaos and cacophony of the wagon offered me a sort of carnival background music: babies cried and shat on the floor or on their braying mothers' bosoms; men gagged, spat and laughed toothless laughs, women, whilst wiping up their babies' mess, prattled away at incalculable speeds. Tim's drooled words twisted and turned in a dreamy way: they dragged on and on and on amidst this 'little music'...this 'African style'...What was the expression: dragging heads? Again the train stopped. People who clambered through the windows were now beaten back by those of our compartment. This was no joke: territories had to be defended at any price! The whole History of Africa (world History?) was resumed in these beatings, shrieks and insults. The train pulled out on its northeastern course towards the frontier of Mali...

Morning. A sleepless night. My eyes were burning and my limbs aching. My mouth felt like cotton; I hadn't had a drop of water for over twelve hours, my plastic water bottle crushed between my pack and Cyrus'. The heat and stench weighed oppressively on us; and I swore to myself that at one point I actually 'saw' the stench steadily, dreamily, wafting towards the ceiling where it hovered in thickening cloudlets. Outside, the grassy veld rolled by, roan-coloured low-range mountains strung out in the far distance, clouds sinking between the rounded peaks, then drifting in and round them before carrying on their habitual course. Was my course as habitual as theirs? Who said that the clouds pass, the sky remains? Suddenly an uproar from behind: two policemen kicked and cudgelled a path through the inert bodies; they stopped and requested our passports, informing us that we could collect them at the frontier town of Kayes.

Mid-day. At Kayes mass hysteria swept the station. This being the border between Senegal and Mali, passengers struggled to get off and on. I was practically in tears: how were we to get the passports? I volunteered to go alone, Cyrus promising to guard over Tim, our seats and belongings at any cost. I jumped out of the window, then ploughed through the throngs with elbows and fists a-flying. A wall of people drove me back and I stumbled on fallen children and baskets. To my left stood a high wire fence around which the crowd squeezed and turned. I scaled it and reached the police station. A moustached officer, calm and collective, had our passports ready in front of him. He handed them to me politely and wished me a pleasant trip. Was he being facetious?

Getting back to the train proved worse: the crowd had swelled and thickened to monstrous proportions. People were literally stepping and tripping over one another to get to the train platform. I felt sick. Women with twisted faces clawed savagely towards the platforms and waiting train. I suddenly began to laugh in spite of myself. You know, one of those uncontrollable laughs you get whenever the mind is weary, over-strung, on the brink of something unknown, perhaps even dangerous. My head ached from this unconstrained laughter, my stomach was in knots. You know, one of those uncontrollable laughs you get whenever you shouldn't laugh, whenever a serious situation entails sarcasm, irony, cynicism...like at the Catholic Mission in Tennessee, where the defrocked priest, transfigured into a sly, cynical hobo, had commented on someone's lethal farting during a very serious sermon delivered by a very serious priest about Hellfire and Forgiving Tears: «I'll bring the tissue

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paper», the hobo-priest had uttered as the wretched stench infiltrated the preacher's zealous words. "I'll bring the tissue paper! I'll bring the tissue paper!" he repeated out of the side of his mouth in a tone as solemn as the priests'. Tears rolled down my cheeks, my stomach heaved. How could I muffle hysterical guffaws in light of such serious double-talk? I succeeded...But here I didn't: and why should I? The police were having a jolly time bashing the hell out of everyone, leaning into those colourfully dressed bodies with abandoned glee. At this spectacle I laughed. Women clawed at faces and pulled each other's hair, some even bit like enraged dogs. At this spectacle I laughed. Naked, undernourished kids were trampled, kicked, pummeled and shoved along with goats, chickens and bags of cereal. At this spectacle, too, I laughed in wanton cruel outbursts. And here I must confess that the reckless laughter carried me through that madness, aided me to clear a way towards my window, viciously, mercilessly...gleefully! assured me the strength required to thrust myself into the vortex of flesh regardless of women, children, animals and helpless old men. I reached the window and climbed into my seat: Cyrus had kept them off for over an hour, his face haggard and pasty. Still laughing (Cyrus couldn't understand what was wrong with me), I handed the two Americans their passports: mission completed. I suddenly stopped laughing and dozed off. When I opened my eyes the train had long since left Kayes and was steaming towards Bamako...

How many more kilometres were left? My food was finished and only two or three drops of water remained in the bottle. Tim had managed to get into the toilet where he found at least six people huddled together fast asleep; he had no choice but to piss on them since they wouldn't wake up or feigned not to be awakened... « Only a few drops came out! » he guiltily confessed. «They were sleeping in the shit-hole...I couldn't hold it in,» he lamented in his nervous, squeaky voice. Who was to blame him? Not I...

The ochre veld stretched far and wide into the azure of an afternoon sky. From behind islands of posed boulders on which no vegetation grew, troops of baboons suddenly emerged, racing and jumping from boulder to boulder to keep up with the train. Perhaps they expected hand-outs. They were huge, gruesome beasts, showing their canines, barking out as they leapt along. The end of the film, 'Sands of the Kalahari' flashed into mind. I soon dozed off again.

The train came to a sudden halt at a thatched village in front of which neat rows of hayricks had been stacked. Here I jumped out of the window and filled our bottles with fresh well water. Dirty though it appeared, we all needed to drink. I also took advantage of the stop to take a leak behind a tree, scrutinized by a half dozen children and women...It seemed more civilised than peeing on Africans in the john of the train!

Midnight. The train seemed to stop in the middle of a grassy tableland. Someone told us that the next stop would be Bamako, and in fact we observed people readying themselves for the mass exit. And a mass exit indeed it was: once in station, passengers stampeded towards the iron gates, knocking ticket collectors to the cement floor. How many of those liberated stampeders had tickets? We chose to wait until the bedlam had subsided, albeit the streams of passengers seemed never to slacken. So we finally alighted from that nightmare and were eddied along with the swelling billows. There was so much screaming and yelling that my eardrums throbbed. The ticket collectors, with the help of the zealous

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police, had taken control of the situation, stopping everyone in order to check tickets. This, of course, was effected in the usual brutal manner: could there be any other? Like a wave rolling towards the shore we swept past the collectors (I threw them our tickets) and into the dark streets of Bamako. Limping quickly from the maddening throngs, we found ourselves in a silent, litless street: sanctuary! Sanctuary! There was not a soul in sight...The silence was deafening, both refreshing and foreboding. It was an uncanny silence, like that of being left behind somewhere in a lonely spot or of being buried alive. That funeral procession silence that contrasts the gaiety of life. We wobbled under the effects of 'train-legs', shuffling lethargically through the quiet, dark streets to find a place to sleep...

### **Mali: Bamako**

We erred down the dark streets like wounded animals sniffing out a hole to crawl into: I had a splitting headache, perhaps because of the uncanny silence! For hours we trudged from corner to corner but no hotel was to be found. The streets were empty. Was that possible in Africa? Apparently it was. The deathly silence began to get on my nerves. Besides, Tim kept muttering to himself, articulating stupid sounds like a whining puppy. Thoughts of sleeping out in a park or even at the train station entered my mind. I was about to suggest this to Cyrus when a man emerged from out of the darkness. He greeted us in Arabic, but continued in good French. He was rather perplexed to find three Americans wandering the streets of Bamako so late (or early!). Cyrus, in good French, explained our dilemma. The man reacted cordially and promptly motioned to follow him. We wound our way through the dark narrow streets until he stopped abruptly in front of a huge bleak building. He called out and before long a bald, dwarf popped his head out of the doorway. They engaged in ardent conversation, gesticulating in all directions (mostly towards us), laughing and slapping their hands together. Finally the dwarf motioned to us. Our interpreter told Cyrus to follow his friend and not to worry; he would take good care of us. He left as abruptly as he had come...

We followed the dwarf through a damp corridor and past a heavy metal door where we found ourselves in an enormous auditorium: it was empty save one metal table and two chairs of the same rusting material. For a moment I felt a vertigo pressing in on me: being hemmed in for so many hours in trains, buses, jeeps and taxis developed a sort of mild claustrophobia, I suppose, against which I had generated defense mechanisms. Now, thrust into this gigantic void produced an extraordinary surge of agoraphobia. These antagonistic sensations sent hot flushes through me which caused my eyes to well in tears. I dropped my pack on the cement floor and immediately sat down. The dwarf brought us water, then showed us the toilet and shower. He refused to accept money.

Cyrus and Tim slept on the floor, I on the metal table: «Are there rats here?» Tim queried anxiously, although in a much less precipitated manner. «No,» Cyrus soothed him; «we're safe here.» And the giant Cyrus took his friend gently by the shoulder. I had seen Westerners flip out in Africa. It generally manifested itself in one of two ways: either the victim went berserk, inflicting damage or injury on things or people, case in which the local police had to intervene and communicate the libel to the embassy or

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consul; or, and more pernicious than the first, the victim suffered from a slow, decaying process of alienation, now causing states of extreme depression, now of intense euphoria. How many times had I overheard in the dead of night Americans, English or French weeping in their beds, talking to themselves in choked whispers, reassuring far-away parents, friends or phantoms that everything would turn out all right! It seldom did! These unhappy souls would end up lonely and banished, a prey to the conniving, to schemers, to malevolent curs. At best they were sent home by their respective embassies, at worst found dead. Is it not better to dialogue with the Dead than to engage in commerce with the Living? As to Tim, he would get out of it all safely thanks to Cyrus, who as I heard many months later, never left his side until they were both on a plane back to the U.S. of A...

I used my jallaba for a pillow: it was good to stretch out the legs, to be in Mali, to be so close to Timbuktoo. My African Studies Course in high school flooded into my mind: true, Mali is classed as the sixth poorest country in the world, but who gives a damn about United Nation statistics and Peace Corps ideological relief? I sought the Empire of Mali, the one founded by Soundiata between 1230-1255 and continued by Kankan Moussa (Mansa Moussa) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, especially during the years 1324 to 1325, those of his glorious pilgrimage to Mecca. This vast empire, of Muslim bond, had been a hybrid one: Touregs who spoke (and speak) Berber, Moors who spoke Arabic (the Hassanya), Peuls, Dogons and Bambaras, that is 40% of the total population, speaking their respective languages combined to forge a mighty sovereignty. This is the Mali that I yearned to penetrate. Dwelling on these majestic thoughts, I was about to fall asleep when an irritating buzzing noise shot past my ear: with no ceiling fan the mosquitoes were descending on us in wrathful hordes. I opened my bloodshot eyes; it was so futile to entertain any illusion of peace on this continent. Cyrus groaned, Tim repeated mechanically the phrase 'the little dwarf...the little dwarf'. Why did he place that adjective before the word 'dwarf': weren't all dwarves 'little'? I slipped deeper into my bag with a sigh...

Bamako, the capital of Mali since its independence in 1960 is, on the whole, an uninteresting, unsuccessful modern African city: a confusion of low-roofed grey dingy buildings, dwarfed dusty unattractive markets, mazes of thatched hovels, rubbish-strewn lots. The hot city is plagued with erring lepers, beggars, alms-men and other pilgrims of both universal and local stamp. A myriad of congested intersections converge into a mass of lorries, cars and people without any policeman or signal to direct it. The few trees that 'embellish' the capital lay withering away, browned and languishing from lack of water and attention. To add to this pot-pourri, an immense Western style supermarket had been constructed only a few years back, yet hardly a commodity could be found on its shiny white shelves. Saleswomen dragged their feet about absolutely bored, haranguing you into buying a tin of pineapple juice, a pair of baggy trousers or a badly styled shirt. In fact when I stepped in to have a look, a salesman zeroed in on me and made every attempt to bargain for any Western attire that I might have possessed; he was ready to trade a few tins of spaghetti, and even a can or two of tomato sauce! Alas, I had nothing to trade off.

It was the medina that intrigued me, not particularly the colours or the hawkish cries, but its remarkable mosque, a mammoth edifice rising from a square base, built of baked mud with round beams criss-crossing a series of stalagmites. Into both the base and the stalagmites had been tunneled - for the mud was packed thick- hundreds of little square holes which served as windows. The many

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entrances resembled the cavities of a honeycomb into which the worshippers penetrated with heads bent low. Prohibited to non-Muslims, I imagine then that they twisted and turned through the moistening cells until attaining the *kiblah*. I was told that this typically West African mosque could hold up to 800 worshippers.

As to the medina itself, disease seemed to hang stagnant in the droughty air; I had never seen so many lepers limping and hobbling about, dragging themselves lamely from place to place in strangling, stench-wreaking packs. On one of my numerous strolls through Bamako I met some Americans from the southern states (perhaps Florida or Georgia); we decided to depart together for Mopti by taxi. This river village was easily reached on a good asphalt road which hugged the Niger for some 300 kilometres. Travelling as a foursome, too, would cut taxi expenses considerably. We would meet tomorrow at the supermarket (this supermarket became a rendez-vous point for all the parch-throated Europeans who found themselves stranded in Bamako) with our belongings and take it from there.

I returned to the auditorium and found Cyrus and Tim taking a nap. A few pineapples had been placed on my metal bed, so I opened one with Cyrus' hunting knife (if you recall mine had been pinched by 'a gold-toothed friend'). This of course attracted the flies whose buzzing and pestering awakened him. I informed Cyrus of my plans and asked whether he wanted to join us. He put on his glasses and retrieved a map from off the floor. «Nop! It's too northerly for us,» he drawled, shaking his large head. «We'll stay on here for a few more days before taking the train again.» I had to give credit to Cyrus, everytime I spoke to him he never once said 'I'; Tim had become an organic part of him.

I took a shower. The rest of the day was spent darting about, securing my visa for Niger, obtaining an extension visa for my seven day Mali one; the authorities stamped me in for two months without clamour or cry. I did, however, slip them five or six dollars for their trouble: «frais de dossier» they sighed with broad, pearly white smiles. That same day I strode to the supermarket to pick up some canned food. I was disgusted with rice and bread. My stool had been streaming out in every colour of the rainbow for the past month or so; I even detected blood spots! I bought some yogurt (which apparently refortifies decaying intestinal tissue), canned sardines, tuna and corn. That night everything was packed and ready.

Following another mosquito-infested night, the next morning I bid farewell to Cyrus and Tim, wishing them all the best. They were, besides Greg whom I was to meet in Mopti, the kindest and most compassionate road companions I was ever to travel with in Africa. At eight o'clock, the three Americans were waiting for me in front of the closed doors of the supermarket. The 'chief' of this little band, a bearded fellow from Atlanta, had already made the taxi arrangements. The other two, one tall the other fat, hailed from Jacksonville, Florida although they were originally from Alabama. I causally informed them that I had slept in all the 'Sallies' and Catholic Mission shelters in Georgia, Alabama, Florida and Mississippi, but this didn't impress them at all; their reactions were slow, almost drug-like. Indeed, it wouldn't be too cruel to state that I was dealing with three dead heads whose political profundity veered towards a quick settlement of the Vietnam War through undiplomatic channels such as napalm, yellow rain, orange acid, bulldozers (to clear out the jungles of crouching Viet-Cong) and cannon-fodder, preferably of black, Jew and hippy constituency. In short, these 'rednecks' were 'doing' Africa as they

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would have 'done' any country on the face of this earth, save Vietnam where, for some unknown reason and in spite of their perfect enlisting age, they had never 'done' nor would ever 'do'...

At the taxi-stop our things were tied securely to the roof-rack and we were off...We moved along the serpentine course of the Niger upon a smooth road where grey-sanded banks, thatched huts peeping up behind thick high reeds, and occasional hayricks lay limed against the backdrop of the muddy river and the yellowed wastelands beyond. Here and there tiny, honey-combed adobe mosques thrust their stalagmite roofs out and over hut and hovel. Several of these cones had been painted white. Villagers, clad only in loin-cloths, their ebony bodies glimmering in the strong sunlight, fished in the now deep now shallow waters either in pirogues with cast nets or on the shores with drag nets. Women pounded rice and other cereals. Naked boys with protuberant navels, swam or waded near the shores.

The Niger River, first explored by Mungo Parks, is the fourth largest river in Africa, supplying water to Guinee, Niger, Nigeria and Mali before emptying into the Atlantic. However, due to the terrible drought, its precious waters have dwindled, making it now impossible for steamers to connect the river towns and villages. Only the pirogue still effects merchandise and passenger services up and down the river, and even these neolithic crafts have to be pushed in certain parts of the river. Indeed, the Niger no longer symbolised a natural barrier against the dangerously advancing Sahara sands: the desert crept steadily into and through central Mali. It is said that each year 20 centimetres of Sahara engulfed former tilled soils, savannah and forest. The effects of the drought on the river were visible to the eye: sandy islands without vegetation emerge and spread like the mane of a lion in the middle of the slow-moving waters. Cast-fishing Africans stood up to their waists, their owners seated in howdahs with muskets, darting terrible glances at villagers who approach them. The taxi driver told us that these turbaned Berbers carried many litres of water in skins which had to be protected. Protected from who? From a population that witnessed their drinking water diminish day by day...

We arrived at Mopti by following a tributary of the Niger: it had almost evaporated! Women washed clothes in the puddles of water on the cracking bed that once contained tons and tons of life-giving water. However, as we approached Mopti, the tributary grew wider and wider, fuller and fuller until flowing into the Niger proper. There, the town bustled with intense riverside activity. Many people were bathing and carrying water skins and ewers to and fro. Along the edges of the river cement had been lain, sloping downwards into stationed pirogues of all colours, fastened to high wooden posts. Men, here and there, hopped from one pirogue to another, loading or unloading food, animals and wood.

As we rolled into the centre of this small town, huge Sycomore trees dotted cleanly swept clearings under which men and women were talking or taking naps. To our right, rows of wooden and adobe homes formed a wedge around the pinnacle of a stone steeple: the taxi driver deposited us in front of the church courtyard. The only hotel at Mopti wasn't far off, but we had been told that it was far from cheap. I fixed my eye on that stone steeple: how many times had I slept in churches when vagabonding through the States: churches whose doors were never locked? I suggested to my companions that we give it a go.

Past a broad-leafed Sycomore we walked and through the arched portal of the outer enclosure until we found ourselves in the middle of a pleasant courtyard, to the right of which a quaint, stone church

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stood. To the left were three or four doorless openings that led into small dark cells. These, presumably, were meant for the weary wayfarer. The priest did not come out to welcome us. However, a leper-inflicted woman did, and motioned to the cells. She pushed us into one. I gasped: evil were these inquisitorial dungeons! Cold, dreary and damp. Did we have to pay for them, too? Apparently not. I was sure that the priest slept in shameful comfort. The leper limped off without a word...

The three Americans pitched their tent inside the cell...I would have to sack it out on the crusty dirt floor, a rite to which I was getting quite accustomed! Presently, the leper returned with a petrol lamp whose yellowish light cast intermittent shadows on a ceiling chock full of chirping lizards, some of which were enormous. Blackened moss grew out of the fissures of the soggy stone walls. I grabbed my things and headed for the church; I would sleep there, certain that it was much cleaner than this dungeon.

Again I crossed the courtyard where the leper woman now, as if by magic, was busy watering and trimming the Hibiscus which crept along the enclosure. I motioned to the open door of the church and lay my head in my hands in sign of sleep: she smiled. I stepped in. The church was steeped in darkness save three votive candles that illumined a single nave, in front of which two rotting pews, their kneeling cushions torn and shredded, had been placed. I set my pack down at the altar: the Crucifix, cracked and warped, was quite unpretentious; and although it appeared bland, Christ offered congenial relief. This Christ was no bloodied, nail-riveted victim of Spanish or Portuguese religious interpretation. Here He had already ascended, the Spirit, enshrouding the drooping pose of pining. The Oriental Spirit 'Lumen Orientalis', seemed so out of place in this white African church, which resembled so many others I had slept in or seen in Africa: styleless, seedy, miserable, banal...soulless; the spiritual exile for filibustering Franciscans and Dominicans, Orbilian-obsessed Jesuits, cynics and 'erring' priests *in partibus infidelium!* Wierd shadows danced behind the Crucifix, circum-wavering the tiny apse. Above, inside the apse, the dimming rays of the sun filtered through three stained glass windows whose motifs were hardly discernible. On the wooden lectern a French Bible had been left open at the Book of Esther, and chapter 9, verse 5 had been underlined. I took note of the verse in my journal: 'Les juifs frappèrent alors tous leurs ennemis, à coup d'épée, tuant et anéantissant. A ceux qui les détestaient ils firent selon leur bon plaisir.' Why I had jotted this verse down has always intrigued me: the conjunction of signs at that very particular moment in Time and Space? An Encounter between symbol and the symbolised? Years later when I scanned my journal I came across the verse and found the English translation: 'Thus the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they would unto those that hated them.'...

Who were the Christians of Mopti? Certainly not Coptes, Syriacs or Armenians. No, they of Mopti were former Animists, and deep in their souls remained Animists: Catholics on the surface, superstitious voodoo worshippers deep within. They had been cajoled and band-wagoned by those zealous French Catholic feckless mentors who declaimed their verses in insipid, patronising tones, chanting their infantile paeans of colonial bounty and Christian goodness. In short, this Church belonged to 'Fuscum Occidentalis'! The battles between French Catholic, English Protestant, and Arab Muslim to convert into monotheists and merchandise the nations of Africa represent one of the saddest stories of Humanity. To be Black during those degenerate centuries was far from beautiful...Of course this perception of reality is



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learnt once one is well clear of indoctrinating school books, and especially the 'Whiteman's Law' . In a Moroccan Youth Hostel a German had asked a Black American how he was treated as he made his way through North Africa. His response struck me with an absolute truth: «It's different for me because I'm a Black, not a White.» And indeed, how could he be treated like a 'normal' American (the image of the normal American for the majority of foreigners is White, Rich, Clean, Smiling and Generous) when he was black?

I laid out my sleeping bag next to the altar: to the African mind what could be the difference between worshipping a wooden or stone Crucifix or an idol of the same material? Had the majority of these new converts integrated the symbol of the material, or did they remain on the smooth or coarse surface? Did the priest ever pose this question when giving mass? I'm sure he did. My head suddenly weighed so heavy. I closed my eyes. Was I asleep? I thought I heard the tinkling of spherical bells...or was it the camel-bell? The tambourines of those nocturnal dancers who pranced and whorled merrily, feverishly round me on a beach in Tunisia? They had awakened me: the discs of the shaken instruments and the clinking of the arm- and ankle-bracelet bells. The women begged me to dance with them: I refused politely...I was no dancer! They approached me, letting their colourful black laced costumes brush against my tense, tired face. Then they bid me good night and twirled away into the darkness and silence, kicking up the pearly white sands silently...the tinkling bells and the shaking discs vanishing...

Then, perhaps, in another dream or vision, I saw myself in New Orleans fighting my way through the Mardi Gras throngs. The church doors opened for me and for five or six other street-sleepers. We found refuge near the altar. The next morning the pastor found us and invited us to his house where we discovered a man in quest of a new Society, a new Religion, a new America...His children smoked hashish and filled their tills with acid pills! The good pastor himself grew marijuana in hundreds of flower pots which lined his window sills both inside and out! He narrated stories of drunken priests and pederasts who ran whorehouses in the presbyteries, who fornicated with the ass that brays three times; the same that bears the burden of higher values, who bears the young and beautiful girl towards the Light of the Orient...towards the great Festival to come...He revealed the filth and hypocrisy of institutionalised Religion, of stale Dogma. And from his pocket he procured colourful tablets which he proclaimed were the only remedy for a defunct Church: these and automatic arms that should and must be distributed to our budding and blossoming Youth...

I awoke to the chirping of the courtyard birds: it was still dark outside. The priest entered the church and spotted me rolling up my bag. In very strident French, he made it clear that I was not to sleep in 'son église!' I was in no mood for his sermons and answered that it wasn't 'son église' to begin with, and that a traveller in need had every right to sleep in God's House. This argument neither deterred nor moved him: he indicated the door so I left for the dungeon.

The three Americans had already left on a visit to the Dogon peoples. I threw my bag down next to the tent and left the courtyard. The priest eyed me with a leer from the church entrance. I strode towards the river. The early morning sunlight made the moving waters shimmer green. I crossed a suspension bridge and came across the biggest West African mosque that I would ever see: the Komoguel as it is called by the Bambara peoples. It was colossal! The honeycombed entrances dug deep into the thick,

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roan-coloured adobe walls. The stalagmites, transversed by poorly cut beams, both rounded and squared, resembled enormous ant-hills. Muslims wearing skull-caps and white *handira* penetrated into and emerged out of the profound entrances. There was no minaret, perhaps the stalagmites served as a substitute. I then wandered down to the banks of the river where I inquired about pirogues leaving for Timbucktoo. As luck would have it one would be departing the next day. A man loading and unloading goods near a hauled-in pirogue pointed to the 'captain' or owner of the craft in question. I hopped from one pirogue to another until arriving to the 'captain's' craft. There was no problem. His huge bark could easily accommodate forty people. He even added that another *too-bob* (white man) had intended to make the journey, but remained unsatisfied about the fee. I, however, agreed to his price after a minute or two of haggling. We shook hands and I hopped back to shore.

At the small riverside market I grabbed a bite to eat and bought some provisions for the boat trip; namely, oranges (very expensive), bananas, canned sardines and biscuits. Two African lads offered to sell me a mask and a statue, both of mahogany and of excellent workmanship. I bought the mask and was about to buy the statue when an eerie apprehension filled my head: the finely sculptured Dogon warrior, beautiful though it was in its coarse, pristine state may have been a fetish, and thus under the influence of voodoo! The readers may find all this rather silly or absurd, however, an incident in Timbucktoo, which I shall relate in due time, confirmed that the belief in fetish and voodoo is no laughing matter. Be that as it may, I decided against the statue, no doubt a gross error on my part from a collector's point of view. I must say that I rather regret it now, far from the African soil where assurance and comfort dissimulate the agony of the unknown and the lure of Black Magic...

The rest of the day was spent at the Niger's edge, observing the coming and going of the pirogues, the flocks of herons and egrets wading on the opposite banks or on the wing. Some of the African boats were enormous; over forty feet in length and ten feet in width. They were all covered with a bamboo made armature on whose top bundles of straw had been securely tied with hemp. The hull of the pirogue was not monoxyle; that is, unlike the Hopi Indian canoe or other small, neolithic African boats. The pirogue is an assemblage of finely cut pieces of wood, either nailed or stapled together. In the centre of the bigger crafts' deep hull (two or three feet) a squared space was reserved for an iron fireback on which big black cauldrons were placed, bundles of faggots and logs. When it was time to cook the cauldron was lifted on to two thick andirons under which the faggots and some clumps of dry grass were stuffed. All the bigger pirogues were equipped with outboard motors, the smaller ones with canvas-stitched sails. The long, narrow boats, which held two or three men, were paddled like a canoe.

A young boy sat down next to me. In good English he asked where I was heading. When he learned that I was off for Timbucktoo he paused for a moment then said excitedly that another American was staying at the Church, and that he too was going to Timbucktoo by pirogue. I thanked the boy and left. The Dogon statue came suddenly to mind: no, I would lose it anyone...for sure. I hurried along the dirt road towards the church courtyard enclosure. On the way I spotted the three Americans seated under a tree eating fruit. They ignored me. Inside the enclosure, the priest was speaking to some Africans, his hands folded in that pontifical, sanctimonious pose so common to these pharisees. He looked at me out of the corner of the eye, but made no gesture or sign of any kind. I laughed to myself and entered the cell to get a map. When I came out a bearded man with shoulder-length hair introduced himself as Greg. He

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was from Washington D.C., and had been on the Road for over thirteen years. It was he who had spoken to the 'captain' of the pirogue on which I was to board. Greg, after much deliberation, had more or less made up his mind to make the voyage up river the next day after having 'haggled over the price'! as he expressed it. We sat down in the courtyard and talked about Africa, raising our voices and laughing boisterously much to the discomfort of the priest. Greg even took out his guitar and began to sing Negro gospels! He played very well, although his singing left much to be desired. After all this provocation, he seriously told me to purchase a week's supply of food because the journey up river might take longer than expected, and further up North we wouldn't find much to eat in those drought-stricken river villages. I took his advice and immediately ran out to complete my provisions. How fortunate I was to have met Greg, for his prognostics turned out to be partially true: I thus bought a kilo of dates and three kilos of tomatoes from the riverside venders.

That night I slept in Greg's cell, avoiding both the 'red-necks' and the priest. He travelled very light. Greg, other than his folk guitar, carried some extra shirts and trousers in a Nepalese bag. He didn't even have a map. He played everything 'by ear', as he would say. (Including his guitar!) It had taken him five years to cross Asia; he was now three years in Africa, and apparently a job was waiting for him in the Camerouns. If all went well, we would carry on together until Niamey, the capital of Niger, from where he would continue south and I, eastwards to Chad...

The next day we packed and left the Mission without a donation, although I did give the leper woman a handful of French Francs. At the river, we located our pirogue and made ourselves comfortable, sitting on the stored burlap bags which carpeted the bottom of the boat. The African passengers were gradually filling it with their goods, which included about ten goats and twenty chickens. We were the only *too-bobs* aboard, albeit one 'white' Muslim was counted amongst the Africans, a woman from Morocco who was treated with contempt throughout the long voyage. True, ever since El Mansur had led his Moroccan armies into Mali in the late fifteen hundreds, the two peoples displayed little sympathy for each other. Not all Malians despised Moroccans, but here, in Songhai territory they were particularly loathed. The wounds of History never really healed, and even if they did the scars remained ugly reminders to Humanity's 'great' achievements! I had always felt the tugging of that scar whenever I crossed the Mason-Dixon line.

The 'captain' jumped aboard and pulled up the gangplank. His crew, two boys (perhaps his sons) and a stalwart young man (I think his brother) got the motor roaring, whilst he procured a thick bamboo pole and pushed us out into the swift moving waters. Many of the passengers waved farewell to their families that lined the cement embankments. Greg retrieved his battered guitar and strummed out a few merry tunes to which the Malians either clapped or hummed. «No better way to communicate!» so the *too-bob* cried above his improvised playing.

The pirogue moved at about ten kilometres an hour, struggling against the current. On this stretch of the Niger the river was so wide that the banks could hardly be discerned; the waters were deep and the surrounding countryside more or less green with many patches of good high grass and trees. Cattle and goats roamed freely along the distant banks. Fishermen in tiny pirogues or on broad rafts were casting their nets, fixing them to each others' boats, forming thus a line that spread over half the width of the

river. As the sun set everyone began to nibble at whatever food they had carried aboard, and one by one they dropped off to sleep, using the burlap bags as cushions or pillows. I lay back against a canvas bag. The rum-rum of the motor and the light rocking of the boat made me sleepy. The straw armature above swayed slightly...for the first time since leaving the French family in Mauritania I felt at ease. The first part of my voyage was almost at an end...and halleluja, there were no mosquitoes...

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### Upriver on the Pirogue

It was very cold that night; I had slipped into my sleeping bag and cuddled up between the burlap bags near the Moroccan woman who had nothing to cover herself. The poor woman coughed and moaned the whole night. All I did was listen and bear her agony. I dared not help her lest attract the hostility of the Malians. I had noted that the Sub-saharian Africans were very disrespectful, even aggressive towards her. Who could blame them: both Arabs and Berbers had sold them off as chattel during the hey-days of commercial slavery! For a White Arab or Berber black is far from beautiful! On the other hand, I remember from my high school studies that Ahmed Baba, a Malian intellectual who lived during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when captured by the invading Arabo-berber tribes had stunned his captors by his prodigious erudition. When asked how was it that a Black could be so intelligent he replied that which is white is not always milk, and that which is black is not always coal, or something like that...

I awoke with terrible sharp pains on the left side of my abdomen. As the day wore on and the pirogue sluggishly cruised up the sunlit river, the pains grew sharper, and my head burned with fever. Greg searched for an answer: was it the food, the sun, the circumstances...perhaps the murky water at Mopti? A year later, in convalescence in New York, the doctors would sermon me about boiling and filtering water in Africa. That's easy to say when an agency arranges everything for you, when you're catered to by clubs. Whoever heard of filtering water in the desert? I drank any water available to me, even the brackish waters in the oases...

It was time to eat. The captain's crew caught fish in their drag nets and rice was scooped out of a burlap bag. The women filled the fire-burnt cauldron with river water, lit the faggots and began to cut up the catfish. When the water boiled huge chunks of salt, peanuts, rice and the sliced fish (head, eyes and tail included) were tossed into the cauldron. I gasped in horror: the heads and tails! The stench of the boiling fish tingled my nostrils, turned my stomach round and round. The smiling women procured a knotty branch and stirred their brew. How I yearned to evacuate everything inside me: but where? Should I just slosh it over the side as one British sailor once recommended if extreme circumstances behooved? « Hang a moon and slosh it overboard » he snickered...Dinner was ready! Would they force me to eat? The thick broth was ladled out into coarse bowls along with a wooden spoon. Greg took his and swallowed it down in a jiffy; he actually asked for seconds! As for me, I couldn't bring myself to eat a bite; I saw too many creamy white eyes, sorrowful, too many open mouths, commiserate. I passed the bowl on to the Moroccan woman who gulped it down without even a thank you.

That night all the passengers slept on the beach whilst the pirogue dipped and rolled listlessly in the moonlit waters, anchored a few metres from the shore. The gangplank had been thrown out towards the shallow water, permitting everyone to wade safely onto the beach. But because of the darkness, and my feverish state, I fell headlong into the deep water. I dog-paddled to the shore where I spent the night shivering inside my now saturated sleeping bag. My little 'river cruise' was slowly transforming into a floating nightmare. I could hardly sleep. Furthermore, many of the passengers performed *al-'ichâ* (night

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prayer) not only murmuring very loudly but at different intervals during the night, as if they each had a distinct conception of the exact time of *al-'ichâ!* The next morning, my limbs aching all over, I removed my boots and socks to dry them in the rising sun. Again the strong urge to relieve myself took hold of me, so I ventured inland in search of a secluded spot. Unmindful of the thorny creepers that criss-crossed the sands, I stepped into one, the pointy thorn snapping off into the sole of my foot. Wounds like these could rapidly become infectious. Limping back to the pirogue I showed my foot to Greg. The captain strolled over to examine it. He gestured for one of the women to come; she bent over, touched my foot, then promptly procured a thin hair-pin from her kinky tufts. With one of those pearly white Black African smiles she plunged the pin into my sole, dug in deep, and in half a second the broken thorn was between her fingers! I hadn't felt a thing. She indicated the river, so I dipped my bleeding foot in. And that as they say was that!

As the days passed I began to feel a bit better. Greg played his guitar and sang; I ate some sardines and oranges without experiencing that pressing need to crouch down and shit my insides out. Where we were presently navigating the river was in spate: I observed the bird life along the Niger, the rum-rum of the motor in counterpoint to the erratic flights of the birds and the villagers working or playing on the distant banks. White herons and dark egrets gently glided towards us and hovered above the straw armature, probably on the look-out for hand-outs. If they weren't on the wing, they either waded or bathed on the banks or mounted leisurely on the backs of cattle. I sat on the edge of the boat, my feet in the water, watching the birds at play. A woman gave me water from the ewers, and sliced up a pineapple for me and Greg. Suddenly right in front of us a hippopotamus surged out from the fanning wake of our boat, opening wide its flabby jaws. The inside of his mouth glowed pink! The Africans started shouting « Mali! Mali! » Then, as suddenly as it had surged, the huge water-glistening beast disappeared under the muddy waters. Everyone was clapping his or her hands and laughing. Greg, who spoke excellent French, asked why the passengers all cried out the name of their country. The captain proudly explained that the name of their country comes from the river-horse, the 'mali', because it symbolises strength and sympathy.

The days lingered on: at every drought-stricken village the pirogue would stop to unload cargo. It was dreadful! There was hardly any food. Hardly any drinking water. The countryside appeared to be in a blaze: dry, bleached-white sands stretched and stretched without the slightest relief, without the remotest spot of green! Children were walking skeletons, mangy dogs prowled around the banks sniffing or licking at the meatless carcasses of cattle and dromedaries that lay strewn here and there. The livestock that resisted had to be protected in pens against starving thieves or money-hungry profiteers. The majority of the men shouldered rifles.

Here the Niger had dramatically dried: at least four times a day we all had to jump out into the waist-deep water and pull or haul the boat off a sandbar. Greg warned me to keep my boots on for the Niger was crawling with those parasites (whose name I have forgotten) that infect the body with *Bilharzia*, a fatal disease of which many Africans die because they walk bare foot along the banks and in the water whilst fishing or playing.

The captain informed Greg that his pirogue would put in at Diré, a village about 150 kilometres from Timbuktoo. From there we would have to take a smaller craft, due to the shallowness of the Niger, upriver. I was disappointed, that meant more negotiating, more scant village food, more chances to contract illness or disease: in short, more hassels!

Greg made me look at the bright side of Diré: sojourning in Songhai territory might be a rewarding experience. And so I took his advice: what did another week or two in an African village mean anyway? I had been drifting about in some timeless void for months and months, whose only medium of bearings was the Space that I covered. I had already begun to forget the days of the week, the months, the years. I would, during the second leg of my journey, after having crossed the Algerian Sahara twice, begin to forget the words and syntax my own language whilst leading a nomad life with Berber and Toureg. When one lives day to day, nothing outside the chores and toils of that day really matter. Perhaps that is what some call the Present...

Greg cheered me up...my appetite was gradually coming back, although that gruesome concoction of fish eyes, peanuts, tomatoes and who knows what else still repulsed me. Be that as it may, when my provisions had been consumed I had no other choice; we all gathered round the steaming cauldron, formed little balls of rice and fish organs in our filthy palms, then flipped them into our mouths. The pirogue rocked gently, the river breezes dispersed the whiffs of steam; it still amazed me today how I didn't barf that blend over starboard!

Most of our nights were spent sleeping on the beach; I hardly closed my eyes because of the mooing cows, the bellowing buffalo, and worse of all the screaming troupes of baboons that approached the afflicted villages in search of food. I was terrified of the thought that the cows or buffalo would crush us under hoof or the baboons bite at our exposed necks.

On the sixth day, during a short rainstorm, we 'anchored' off the beach at Diré. This was the last stop. Greg and I waded ashore where we were immediately greeted by three young boys who offered sleeping arrangements at their uncle's home. Greg made it clear that we had little money, and that the beach would be fine. They shook their heads in a slow, mechanical manner then took us by the arm. We let them escort us through the dusty streets until arriving at an adobe hut of an unusually big size. The three boys pushed through the curtained entrance and pressed us to be seated on straw mats. Soon Salif entered, the boys' uncle. He welcomed us to Diré, adding that we were in the land of the Songhai! He invited us to be his guests, and eat at his restaurant at whatever price we could offer. Swishing through the curtain one of his wives (he had four, apparently), dressed in a dazzling robe of hyacinth, set forth a plate of rice and salad on the mats. Salif motioned to help ourselves. After our meal, Greg played his guitar for the whole Songhai family. Salif's wives, rather coquettishly, insisted that Greg keep playing and that I dance with them. Salif thought it a wonderful idea...I declined, explaining emphatically that I suffered from a bad back (which was not altogether untrue). The women giggled impishly and didn't insist.

We lived with Salif for six days, his wives, his innumerable children and nephews. They plied us with food, questions and drink, accompanied us everywhere, never leaving our side. which as everyone

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knows who has travelled through Africa, can become rather annoying. The idea of privacy is unknown to the majority of people of this continent. Confiding to one's Self, indeed, becomes a privilege that may not last more than several instants. Salif continuously introduced us to family, friends, acquaintances; we knew the whole village and couldn't get across it without being fed on food or conversation. One day, Salif introduced us to a French couple who were working as medical assistants in the village clinic. They were volunteers. The husband examined my stool and detected parasites for which he gave me some antibiotics. Thus began my grudging routine from Salif's hut or restaurant to the clinic, waiting on that lazy line, either for another examination or some medicine. The Africans would let me go ahead of them, knowing well that the white man's patience was far shorter than theirs! But patience was always a question of Time...and Time I had...I had insufferable Time, and thus insufferable patience...Women bearing babies on their backs or hips let me ahead...men smiling white pearly smiles let me ahead. Even lepers let me ahead...all this was insufferable, like Time and patience...Something was eating away at me deep within: the parasites or Ennui?

The days dragged on...one day a pirogue anchored at Diré: it was going on to Timbuktoo. Would it take us aboard? The two previous ones had refused us, due to the weight of cargo and humanity. I was miserable: Diré had transformed into a languishing route from the harbour to Salif's hut via the clinic... The sandy streets never seemed to end, so banal and familiar had they all become...Routine was setting in, terrible, death-like routine! Did anyone ever really escape from this 'fléau'? At four o'clock, Salif came dashing into the hut; Greg and I were sprawled out on the mats 'thinking the time away'... «La voilà!» he cried triumphantly, «La pirogue est arrivée. J'ai acheté vos billets.» Greg jumped up. Indeed, Salif held two slips of greasy paper in his hand. Greg asked a few questions then quickly turned to me: «quick, she's leaving in two hours.» We packed at all speed. Salif's entire family escorted us down to the bustling banks, where they didn't stop waving until our pirogue had disappeared far up the river...

Everything had gone so quickly: a stalwart man greeted us on the beach, and after having spoken to Salif for a few minutes pointed to a dugout into which we crept along with four Africans. Salif's 'friend' climbed in and paddled us to his pirogue stationed in the middle of the river. Ten or twelve passengers had been waiting for us. The man (no doubt the owner) revved up the motor, and soon we were out of sight of Salif's family's raucous calls and gesticulated farewells...



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### The Holy City: The Well of Bucktoo

For the next two days under a burning sun the pirogue battled up an ebbing river, pushed and pulled by its courageous passengers so often that the owner should have reimbursed our toil at least half of what he charged us for our voyage. For toil it was! Tugging thirty foot pirogues off high sandbars was no easy business, and I was in no condition or mood to play Humphrey Bogart. At one sandbar, long and high, the boat almost tipped over on its right side whilst everyone was pushing and hauling frantically. I tripped up and as I clutched at the side of the pirogue the silver ring that I had bought in Algeria five months ago slipped off my finger...my goulimine bead, too, vanished in those shallow, miserable waters!

Kabara, the port of Timbucktoo, came into sight in the late afternoon of the second day; we literally pushed the pirogue on to shore where we were met by fishermen who helped us haul her up. Kabara, or the six thatched huts that comprised it, was twelve kilometres from Timbucktoo, accessible by either truck or jeep: no pirogue ventured further up river lest being marooned on some island-like sandbar far from village or bank. At Kabara there was no transport problem, many lorries left for the towns which dotted the Niger upriver. It was a good asphalt road which ran right down to Niamey, the capital of Niger. Within a half hour we were in the back of an empty lorry surrounded by a desert wasteland of hills and thorny creepers. We arrived in Timbucktoo at nightfall.

The Holy City appeared deserted! True it was early evening, and a gibbous moon supplied atmosphere, but could this be the crossroads of the Sahara, so described by many an adventurer and traveller? Greg and I strolled through the narrow streets now lit now pitched in obscurity. The only hotel in Timbucktoo was much too expensive. We asked whether it was possible to sleep in the back gardens (if they could be called as such!) of the hotel, near the bed of a long since dried tributary of the Niger. The receptionist had no qualms against this...at our own risk! We decided against this idea...the crocodiles, mosquitoes, roaming, famished thugs or dogs dissuaded us, so we carried on along the contours of six foot high adobe walls that lined the lonely lanes. Indeed, this was no 'typical' village on the Niger, the constructions that we began to perceive: mosques of the Songhai stalagmite stamp, palace-like homes of stucco walls whose high narrow windows were embellished with wrought-iron bars which framed sculptured geometric or figurative shapes, outdoor ovens, mausoleums and the adobe ramparts testified to a former, great power. Suddenly a bald head popped out of a doorway; a man clad in a *bo-bo* of hyacinth bid us step into his restaurant. We did. He introduced himself as Monsieur Baba, owner of a restaurant and three clean huts just across the lane in which, if we desired, could stay at little cost. The cost was determined and so we ate eggs, bread and tomatoes. Monsieur Baba was one of the wealthiest villagers of Timbucktoo, or so he vaunted. He had more than four wives (illegal under Muslim law), but since they were all well provided for, neither the villagers nor the Imam denounced him. Two or three of his wives did all the cooking and cleaning. For this reason he always referred to his restaurant as a 'family enterprise'! It goes without saying that the huts across the street provided nothing for the weary wayfarer save two straw mats in each. Monsieur Baba lent us a petrol lantern which Greg and I would share whenever we wanted to read at night, for as could be expected there was no electricity.

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I laid out my sleeping bag on the tampered sand and made a pillow with the scattered leaves that lay scattered about the hut. Greg, a few feet away, was pouring over a map, the lantern light faintly illuminating a ceiling and a portion of the mud wall. I inspected the thick rotting beams between which mud had been securely packed, admired the simplicity of the architecture, of this life style in general. This was no kingly abode, yet kings and princes, if necessary, would and did dwell in them, their reputations unblemished, their images unstained. A wave of relief rushed through me: it could have been worse. After all, hadn't I reached my projected destiny? Hadn't I overcome the obstacles of high school scorn, endless bureaucracy and African afflictions? Hadn't the cantankerous schoolboy who refused to accept imposed reality accomplish his dream? I heard a scratching sound just behind my head. In the darkness of the leaves I saw nothing stir; I pushed them up nearer to the bottom of the wall. I lay back. Again the scratching sound returned, this time louder, perhaps closer. I called to Greg to bring over the lantern. He set it over the leaves and suddenly sprang back: «a scorpion!» It was a huge beast, ruddy-red, carrying a worm in its mouth. Annoyed by the light, it lifted its head and claws, squirming to escape under the crispy leaves. Greg ran to an outside corridor which connected all three huts, secured a baked brick and smashed the thing. We pushed it into a corner of the hut and threw dirt over it. I was shaken up; scorpion stings could be fatal. Greg suggested that I sleep in his hut for the night.

The next morning during breakfast, we asked Monsieur Baba about the scorpions of Timbuktoo. Removing his skull-cap he showed us where he had been bitten once, near the right temple. Scorpions here were not deadly, although the venom they did inject was extremely painful. He did add, however, that one or two rare species of scorpions found in the surrounding countryside were very lethal and could kill a man. Needless to say, for the remaining eleven days in Timbuktoo neither Greg nor I stumbled across any other.

During our thirteen days in Timbuktoo, with or without Greg, I explored the Holy City and the desert around her. Everyday I would stroll down to the huge market located in an ugly concrete building that looked like an aeroplane hanger. It was the only unsightly architecture of the town: the stalagmite mosques, big and small, imprinted a marvelous image in my memory, the uncrenellated raised fortifications which protected the streets were suggestive of those that I saw in photos of Troy, Urfa, Crete and Antakaya. Everyday caravans from Taoudenni, an oasis located in the wilds of North Mali, laden with salt and legend, would stop at Timbuktoo and rest for several days. Atop the glistening dunes I would follow the unhasty, undulating movement of the caravan as it glided over them, passed the serrated adobe ramparts and penetrated the town by way of the market place. In days of yore, that is in 1324, Kandan Musa crossed the width of Africa on pilgrimage to Mecca. He brought with him 500 slaves each bearing six pounds of gold. Eighty-one dromedaries, appalled with howdah, head armour and magnificent cloths of hyacinth carried 300 pounds of gold each. This pomp was to prove to the Muslim world that spiritual and material weal were perfectly complementary, and that both were required for a healthy Islamic expansion: the Koran and Booty provided the dual methodical dynamics of Conquest and Conversion...This same Mansa Musa had also had built the Djinguiraber Mosque, and although it has suffered over the past 500 years, it still stands proudly near the market place. Greg strolled out of the town to join me. He sat down and opened his clenched fist: «do you know what this is?» In his outstretched palm three green, blue and black goulimine beads lay. Greg appeared

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surprised when I shook my head in the affirmative. I recounted the story of my goulimine bead. He laughed. He thought it rather an ill-omen to have lost it in the river. He then stated seriously that they probably had been fabricated in Venice and used by Europeans to buy slaves. Greg added that they were worth a lot of money in America and for this reason wanted to have at least a dozen before returning. So he would be returning then? Apparently the black ones were especially inestimable. I shrugged my shoulders and pondered over my ill-omen...

From my lofty sand dune observation post Timbucktoo laid spread before me. Did it resemble the 'well of Bucktoo', the name of the female Toureg guardian of the well (*tin*), or the 'valley between the dunes', so translated from the Songhai language? Both suited her quite admirably, although I never stumbled across the well or valley...

Timbucktoo had been a nomad Berber camp before her steady rise to wealth and fame in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Its decline began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century because of the Arab slave-trade, and also due to the maritime routes along the shores of Africa between Europe and the Sub-saharian countries; routes that paved the way for the glorious days of slave fodder sold to Europe and America. Poor René Caillié, who in 1828 had bluntly stated that Timbucktoo was neither Damascus nor Bagdad, but a miserable, sad, dusty hole, where instead of heaps of gold he rummaged through heaps of salt! And the erudites back in Paris actually accused him of making it all up: the fools! Whose fault was it that this once magnificent city lay abandoned in the desert? Why be disappointed over an historical ineluctability? Ibn Battuta fared far better: in 1353, he beheld a city at the apex of its splendour. As to the Scottish explorer, Alexander Gordon Laing, he unfortunately, in 1826, not only found heaps of salt, but was murdered by slave-trading Arabs or Berbers! I for one was not at all disappointed, and I can certainly vouch for René that heaps of salt exist, and those in myriad quantities...

For a Franc or two I had made a solid pair of goatskin sandals to which was fitted a thick sole made out of the rubber of a tyre. They would last for years, but also tear the skin off the top and sides of my left foot, a feast thus for flies! Presently though, I browsed around the market, examining the colourful clothes, the baskets of dates and peanuts, the mounds of melons: to tell the truth the market was a hideous place; fly-infested without that nervous activity necessary to generate interest. Besides, being the only 'whites' in town, we had hundreds of children at our heels every time we entered the cement building, hounding and teasing us.

Everyday I would sit on the shady side of the adobe-lined lanes of the Holy City and try to sell my thick, heavy boots, which no one cared to notice plopped down on the grey sands much less cared to purchase! When the scorching midday sun began to creep up on the greyish sands of my lonesome boots, I would change the side of the lane, place the boots directly in front of me and patiently wait for a potential customer: none ever came! This ritual went on for three or four days: indeed I was adamant, but the Malians more than I. At least my nostrils were rewarded now and then by the scent of hyacinth when a young shapely woman swept by me. Perhaps no one would buy the boots because I was Christian? After all, during the Middle Ages the Holy City had been prohibited to Christians! But what made me think of such nonsense? Burton's dangerous excursion to the Mecca and circumambulation of the Ka'ba did indeed raise hue and cry, but finally was accepted by the Muslims, for was not Burton

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somewhat of a Muslim? He wasn't, however, the first to transgress the sacred frontier: a certain Italian voyager in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ludovico di Varthema, had already sneaked into the city disguised as a Mamluk soldier from Egypt, a fact that the honest Burton himself ascertained in one of his books. Besides the annoying packs of children, though, no one slighted or offended me in the least; in fact, I observed no violence at all in Timbucktoo, no girl-beating like in Moroccan markets, nor face-spitting scenes in Northern Algerian cities! I would, in the river town of Gao a few weeks later, however, be witness to a bastinado by policemen, implemented upon a young man for theft, encircled by a huge number of apathetic spectators!

Everyday at two o'clock or so, Greg and I would take long naps: the grains of sand seemed to roast white in the glaring sun. One noon, as we were hurrying back to our hut to escape the climbing sun, a tall thin, clear-skinned man motioned to us from a door-passage. We stopped and entered at his bidding, oddly enough, without hesitating. Inside, on four of five straw mats, the tall man sat, dressed in a *handira*, surrounded by scattered books in Arabic scripture (one or two of which had covers of gleaming embossed calligraphy), four lit candles whose dripping wax had formed tiny mounds in guise of candle-holders, and two low reading lecterns. In the centre of the dimly lit room a metal incense-burner was smoking called a *al-mbakhra*, methinks. A square green cloth had been carefully placed under it. He looked up and asked us, in a soft calm voice to be seated opposite him. We leaned against the cool mud walls, scrutinizing him scrutinize us. Then he pointed to his books: «je suis un Aïssawa, vous savez, un *chaykh*, un *gestionnaire* du grand empire; je me rends aux tombeaux des saints pour l'amour d'Allah.» Greg nudged me and whispered that he was a 'marabout', a sort of sage or mystic; Greg seemed to accept the title with feigned seriousness, but because of the poor light, and Greg staring stonily at the 'marabout', I couldn't understand whether he was being ironic or not! I personally thought the whole thing a *mise en scène*. Meanwhile the 'marabout', disinterested in our whisperings, opened his palms to the earthen ceiling whilst bending over the incense-burner and opened books. He began to make odd signs in our direction which I barely discerned in the semi-obscurity. Like our huts, his too had no electricity. For the next few minutes or so a dreamy silence enshrouded the circularity of the hut, not a silence of expectation, but one that strains the mind outside of its prison of prejudices and planned futures, a pained silence of some Presence which bears down on you as familiar yet ghastly: a face rising over the foot of your bed at night to keep vigil over your nocturnal, illicit wanderings...To which bedside errings he began chanting, that 'marabout', chanting an enchanting chant...melodious, light, andante; a charming chant he chanted: hushed, soft-petaled, low-key...modulated by his rising palms up and down...up and down...the wafting fumes circulating round the circular hut ceiling, the rosary beads which he counted, one by one, slowly, meticulously, attentively "Allah mu la na...Allah mu la na...Al lah mulana..." and so on, methinks! All this time he never lifted his eyes from the incense-burner. Then he glared stonily at me! I froze, lowered my eyes to avoid his unembarrassed gaze, then turned to Greg: he had dozed off! I had done my best to remain lucid, fighting off lead-laden eyelids, rolling my eyes inside their orbits to the orbicular movement of the fumes which circumambulated from right to left. They smelt like an Orthodox Church: myrrh, frankincense...that last word reminding me of Frankenstein, whose horror tales I had read hundreds of times, whose horror magazines I had devoured before the age of eight, whose whole concept of life I attempted to equal, to be his first emulator...Did I still feel that way? The Monster, the ostracised; he who dares 'show' himself as the acclaimer of Difference? Visions of

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this social deformity flooded my mind: the 'marabout' chanted on, his eyes fixed on me and the snoring Greg. Those experiments in the Art of Lycanthropy, at night, in the moonlit woods near home. It suddenly came rushing back to me:

*'Even a man who is pure in heart*

*And says his prayers by Night*

*May become a Wolf*

*When the wolfbane blooms*

*And the Autumn moon is full and bright...'*

Metamorphosis! Schizophrenia!..

The situation was becoming monstrous as the hut fumed and chanted, a horribly delicious one of two truths, two monstrosities, two seven-year old visions: nightmarish and ambrosial...The 'marabout' suddenly stood up in the swirling fumes. His reddish tinted *handira* with long, broad white stripes touched his bare feet. He drifted to Greg and touched him in the middle of the skull; he bent over me and did the same. Then, before we knew what had happened, the 'marabout' was standing at the threshold of his hut gently ushering us into the Outside, where the white sun exposed me to Reality...Which one? On the way back, Greg uttered not a word. He was disturbingly silent. True, the entire episode rose and set like so many incidents of the day; fugitive, hardly worth noting...and yet I did note it as soon as I recovered in our hut...

Along the adobe-walled streets we sauntered, passing Songhai, Toureg and Bambara, each dressed differently, each speaking his or her maternal tongue. From afar, out over the barren dunes, a herd of dromedaries strung out over the twilight sands, skeleton like, slowly moving across the face of the Sahara, limed against a deep, russet, slowly, setting sun...And there I heard it again: the tinkling of the camel's bell...

That night, in the semi-obscurity of my hut, I discovered that my hair and tee-shirt were invested with lice! Greg had been crushing his between blood-stained fingernails for months: what else was there to do? In these parts of the world neither spray nor powder existed in the pharmacies. Killing one meant twenty others lingering near: eggs, babies, adults...Three months later in the oases and impoverished hamlets of Southern Algeria, I would gasp in horror at the hundreds of louse bites on my chest and stomach, red and lumpy. It would be some six or seven months later, in convalescence, that I would exterminate fully these irritating blood-sucking pests. The tall 'marabout' came suddenly to mind: had he blessed or cursed me? Or could it have been the constantly scratching Moroccan woman aboard the

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pirogue? Or had it simply been the fact that I hadn't changed my clothes in over eight months, and had gone without a shower or bath in three?

On the fourteenth day of our sojourn at Timbuktoo, after having made the pilgrimage to the mud-packed stalagmite tumulus of Mansa Musa two or three times, Greg and I scoured the town in search of an exit vehicle: we both had a strong desire to depart. I had sat and contemplated Musa's tumulus on those three occasions, transported back to those golden days of empires, dromedaries spangled with royal trappings, ebony-skinned slaves, crowned kings and mitred, bearded sages in flowing robes of hyacinth...of tinkling camel bells! I had smelt the incense that has been the royal smell of all great religions. It was time to recommence the pilgrimage to the other sacred lieus of that vast continent, for they were many. And Time? There was no Time in the deserts of the Sahara: the flat, stony one of Mali and Algeria, the *tanezruf*; the gigantic ochre dunes of Southern Morocco; the ruffled sands of Libya and of the Spanish Sahara touching white-crested waves along desolate shores; the mountainous canyons and shifting sands of Mauritania; the tremendous salt lakes of Southern Algeria...Here there was no Time only Space. Space on which hundreds of pilgrimages, myriads of holy sanctuaries and sacred Roads had been paved and trodden. And like the beads of a rosary, those countless grains of sand, too, were told, each and every one chanting the deeds and marvels of the former Spiritual Knights of the mystic congregations. I wanted to re-tell, to re-count those beady grains, those saintly High Lieus. That was why I am here. To let the Sacred penetrate my naked feet. To be *exposed*, I say fully *exposed* to a timeless Space...to a Void whose plenitude can only be measured by the Encounter of the dreamer's dream and his 'touch' within that dream Space. Without the dream or that 'touch' there could be no Space...no great Encounter with the Sacred...

As the lorry rambled onto the sun-cracked 'piste' heading East, I looked back and took a final glimpse of the City of 333 saints. Would this sacred lieu resist Time... the events of history? Would the tombs of the saints of the 'Valley of the Dunes' survive the assault of modernity, fanaticism, intolerance and unimaginative interpretation of the holy Writ? Would it become a 'Valley of Tears'? Timbuktoo had indeed overcome slavery and colonialism...would it overcome the onslaught of the infernal commercial machine of hordic tourism, or the purges of violent dogmatic sects whose hateful cries for purity match their profound ignorance of human compassion and dignity, of human fault? The lorry suddenly veered to the right, plunging into a landscape of high, serrated moon-bathed dunes, the brightness of which illumined our Road... There ended this Voyage to the Holy City, and hence would begin other Sahara-crossings, oases, hamams, grotty restaurants: Gao, Tessalit, Bidon V, Reggan, Timimoon, El Golea, In Salah, Tamanrasset, via the *Tanezruft* and the Adrar deserts, the Hoggar Mountains. All these magical places held unforeseen surprises, both good and bad! I must confess it was the happiness moments of my life...

*«Fantasies, these will seem, to such as are able to call my beginning an ordinary effort».*

T.E. Lawrence: *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

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## EPILOGUE

There, in the stench and heat of midday, I sat on the piss-stained grass that fringed the main road out of Tamanrasset, waiting for someone to pick me up...literally. Exhausted, demoralised, ill, Tamanrasset would be my terminus. The Toureg experience of the *Tanezruft*, munching on dates and rice, quaffing brackish water from oases brooks, hopelessly struggling against lice, an infected foot, dysentery and a balloning belly had engraved their indelible traces...I was dying! A loss of about thirty kilos, a face incrustated with filth, discoloured from illness and the unrelenting Sahara sun, chronic diarrhea mixed with blood, about twenty dollars left in my pocket; would I ever reach Niamey? No...my visa for Algeria had long since expired as well as the one for Niger. When the border police at Reggan discovered this minor detail they promptly threw me in a cell for two days. Mind you they treated me well, and since no hotel was to be found in that desert hole, I fancied myself quite fortunate to be a 'prisoner' to those two policemen, who, by the way, plied me with tea, bread and conversation in both Arabic and French. Weary of my presence, however, they threw me out (so to speak), and henceforth I set off on my own. After three feverish weeks in In Saleh's dripping green hamam, fighting off illness and the homosexuals, a French couple from Dax, with their bright, shiny jeep, decided to take me on with them through the Hoggar Mountains. What an adventure! We indeed shared many a strange and wonderful experience together: explored villages and mountain caverns, attended a Tomato Spring Festival in some rampart-girded village, several hundred kilometres from In-Salah whose name I no longer recall, overjoyed and at times awestruck by the camel jousts and the lance-throwing competitions. Alas, all good things must come to an end; faces can become as irritating as conversation, especially after a month of intimate cohabitation. And so that honey-moon declined slowly but surely: they dumped me on the side of the road in Tamanrasset: 'au revoir et bonne chance'...I couldn't hold anything really against them, we were gradually getting on each others' nerves, as could be expected. And after all, it was their jeep. The heat, bad food, flies, vomit and ambiguous smells, always at loggerheads about money, inter-cultural *mésententes*, etc., etc... Tant pis for Chad and my kibbutz...

And thus, weary and disgusted, I sat on that piss-stained grass that fringed the main road out of Tamanrasset, waiting and waiting for something... that something never came. A month or so later, the Algerian authorities threw me out their lovely country: just when I was beginning to feel at home! A year and a half of *wanderlust* should not be scorned. And yet, what else could they have done; pamper to a bloated-belly living skeleton who, for over a year had been living off the fat of their land, so to speak?

In spite of this temporary discomfiture, and a month of very embarrassing and awkward hospital tests, the Desert would remain the lieu of a Thousand Gibbous-Moon Nights for me: the Kalahari many moons later...the Taklamakan and the Gobi many many moons later.....future haunts of those phantoms

whose nocturnal wanderings bathe the seeking Self in their eternal brightness, a true sign of one's desire to Be ...

*«All other life is living death, a world where none but phantoms dwell  
A breath, a wind, a sound, a voice, a tinkling of the camel-bell»*

*Sir Richard Burton: The Kasidah (VIII)*

*En hommage à Sir Richard Burton*