

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

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Running Through Tangiers

Not everyone picked the side-trip to Morocco, the glossy white ferry across the Straits of Gibraltar to Tangiers. Some were fearful. Some were tired from Madrid and Barcelona and Costa Del Sol. Most chose the day of shopping. But the cultural tour guide assures the brave ones they will be perfectly safe, guards will escort them through the city, everything has calmed down in the last few months.

A rickety bus meets the docking boat, and fifteen eager strangers, on vacation from teaching school, building tract houses, and balancing the books of small businesses, climb the steep metal-ridged steps and settle onto hard plastic seats. For years, they deferred to 401s and deposited into savings accounts. Looking up from half-built walls or stacks of student themes, from computers in soft-walled cubicles, they longed for travel, for adventure. They dreamed of exotic places. Someday, they promised themselves.

The old bus bumps for an hour over deep rutted roads, open windows sucking in diesel fumes and hot sand. The driver descends and holds out his hand to assist with the final steep step to the ground and into the market square. He introduces the hired guards, four men in black beards, red fezzes, and shapeless tan gowns. Everyone nods, but they remember only one name, Mohammed, the tallest one.

The driver turns away, lights a cigarette, and leans against the bus. Vendors stop bartering to stare. Teenaged boys smoke and glare while guards hurry the fearless toward the walls and alleys of the inner city.

Tall bright white buildings shoulder hard into the skinny streets of uneven stones. Curves switch back every two hundred feet, hiding what lies ahead. A solid wood door studded in metal fronts each building. Small windows stare into each other's faces high above the narrow alleys.

The guards flank the group, signaling each other with eyes and hands, herding forward. Soft tourist feet, laced and double-knotted into white athletic shoes, spread over the uneven street.

First, an opening with a rectangular tan mosque, a cool, dark interior. No photos allowed. Colorful arches open into a wide expanse of tiled floor and painted pillars. Some wonder if they are expected to pray, but there are no pews, no altar, no icons.

The four guards wait outside to steer them back into the alley.

Mohammed throws practiced questions. Do they know the American number system came from Arabic? And the alphabet? That Christ was an Arab? His rough-textured robe rustles as he walks and raises low clouds of yellow dust.

The eager stumble behind him, straining to hear, hurrying toward the second show they've paid to see.

In the center of the stucco maze, they reach a small stone-walled court. They circle six feet back from the half-dressed old man with the paisley turban and sunglasses. He blows into his long wooden flute, and simple notes trail each other into the air, lilting upward like thin smoke. The

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low woven basket at his feet trembles. Its round top bounces open and, as though pulled by invisible string, a mottled brown head with wide flat wings rises, waving back and forth. A few of the women step back. Everyone stares until the music stops, and the snake coils into the basket, dropping hard with the final soft note.

“Want to hold it?” asks the wrinkled snake man. “It won’t hurt you.”

To prove it, he wraps the velvet twitching rope around his neck, across his shoulders. The head bobs, twirls, spits. The man grins the teeth he has left, offers the snake out toward the group.

Hands pull cameras from purses and backpacks. One woman pushes her blonde friend forward, urging her. The friend tilts her chin and adjusts her elastic waistband. If only she were still teaching second grade, what a story this would be for show and tell. She licks her lips and steps into the circle. Mouths compress around the group as the snake man straightens the coil and drapes it around her neck and arms.

The snake fits her like a yoke, dipping toward the ground, hunching her shoulders. Her friend raises a tiny camera, orders a smile, and freezes the moment. What excitement, an adventure to boast of for years to come. The proud teacher gleams, and the snake man lifts his swaying pet.

“Next?”

A man in a straw panama hat and a belt cinched below his belly steps up, grins at his wife, the cameras. He will tell his friends on poker night.

None of the adventurers notice two teen boys, but the four guards shift their feet, surround the group, one in front, one on each side, one at the rear. Their faces tense and their eyes twitch.

As they march the group forward, more thin young men in tan shorts, open sandals, and dusty feet squeeze into the alley, edging in alongside. Mohammed bares his teeth and spits harsh words.

More boys join, pointing and hissing, low at first then high and wild as crows. The guards jerk their arms back and forth, up and down, raising the heat in the street and the sharp scent of fear. Crescents of sweat widen under arms.

Down the narrow alleys, through hard stucco walls, the once-eager tourists stampede, frantic feet rumbling on stone. They don’t know where they are, and don’t know where they’re going. Forward could be backward through the maze.

A beacon shines ahead, sun streaming on the open market and the idling bus spewing sooty fumes. At the alley opening, the boys halt and harden, let the invaders sluice though into the light.

The driver whirls, drops his cigarette and jerks opens the door. Like a cresting wave, the travelers tumble toward safety.

The driver unzips a leather pouch and pays the guards in dirhams.

Before boarding, the second-grade teacher who braved a cobra slips Mohammed a folded twenty.

She’s had fear enough to light the years ahead.