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Culture Shock

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Author Bio

Rachel is a senior Health Sciences and Spanish major from New Jersey. She enjoys playing music with Bullets Marching Band and Sigma Alpha Iota, serving the campus and community with Alpha Phi Omega, and worshiping God with Disciplemakers Christian Fellowship. She has also recently discovered that she enjoys expressing her crazy life through writing.

Culture Shock

Rachel Ciniewicz

[Knock knock] The heavy door opens. Where are we? *You're blonde. They are going to sell you.* [Slam] The car door shuts. There is no escape now. *You're blonde. They are going to sell you.*

Salamanca, Spain- November 29, 2010

“Jajaja. Eres rubia. Van a venderte.” Hahaha. You're blonde. They are going to sell you. She laughed, like she was joking. The entire table laughed. I laughed too, but the sound was distant, merely a buzz in the background as my imagination had raced off at breakneck speed. They calmly returned to the lentils on their plates, but I no longer had an appetite. I was completing my semester abroad in Salamanca, Spain, and was excited for one final trip with my friends, Brenda and Jill, a grand adventure exploring the exotic streets of Morocco. We had planned meticulously and being sold was not on the itinerary. After living with this family for three months, I should have been able to tell if my host mother was actually joking or not. I compiled a mental list of every reason why this statement should not alarm me. If she was actually concerned, she would have said so. The Spanish were always making politically incorrect statements. Everything would be just fine. There was no need to worry. I was going to Morocco: the chance of a lifetime. A few days later, I opened the front door to embark on my journey, bubbling with anticipation, backpack stuffed with the traveling essentials. “Raquel,” she said, “Ten cuidado.” Be careful. There was no laughter this time, no smile on her face. *You're blonde. They are going to sell you.*

Marrakesh, Morocco- December 2, 2010

Stepping out of the airport doors, we were greeted by the warm Moroccan breeze. Still in disbelief that I was in this foreign country, I was startled by the shouts of the aggressive taxi drivers herding visitors into their caravan of tan cabs. Brenda negotiated with a driver to bring us to our hostel, and soon we were cruising through the dimly lit streets, passing one palm tree after another. Before long, the car stopped at a café and the driver insisted that he could go no further. Apparently, our hostel was located in the Medina, the part of Marrakesh surrounded by the old city walls. Cars were not permitted in this area, so we slung our bags over our shoulders and began to walk.

“Where are you going? I will take you there! Follow me! Come! Come!” The taxi had barely pulled away before a man spotted the blonde and red heads of three American tourists and pounced. He was such a friendly man and would take us anywhere we wanted to go. Fortunately, Brenda had also studied in Morocco and knew the man would demand a fee for his kindness once we reached our destination. As we began to weave through the crowded roads, my senses were overloaded. Clusters of men in linen shirts chatted in white, plastic lawn chairs outside the shops as women, colored scarves covering their dark hair, led cheerful little children through the crowds. Strains of sultry music drifted from every crevice, interrupted by the horns of impatient motorcycles trying to speed past us. We walked down the small streets, both trying to find our hostel and lose our acquaintance, who was growing increasingly aggravated that we did not accept his offer; my heart raced excitedly. I was overwhelmed trying to soak up every new sight and sound. Following the cryptic directions given to us by the cabdriver, we found the center of the Medina, where we were greeted by a haze soaked with music and the chatter of the people gathered at white stands. Each stand was stocked with bags of colored spices, pyramids of oranges ready to be squeezed into a sweet juice, and other Moroccan delicacies. Men in traditional cotton outfits and colored turbans enticed passersby to stop and marvel at their dancing monkeys and charmed snakes. Walking through the square, I felt like I had been transported to a storybook. After only half an hour in the country, I was enraptured. We were snapped out of our enchantment by the ‘friendly’ men in the city, each offering to help us, out of sheer kindness (and a hungry wallet), to find our hostel. After ignoring each of them and again trekking past the displays of colorful shoes and tea sets, we realized that our hostel was not so easily found. Each corner we turned onto led us to more crowded streets but no hostel. Eventually, we asked a shopkeeper for directions, but he merely stared back at us, his face twisted in misunderstanding. Instead, he summoned a child of around ten years old to help us. He eagerly urged us to follow him, insisting that he would help us and would do so for no money. Lost and desperate to find our lodging, we followed.

The boy began to weave through the crowd as Jill, Brenda and I trotted behind him, desperately scanning the surroundings for landmarks we would remember later. Every yellow, stone storefront lined with colorful merchandise and fruit was the same. The child swiftly rounded corner after corner, leading us deeper into the labyrinth of the city. At first, the streets were full of people, but steadily the crowds thinned and the doors led not only into stores but also homes. Soon, we were the only people in the small alleyway. My friends and I exchanged nervous glances, all silently wondering if following this child was a good idea. Slowing out of ear-shot

of the boy, we considered turning back. Then we heard it. Frozen, I began to panic.

It was an ornate, mahogany door, straight out of a movie. The door loomed over the dark alley, ominous, yet majestic against the yellow, stone wall. It was at this door that the boy began to knock. There was no number over the door, no sign on the wall. "This is your hostel," the boy informed us. That was impossible. Hostels have signs, they advertise their presence. Hostels do not hide undercover in dark alleys. *You're blonde. They are going to sell you.* I wanted to push her voice out of my head, to pretend that I was safe, but the pounding in my chest and the blood racing through my veins told me that she had been right. That was it. Twenty years of stranger danger lectures, of taking special precautions to be safe, of insisting to my mother that she had no reason to worry about me because I was street-smart, and here I was, about to be sold. What was behind that door? I did not want to know. In my last second of freedom, all I could do was stand there, immobile with fear, wishing desperately that I could run.

I could have escaped. I would have been halfway to the square when that door opened. I missed my chance. The door opened and another 'friendly' Moroccan man stepped out to greet us. He looked perfectly harmless and normal in a white T-shirt and jeans, but the greedy smile that spread across his face as he spoke with the boy in rapid Arabic said otherwise. "This is your hostel. Come in, come in!" he said, his cool, slick voice sliding toward us, awakening our panic-stricken muscles. Against our better judgment, the three of us stepped out of the alley and over the threshold. Our eyes immediately fell upon the writing on the purple wall in front of us: the name of our hostel painted next to a display of tourist brochures. The man chuckled at our simultaneous sigh of relief. We were in our hostel after all, once again carefree.

Essaouira, Morocco- December 3 and 4, 2010

Marrakesh was a fascinating city; however we opted to spend the majority of our trip in the warm, coastal city of Essaouira. A bus ride through the sandy desert brought us to our destination. Unlike exotic and enchanting Marrakesh, Essaouira had a calm atmosphere that reflected the neighboring sea. Inside the white city walls of the Medina, men and women still gathered around storefronts and carts piled with sweet tangerines, but there was no rush, no music, and no angry motorcycles. Our hostel in this city was easily located, and we were soon settled in a vibrant purple room. Now relaxed from our previous adventures the night before, Jill, Brenda, and I took a leisurely stroll around the city streets. Although storekeepers still identified us as Americans and called out in broken English for us to stop and admire their merchandise, we were no longer intimidated as

we had been in Marrakesh.

At this point, I was beginning to understand the Moroccan culture. The shopkeepers took the time to talk to all potential customers and truly sold their product by establishing trust through friendship. One man invited us in for tea, in which he poured a mixture of various herbs and rosebuds. Watching the rosebuds blossom in the golden liquid, I realized how much I was enjoying the culture. My fear of being sold began to dissolve. After our tea, the man introduced us to his friend, with whom we bartered for Berber jewelry. I began to see that the Moroccans all seemed to work together. They all had a friend or relative who could help us in our travels. Being passed from one vendor to another was not uncommon and was actually pretty enjoyable.

After shopping and exploring, we sat down to plan out the next day. Jill and I had been determined to ride camels since the trip planning was in its earliest stages, so the two of us decided that we would go while Brenda stayed behind. Of course, the hostel owner had a friend who could take us to ride camels. This seemed culturally normal so we decided to go with this friend. He arrived early that morning and instructed us to follow him. Without question, since he was the friend of our hostel owner, we followed him through the city until we reached a car parked outside the Medina walls. He opened the doors for us, and we slid in. This man did not get into the car, however, but stood outside as an older man, who spoke no English, stepped into the driver's seat. "My car is broken, so my friend here will drive you," our leader told us, as he slammed the car door. Jill and I glanced at each other. Why didn't he tell us this before? It's just the culture. There is nothing to worry about. *You're blonde. They are going to sell you.*

The car rattled along the outskirts of the city. The number of buildings we passed dwindled, and all that could be seen was red sand and brush. The ocean appeared outside my window, an ideal spot to ride a camel, but we kept going. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Every spiky bush looked the same. Clearly, we were going far out of the city, and it did not seem likely that camel riding, which was designed for tourists, would be in the middle of nowhere. Again, my body began to tense and my imagination flew off. What if he wasn't taking us to ride camels? Both Jill and I were blonde. If they were going to sell us, locking us up outside the city was ideal; no one would look for us out there. After 15 minutes, the car turned up onto a hill, finally stopping at the top. *You're blonde. They are going to sell you.* To my surprise the driver simply held out his hand to snatch our colorful Moroccan dirhams, and we shakily got out of the car. Standing alone in front of an iron gate, Jill and I watched as the car drove away in a cloud of dust, leaving us miles from the city without a way back.

Stepping through the gate, we realized that we had been left at a

ranch and were standing in the courtyard. Men were constructing something in the center of the courtyard as the sun gleamed off their sweaty backs. Nobody noticed us as we wandered around, looking for some indication that we were, in fact, in the right place. Finally, we found a woman sitting in what appeared to be an office. She led us out to meet our guide at a fenced-in area that contained two tall, ugly creatures. We had found our camels, which our guide later informed us were both named Obama. My fear quickly melted as I sat upon the woven blanket that covered Obama's wiry hair. Our guide led our camels through the brush and sand to the ruins of the castle that had inspired Jimi Hendrix's song, "Castle Made of Sand." Jagged edges of the castle jutted through the sand, still majestic despite their condition. Rocking past the castle, I was greeted by the cool breeze as we approached the ocean. The gentle jerking motion calmed my nerves and allowed my heightened senses to relax. Upon returning to the ranch, Jill and I were brought back to the reality that we still did not have a ride back to Essaouira. We hoped to call for a cab, but the woman in the office instead ushered us into a van parked outside the gate. A man assured us that he would drive us back then shut the door. Instead of stepping into the driver's seat, he walked away, leaving us trapped inside. The vehicle must have been made in the 1970s. It was a pea-green color with shabby curtains hanging in the window. This van looked strikingly similar to kidnapper vans in Hollywood movies. *You're blonde. They are going to sell you.* After a few moments of trying to hide my panic from Jill, I was both alarmed and relieved to see the driver return. We heard the roar of the engine, and off we drove toward the sandy horizon. We sat in silence, praying that the driver's final destination matched ours. As the Medina walls entered into sight through the dirty windows of the van, Jill and I both let out a sigh of relief. We had made it safely back to the city, laughing at the places our imaginations had taken us, but the trip was not over yet.