



Ahmed

AHMED SQUATTED ON HIS HAUNCHES, staring at the ends of a broken chain. He wore a moth-eaten jersey, black cycling shoes with cobbled cleats, and a cycling beret with the brim upturned. It took us an hour to fix his chain. As dusk pushed from the horizon, I struggled to overcome a primal instinct to be settled, and could remember no town in this part of Algeria large enough for a hotel. No one knew where I was. I had ridden into a dead end.

Two weeks before, I had reached Sicily, bought a map of North Africa, and ridden down to the port of Palermo for the recommended shots. Biceps aching, I limped through the final European miles to Trapani, departure point for Tunisia. In Tunis, I watched men spit into the sawdust of café floors while waiting three days for an Algerian visa. An incredulous consular officer at the U.S. embassy informed me that I was only registering my body, if found. I had no itinerary, no form of communication, and no backup plan. I did not know whether I would find bike parts, even tires, in Africa.

My first problem was avoiding the ancient Citroën and Peugeot clunkers, many with frames so bent I could see the edge of the rear

bumper as they veered toward me. The second problem was young boys throwing stones at me, thousands of stones. I also was afraid of someone stealing my bike because everything I had might be more than they would ever have. Every puncture repair or derailleur adjustment drew a crowd of hands shifting and searching. Everything was touched many times, including me.

Ahmed and I rode through the dark, side-by-side into his village. He wheeled my bike down an alley and returned carrying my panniers and handlebar bag. He was wearing my sweatshirt. "On y va," he said. He took me to the village's public baths, whose faded colonial glory was heartbreaking. The larger tiled tubs were empty, mildewed, and chipped. Everything reeked of clogged drains and steam. I was handed a threadbare towel and a sliver of soap and directed into a stall. Mercifully, it had a raised wooden floor, for a mucosial soup swirled below. The showerhead hiccupped, shuddered, and spit lukewarm water. It was one of the best showers I have ever had.

I had miles in my legs and food on my mind, but for the next two hours I sat in a café nibbling potato chips and drinking phosphorescent green soda, meeting every male inhabitant of the village. I diplomatically voiced my concern about a hotel, but Ahmed announced that I would be staying with him. "I have your bike," he said, laughing. He thumped his fist on the table and said, "On y va."

Ahmed's mother served us a huge platter of nuts, blood oranges, olives, green beans, flat bread, and sauces of cumin, coriander, paprika, mint, and fennel. Ahmed and I lounged on the carpet, eating with our hands. His mother was the first woman I had seen since leaving Europe, and I only saw her face. I was not to see another woman until I reached Spain.

That night, Ahmed insisted that I take his bed, which was wide, with clean sheets and wool army blankets. Other nights I had slept in fields, on a high table behind an abattoir and a mountain of bleached goat bones, or on a sea of mattresses scattered across the flat roof of a youth hostel, where I awoke in the small hours to see others praying, the tape-recorded muezzin wailing from gray speaker-horns lashed to minarets across the skyline. I was delighted to have a bed. Ahmed was delighted that I was delighted.

In the middle of the night, however, I realized I was covered by bed bugs. I tore the covers away and switched on the light. The beauty of bedbugs is that they vanish when the host is no longer offering a blood meal. I turned out the light and lay down, but not thirty seconds later they raced onto my body. I was up dancing a jig, shooping shiny bugs onto the floor. Some were swollen, reddish-brown. Ahmed slept soundly on the floor.

Then the full force of his generosity hit me. He had opened his door and offered me his bed. So, I returned to bed to offer my flesh to the bugs, and the next morning my body was a horror of red spots. The following night I retrieved my sleeping bag from my bike down the alley and burrowed deep into it, sweating and gasping for air.

Soon, I literally itched to be on my way, setting my own agenda. But Ahmed would not let me go until he had arranged a relay of friends, and friends of friends from other cycling clubs, stretching westward for three days and 300 miles along the coast, until the daisy chain dwindled to a final rider who seemed thankful when I relieved him of an obligation originating from where he did not know. After the last rider had gone, I threw my infested sleeping bag in a ditch and set it on fire.

Three days later, I found myself crossing a mountain pass on an exhausted road, the shoulder plasticized into washboard by long-haul trucks. One by one the spokes of my rear wheel popped. I stopped to loosen the brake. Then I stopped to remove the rear fender. Two hours later, I removed the brake entirely and wrapped it around the seat post. My wheel gyrated up and down, left and right, and I began to wonder how few spokes a wheel could have and still be a wheel at all.

I noticed wheat-colored thunderheads forming to the south in the Sahara. To the northwest over the Mediterranean, other clouds built so high I had to crane my neck to see the anvil tops. The sun turned the color of cantaloupe.

Day turned to night when the storms collided.

Within minutes I was drenched to my crotch, and water ran down the road in sheets. Mushy hailstones of sand slammed the road like fists. I waited under a bridge over a dry stream bed until a slurry of mud and sticks rose around my ankles. I returned to the road, but couldn't see more than a few feet. I pushed my bike along, shoe cleats slipping on the pavement. A hailstone smacked into my shoulder and slush ran down my back. To my left I saw a faint electric bulb and pushed my bike up a dirt road into a muddy courtyard before a corrugated iron shack. I yelled for help again and again, and then heard a faint, "İçi, içi." I pushed my bike ahead through a small door and confronted a wild-eyed old man in baggy pants wielding a hot poker. Two women in chador cowered behind him. He jabbed and jabbed the poker in my face until I retreated. I found cover under a low shed, rain and hail pounding the roof. After a few minutes in the freezing wind, a young man ran over from the shack and offered me a filthy army coat and a cigarette. He kept asking, "Ça va? Ça va?" Minutes later, I huddled shivering on my haunches before a coal brazier in the

old man's shack, tears of relief streaming down my face as my hosts looked on in confusion and offered stew.

The storm passed and the sun punched through a few clouds. I apologized over and over to my hosts, tried to explain my tears, my fears, and the need to continue before dark. That night, I slept in a field beneath the cosmic smear of the Milky Way.

The next day I pushed on to Algiers. I had the wild idea that if I could find the city's velodrome, someone there could repair my Rube Goldberg wheels. I eventually found it and was ushered under the stands by a gaggle of cyclists who presented me to their septuagenarian leader. He clucked his tongue at my shabby bike and lifted it onto his repair stand, then regaled us with stories of victories—hard fought and at long odds—and defeats—luckless and *méchantes*—at the hands of the French on the track above us. He measured the rim's wobble with a greasy thumb and then measured spoke tension like a harp by dragging the same thumbnail along the spinning spokes. "Allez!" he announced, "Finis!" He declined my offer of money with outstretched arms because no amount of anything could compensate for sixty years in the saddle. Dusk had come; it was too late to accept his offer of a spin on a borrowed track bike. So I rode off, humbled again.

By week's end, I was near Melilla, the Spanish port city on the north coast of Morocco, one of Spain's remaining outposts in Africa. The city is claimed by Morocco, but Spain likes to thumb its nose at the Arab world thirteen centuries after the Moorish invasion. By now, I had reduced my diet to coffee, croissants, sardines, bread, foil-wrapped cheese segments, baked chicken, and liters and liters of phosphorescent green soda. My body weight had dropped from 190 to roughly 175 pounds. My delay in Ahmed's village had probably cost me five pounds, afraid as I was of eating so many things. I was constantly hungry, but never sure whether or not the food would kill me.

It almost did.

That evening, as a cuticle moon rose over the central square in Berkane, Morocco, I ate two lamb kebabs from a roadside stall.

When I awoke the next morning, I suspected already that I might need medical care. The final leg into Spain was the longest sixty miles of my life, during which I consumed only Pepsi, a welcome enough change after a month of green soda. At dinner time, I felt much better and had a beer, then another, and met a couple of Scottish engineers taking a break from the Algerian oil fields. I splurged on a meal of pasta, steak, red wine, and flan. The next thing I remember, I was staggering out of control down the sidewalk, pleading with passers-by in English to help me. I wandered through traffic to the grassy me-

dian of an avenue and collapsed. The palm trees above spun like a carousel. I tried to stand but blacked out.

I awoke back in the restaurant, with my head in a puddle of vomit and someone asking me, “Ar yall raite, mate?” My new best friends from the oil fields took me to the local hospital where I was offered an alternative: a three-week course of tiny pills or an injection followed by seven horse pills that would make me wish I were dead, but cure me faster.

I took the injection and put the seven horse pills in my pocket.

I checked into a cheap hotel and for the next week alternatively huddled in bed, wrapped in sheets and blankets, or spread-eagled on the tile floor with fever. Several times each day I would crawl naked across the corridor into the communal shower, where I would sit on the floor, scrape dried vomit and feces from my body, and push it down the drain. Once each day, the kind owner of the hotel would collect the sheets and drop off new ones outside my door. The Moroccan lamb kebabs were teaching me how many holes I had in my body. Fluid even drained from my ears. On the seventh day I wobbled to my feet, went downstairs to a café for a croissant, then a slice of empanada. The next day, I took the ferry to Almeria, Spain.

My ride ended in tears on a climb east of Almeria. I simply did not have the strength to turn the bike crank another rotation. I saw tears drop on my handlebars and soak into the filthy tape. I felt I was abandoning the Tour, forced to give up my number and ride in the broom wagon. I turned my bike downhill to the city’s train station.

A week and a French rail strike later I was back in Italy. I weighed 145 pounds. A friend broke down and cried when she saw me.

Riding alone across Algeria was one of the most important, stupid things I have ever done in a life filled with stupid things that I have done. I learned generosity from Ahmed, from a poker-wielding grandfather, from a forgotten champion, from Scottish roughnecks, and from a widowed hotel keeper abandoned on the wrong continent.

Any friend can knock on my door at 3 AM with suitcase in hand and stay for a year. An Albanian refugee and her infant son once did, but that is another story.

And I always stop for stranded cyclists.

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