People often grow increasingly culturally confused when spending significant amounts of time in a foreign land. Identity can become lost only to reform in the image of the host society. This thesis presents a creative nonfiction series of essays that explore the author’s loss of self and contextual identity, the reshaping of that identity, and the destruction of the new identity. The theme of identity is explored, sometimes violently and sometimes comically, through interactions with tourists and natives; local, national, and global politics; ethnic food; journeying through a sandstorm; crime in a medina; the veneer of religion; and visibility and invisibility within a society.
The Eyes of Tunis

by

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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

University Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Science in Mechanical Engineering

Presented June 1, 2007

Commencement June 2007

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I understand that my project will become a part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

______________________________
Douglas L. Van Bossuyt, Author
AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express sincere appreciation to everyone who helped him throughout his undergraduate experience. He would specifically like to thank Eric Hill, his thesis mentor, who took his thesis on during the 11th hour and admirably kicked the author in the seat of the pants resulting in a quality product. He would also like to thank Dennis Bennett who kicked the author in the pants for added effect. The author wishes to extend heart-felt gratitude to Xiyun Yang who so eloquently picked the author up after he had been kicked to the ground. He is also grateful to Marjorie Coffey who helped drag him through the editing process. The author would also like to thank his mother who, for his entire life, has been his first and best editor, for spending long, sleepless nights beating this thesis into submission. Finally, the author would like to thank the countless people who made it possible for him to get to Tunisia, who he met in Tunisia, who helped him recover after Tunisia, and all of the people who helped him write this thesis. THANK YOU!
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THE EYES OF TUNIS

Prologue

For two years I have tried to come to grips with what happened to me in Tunisia. I lost my American identity to the sands of the Sahara only to re-emerge from the storm of culture arrogantly believing that I could be Tunisian. That false perception was rid from my mind one afternoon in the old Tunis medina. I returned to the United States not sure what happened or who I was.

Since repatriating, I have searched for answers to who I truly am. No longer do I find myself firmly anchored in the American tribe nor do I find the illusion of assimilating into Tunisian society blindfolding my eyes. I remain, as I was in Tunisia, caught between two cultures and two worlds.

I am not so bold as to say that I can find all of the meanings to my time in Tunisia in only two short years. This work of creative nonfiction is but part of a process that will span decades. Only the first few chapters of my Tunisia have been written. Many more lay dormant in the back of my mind, waiting to be found.

These vignettes of a man trapped between two worlds, desperately trying to adapt to a new culture while casting off the old, are often far from flattering self-portraits. The damning and incriminating words written in these pages were penned in the heat of the moment, scrawled in journals and notebooks. They are presented here as part of the process.
While the places, people, and events described here reflect my overall experience, they are composite, fictionalized portraits and settings.
Hand of Fatima

The knife flashed, sun glinting from its blade. It hissed through the air, striking at me, striking at my very core. Who did this man think he was? He was trying to gut a fellow countryman. The stiletto metal rushed downward, plunging into my soul. I screamed, blind rage taking hold. The man’s eyes, wild with malice, momentarily lost focus, congealing as great orbs full of terror. Spittle flying, I yelled for the police. My booming voice penetrated the old medina with Tunisian Arabic. The man had misjudged his prey. I was not a foreigner, as I externally appeared. Pounding inside my chest, slamming against my ribs, my heart coursed with hot Tunisian blood. The women, just arrived from the states, froze in terror nearby. I ran after the fleeing man, no longer fighting for my life. I was fighting for my country.

The hand of Fatima is a powerful symbol in the Arab world. Predating Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, the symbol of a hand has long protected the people of Tunisia. Found on doors and pendants, the hand wards off the evil eye, protecting those who reside behind the powerful talisman. In recent years, the hand, with its five outstretched digits, has been adopted by peace activists eager for a resolution to the conflicts embroiling the Middle East. There are some who take a different meaning to the hand of Fatima. To them it represents the hand of fate, plotting their course through life.
When I first arrived in Tunisia, the airplane came in low over the bay outside of Tunis, the capital. The city stretched out before me. The old medina crowded together with the French quarter known as Ville Nouvelle tacked onto its east side. The new development of Lac Palace spread out along the bay. Suburbs built since independence sprawled in every direction, unfolding in front of the plane as if I were reading a map. To the north I could make out the distant suburbs of Sidi Bou Said and La Marsa. The sun had just gone down, setting the red clouds burning, lingering at the horizon. The city of Tunis was engulfed in twilight.

Three years prior to that twilight landing, I chatted with a friend, examining the university course catalog for interesting classes to take the following fall. Thumbing through the tome, my friend happened upon a new course offering – Arabic. Immediately she begged me to take the class with her, wanting a companion with whom to battle the scary, new language. That fall I arrived at the first day of Arabic only to discover my friend was nowhere to be found. She had dropped the course over the summer, forgetting to mention that minor detail to me.
Why I stayed that first day I do not know. Perhaps it was the kind, forgiving Yemeni teacher whom I could never bear to disappoint. Maybe it was curiosity or boredom, simply trying to find an escape from the tedium of my major coursework. Whatever the reason, two years of Arabic lessons passed, launching me across the ocean and the sea. I found myself parachuted into Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, on a nine-month program of study. The language and the culture whirled and danced about my head, both in schoolhouse lessons and every day on the street. The question echoed in my mind, “What are you doing here? What will you find?”

The early weeks of the program passed in the blink of an eye. My host family, Farid and Basira, their daughters Hadia and Samia, Katy the kind black dog, Bibi the friendly, happy puppy, and a Chihuahua named Tito, the pint-sized dictator of the house, lived in an understated villa on a hill outside of Tunis proper in the neighborhood of Hayya Mishmish, the city of apricots.

At school, a whole host of characters whirled and danced about. One of my classmates, Daniella, came into class one morning, panicked. Michelle and Rachelle, twin students in our group, had been accosted by several men on the train. The men grabbed and touched the
tattoo on the back of Rachelle’s neck while also taking great interest in the many metal pierces adorning Michelle’s ears, nose, and eyebrows. They had been attracted by how out of place Michelle and Rachelle looked on the train. Seldom if ever did a Tunisia woman pierce herself with many metal objects nor did Tunisian women often get large tattoos across their backs. Everyone knew that such body modifications would attract unwanted attention, just as a woman riding the train nude in America would. While I actively tried to lose my American looks and mannerisms in a desperate attempt to blend in, Michelle and Rachelle dealt with the shock of a new and unfamiliar land by clinging tenaciously to their idealized home culture, becoming caricatures of ugly Americans as they tried to save themselves.

Daniella was distraught over the incident, believing that she might be next on the list of would-be Tunis rapists and fondlers. While she was quite beautiful, the class assured her she had nothing to fear. Daniella looked as if she could be Tunisian. She dressed conservatively, generally wearing long pants and high collared shirts. Her dark brown hair was always held under a hat which covered her head. The mixing of her mother, a woman from Central Asia, and her father, an American of Spanish decent, had produced dark, handsome features. She had nothing to fear if she only could learn to relax and blend in.

In those first few weeks, the last few weeks before Ramadan, a group of us could often be found at one of the many cafés on Avenue Bourgiba, the central artery of Tunis. The lifeblood of Tunisia coursed by in a swirl of colors. Packs of trendy young men in their tight
clothes, sporting two kilos of hair gel, and wearing dark glasses even at night paraded along the broad sidewalks. Tight knots of women promenaded down the avenue, casting fleeting glances of seduction at the men. The cafes, thronging with people, spilled out onto the sidewalks, blaring the latest pop songs. Tourists, appearing like great whales trimmed in every shade of white and lobster-red, paraded up and down between the hotels, medina, old French cathedral, and idling tour busses. Businessmen in suits and ties rushed between taxis, banks, and offices in a never-ending stream. Six lanes of traffic, three in each direction with a wide center median, roared in fits and starts as policewomen in crisp uniforms, hats, and white gloves made a mess of the traffic pattern by intervening and overriding the stoplights. The hustler rushed after the tourist while the packs of young men and women ogled one another. This was life on Avenue Bourgiba – loud, fast, bright, always on.

At first when I arrived, dazed from the voyage, I walked along Avenue Bourgiba, mouth agape at the wonders all around me. To the hustlers I appeared like every other foreigner, a tourist flush with Dinars, the Tunisian currency. Others in my school group also floundered, like fish out of water. Drinking tea and eating croissants on the avenue one day it dawned upon me that I had to separate myself from the tourists mentally if I were to ever assimilate into the cultural landscape. A group of tourists, sunburned to a lobster-red shuffled by, following their tour guide to a waiting bus. They looked like a mass of Cetaceans migrating to cooler waters to feed. Thus, the phrase “red whale” was born, effectively isolating our group from the world of the tourist while superficially bringing us closer to that of Tunisia.
A never-ending flow of white vans with racing stripes blazing down the middle swarmed in and out of a cavernous hall. Two cities, usually in Arabic, sometimes also in French, presented themselves on the top of each van. All listed Tunis with another city, from close at hand to the most distant of villages, alongside. Teeming throngs of people streamed in and out of the exhaust-filled building, carrying all manner of package and parcel. Drivers barked city names in rhythmic calls. “Jendouba Jendouba Jendobua! Kef Kef Kef! Tabarka Tabarka Tabarka,” they cried. Passengers coursed through the waiting lines of vans, eager to find the first that would leave. When a van reached eight passengers, the driver would slam the doors with loud bangs, jump into the front, and tear off, beeping the horn wildly to clear a path through the people and vans.

This was the North and West Louage Station of Tunis. From the dingy warehouse of louages, as the vans were called, a person could be whisked to the far corners of north and west Tunisia in a few short hours. A sister station sat on the other side of the city, the scene of controlled chaos mirrored. Between the two stations, Tunis was connected to all of Tunisia by a network of maniac drivers bent on making as many runs in the course of a day between their two cities.

This intricate network of louages, covering the country in a fine web of interconnected villages, towns, and cities became a familiar mode of transportation to me.

The first 45
minute louage ride, dodging delivery trucks, cars, and donkeys, was terrifying. I soon found that if I put myself in the hands of fate, as the louage drivers did with the many hands of Fatima and Qu’aranic verses plastered to the insides of their vans, the death-defying rides became easy and even enjoyable. Placing my fate in the hands of the drivers, I found myself exploring Tunisia through the windows of a louage.

Ben Ali, the president of Tunisia, was an omnipresent force, penetrating every nook and cranny of the country with his gaze. No matter where I turned, no matter where I tried to hide, his eyes always followed. Posters, flags, banners, and streamers adorned every blank surface and hung across every boulevard. The Tunisian presidential election would be held that fall amid the fluttering flags, banners, and streamers, and the gentle, smiling posters.

I entered the country not knowing why I was there or what I would find. Many months passed before I memorized the lessons of Tunisia. I continue to discover new meaning in those lessons.
The back of Farid and Basira’s delivery truck was full of old clothes destined for the poor. Ramadan loomed large on the horizon pushing everyone to do their part. The city swelled with pious deeds. Bumping along the streets of Tunis, through Jebel Akhmar, around Ville Nouvelle and the old embassy district, all the way out to the new business developments near Hayya Khathera, the clothing and I tumbled around as if in a clothes dryer. I exited the car at school, some stray socks clung to me with static.

My life in Tunisia began as the country was anticipating the holiest of holidays. While I had previously experienced Ramadan in Egypt, Tunisia exposed me to an entirely different perspective on Islam.

Later that evening, the sunset call to prayer jolted me as it bellowed from untold numbers of mosques throughout the city. First one would start and then another would follow until all of Tunis was echoing with the call to the faithful. Every night since arriving at the villa the call had progressively gotten louder and louder. Ramadan was about a half-month away and the mosques were obviously ramping up for the event. Many people on the street were dressing more conservatively and acting more pious. Ramadan was nigh.
Days passed, and soon the breeze carried the scent of the month of Ramadan, freshly upon Tunis, in the early dawn. Minarets around the city bellowed the first call to prayer, amplified ten times beyond the government-mandated limits of only a month before. Katy, Tito, and Bibi howled in the main house. The windows rattled. The call echoed and reverberated from a thousand mosques across Tunis. All of Tunisia had found need to demonstrate religious devotion.

Daniella, eager to shop, led me deep into the medina to the Grand Souk des Chechias, the epicenter of the little red felt hats that adorned so many old, tradition-bound Tunisian men’s heads. Finding it an intense fashion statement, Daniella felt that she, too, must own one or two of the stylish hats for use with various outfits, tangible and imagined. She eyed the multitude of identical shops, all selling identical chechias, all with identical jolly shopkeepers. The grinning chechia peddlers attempted to lure stragglers into their shops as a throng of great red whales docilely followed a tour guide holding a paddle with the name of their cruise ship and number of their tour group high in the air for all to see.

Daniella chose the shop of Noradeen, proprietor of all manner of chechia. We emerged from Noradeen’s shop burdened with eight chechias for Daniella and one for me. She picked out several traditional red chechias before switching to more exotic colors, choosing blue, white, and steel grey. While she dickered with Noradeen, lowering the price below even that which most normal Tunisians would pay, I observed many Tunisian men, in search of a quick show of piety, darting into the shops and emerging with brand new chechias adorning their heads.
Depositing Daniella at her apartment doorstep, a clutch of chechias the likes of which the building had never seen grasped tightly behind her back, I found Fatima, Daniella’s host mother, lying in wait. She drew me into the apartment, insisting I return for Iftar, the breaking of the fast after a day of refraining from food, drink, and smoke. Cornered, I had no choice but to accept her offer to spend the first night of Ramadan with Daniella at Fatima’s house. Released from Fatima’s grasp, I returned to my apartment in Hayya Mishmish to wait out the heat of the day, sleeping to conserve the small store of food and water my body had held from our pre-dawn meal.

The sun dipped below the rooftops beckoning me to return to Daniella’s apartment. I was shown into the room with the television. Fatima insisted I stay in the room until Iftar, destroying any hope of me being put to use in the kitchen. Fatima’s sons joined me in the room, nervously waiting for Iftar so that they could smoke. To ease our minds from the pain of no food and the lack of water, we talked politics, discussing the upcoming American presidential election. Mr. Rokki, Fatima’s brother, arrived and joined us huddled around the TV, eager to light up as well. The younger men felt that, in spite of their great hope for change, the incumbent president of America would win re-election. Mr. Rokki insisted he would not, decrying the very notion of the American public being so stupid as to re-elect a war monger. I sat silent, bemused by the conversation and comatose from lack of water.

Fatima and Daniella rushed in, setting down heaping trays of food. Mr. Rokki switched channels to the Tunisian satellite television station, eager to be told that he could smoke. The sun set, the TV began to summon everyone to eat; mosques across the city blasted the call to
prayer, the call to eat. In unison we devoured our briques (pronounced “breek”), a Tunisian specialty consisting of diced potato, parsley, and a raw egg enclosed in a triangle of thin dough and lightly fried until the egg is cooked just enough to kill any lingering salmonella but not enough to harden the yolk. One eats a brique by lightly grasping both ends of the triangle dough, biting into the thick, warm center, sucking the runny egg out, drinking in the rich flavor. The egg still trickling down one’s throat, the discerning diner will continue to eat out a larger and larger half-moon shaped hole until the entire brique has been devoured. One’s hands are often left greasy after eating a brique, the delicacy still dripping with the remnants of the frying oil.

The brique was synonymous with Iftar in Tunisia. Almost without fail, I found myself breaking the fast with a brique every night during Ramadan. While the first brique or two a person eats makes one’s stomach queasy and often draws concern of food poisoning, the slippery yolk and oil-soaked pastry quickly becomes a favorite of all who try this particular Tunisian delicacy. The feast continued late into the night, the men smoking while I ate. Fatima and Daniella became engrossed in the Tunisian soap operas specially prepared for Ramadan.

A few days later, I roused from my afternoon Ramadan slumber in time for Iftar with my host family. Hadia, Basira’s daughter, saw me into the villa while Basira and Samia busied themselves with the final preparations for dinner. Tito ran out of the TV room, growling,
staring me down as he stood on the staircase. Bibi ran around, yipping excitedly at the prospect of more belly rubs. Three of Hadia and Samia’s cousins, Jamal, Mohammed, and Rasheed, were lounging, watching music videos on a station beamed from Lebanon. The women gyrated their hips, exposing flesh dripping out of the screen, drawing all who watched inward to the music. Having departed several days prior, Basira’s husband, Farid, remained in Senegal, his business unknown and unspoken. Sunset nearly upon us, Basira rushed in with Hadia close behind, carrying trays loaded down with food and drink. The call to prayer, the call to eat bellowed out across Tunis, reverberating off the villas of Hayya Mishmish, and attacking from the television. We feasted.

Groggy from the food, we lounged on the sofas, watching the Ramadan soap operas into the cool evening. Rasheed, Mohammed and Jamal took their leave, planning to return later in the evening after visiting their uncle. Samia later informed me, with her mother and sister out of the room, that her cousins had gone to the mall in the trendy new neighborhood to the north known as Menzah 6 to ogle girls with their uncle as a cover for the nefarious activity. I stayed up with Samia, watching late-night Ramadan programming and waiting for Jamal, Mohammed and Rasheed to return, Basira and Hadia having long retired. Tito nipped and snarled at my ankles while Bibi jumped from one lap to the next, demanding attention from all. Tired of fending off attacks from the three-legged tyrant, I bade Samia adieu at midnight, collapsing on my bed and falling into deep slumber.
One of my classmates and I were in La Marsa at the bidding of one of the many women to whom we had given our telephone number at school. She had summoned us for an afternoon exploring Sidi Bou Said and La Marsa with the intent to capture us for Iftar with her family. We followed our friend through the streets of La Marsa and away from the beach, steering toward the dying, blood-red sun. The discrete villas exuding status and money on the beach gave way to more modest dwellings along the twisting alleys of La Marsa. By a little mosque, our friend bade us enter through a narrow gate into her family’s house. Her sister greeted us, wearing a full hijab, a pious sight for Tunisia. Her mom wore a dljaba while her younger brother appeared through a doorway, dressed like a European soccer hooligan. Her father also wore a dljaba with a white skullcap covering his head. Our friend wore a large, puffy hat covering her hair and long, tight coat and pants, covering anything that could be viewed as unseemly. Her family’s means were modest, but their hospitality was unmatched.

The ride back to Tunis on the commuter rail was livened by a group of boys, their hair gelled for perhaps the first time, wearing faded black pants, the castoff clothing of older relatives. The kids horsed around, pulling open the doors of the carriage with the train speeding along. One of the boys had a small beat up child’s bicycle. I turned away to observe a flurry of streamers and banners, thousands of Ben Ali eyes staring back at me through the night. My gaze returned to the antics of the boys. I noted with some alarm the departure of the bicycle and rider. We had not stopped at a station, nor had I heard the cry of a truant child being shoved from the train. The boy and his bike had vanished into the night through the yawning open doors. The others chortled and chattered, pushing and poking each other toward the door, all wishing the others to meet their fates in the dark night, all wishing not to be pushed
out onto the harsh rails. The ticket collector came along to collect fares. His eyes narrowed, spying the miscreants dancing in the door. As the train pulled into a station, he threw the boys out the door and onto the platform, threatening them with worse if they reboarded his railroad. It seemed at times as if only the fittest of children survived adolescence in Tunisia.

On the weekend, several of us went to the beach at Hammamet, a short louage ride from Tunis, looking for a break from routine. A German family reclined on the beach a small distance away from our lounge chairs. The grandmother, mother, and daughter aged no more than ten, had come on vacation to Tunisia, leaving the men at home. The grandmother epitomized all that it means to be a great red whale. Her enormous, burnt bright red figure blotted out the sun, shading a young Tunisian man sitting next to her. The afternoon dragging on, she informed her daughter, speaking in German, that she and the boy would be in the room until dinner and that they would all meet at the buffet that evening. Addressing the young man in broken French, she ordered him, “Come! We go room now!” Dutifully, he helped the woman to her portly feet and slowly walked along side as she waddled back to the hotel. The horrors he must have seen boggle the mind. Other such arrangements, older women with young Tunisian men, could be spotted up and down the sand. Beach gigolos, eager to find their next mistress, trolled back and forth at the edge of the surf, their bronze, muscular bodies quivering with every step. I shuddered, thinking of the conditions that must have driven these men to sell their bodies to tourists.
My classmates dined on bland food, devoid of any of the flavor and spice of Tunisian cuisine which was obviously calibrated to fit dull European tastes. We were surprised to hear English at a neighboring table. Turning to look, we spied the security officer from the embassy who had tried to scare us into never leaving the embassy grounds. He argued with his young son and daughter, attempting to coax them into eating their unappetizing faux hamburgers.

Weeks before, our school group paid a visit to the American embassy. It sat in a new section of the city, far from the medina. The compound was surrounded by high walls. A building poked up, looking like a stout turret sitting atop tank treads. Security akin to an airport greeted our arrival. We left our passports at the front desk, shielded by thick, blast-proof windows. Through a metal detector, we were led to the embassy building inside the heavily fortified compound.

Green manicured lawns and plants, obviously imported from America, ringed the fortress of the embassy proper. Inside we received a briefing from the security officer, the man that now sat not three meters from us. That day at the embassy he taught us how to be safe in Tunisia. The message was clear. Only barely masked behind diplomatic words, he said, “Be afraid of everything and everyone, even yourselves.” The man went so far as to say we should not ride public transportation. Were he to have his way, we only would have been permitted bullet-proof taxis. It was obvious that he rarely ventured outside the embassy grounds.
The security man led us from the embassy across the golf course lawns to the Marine House to meet the Marines. The protectors of the embassy were having a party. Two had just been promoted and were serving free drinks and soda to everyone.

For the rest of that afternoon and into the evening we played volleyball and American football with a group of embassy children. The embassy and especially the marine house were true bastions of America, islands of the exotic culture of Hollywood amid the sea of Tunisia. Coming into the embassy grounds from the overwhelming reality of Tunisia, I found the garish display of all that was America to be nauseating.

Back at the restaurant in the hotel at Hammamet, the children could not be convinced to eat their fake hamburgers. Not wishing a repeat of the security lecture, I remained quiet. Rachelle and Michelle, eager to speak English with someone outside our group, ran over to say hello and inquire about their favorite marine guarding the embassy. The choice of this particular hotel amongst the great parade of identical establishments became clear. A drunken embassy worker at the last marine party had told Rachelle, who selected the hotel with her sister, about Les Orangers. This hotel was frequented by the staff and families of the embassy, eager to see a more exotic side of Tunisia than that offered behind the high compound walls. Les Orangers was the most exotic place many of the staff had ever seen.

We retreated from the sun to the dark recesses of a tourist hammam. This bathhouse was not filled with a steaming cauldron of naked, screaming people, as was typical of Tunisian
hammams. Instead, it contained three respectable rooms. The cold room was littered with obese naked German tourists sleeping off their sunburns. The hot room was empty, save for our little group. We sweated in the heat, beating our backs with sweet eucalyptus branches. A Tunisian masseur waited in the adjoining massage parlor, nearly dead from fasting in the hot, humid steam. The tension of Tunisia faded from my shoulders under the masseur’s hands. We talked at great length during my massage, discussing the cruel irony of the Tunisian tourist-centric economic model. He told me of the great red whales who drank water and ate food openly in front of him. They did these things while they waited for their massages right in front of the masseur while he nearly fainted from exhaustion, starved for food, water, and a cigarette. What cruel world was this that allowed tourists to mock his fast during the month of Ramadan? It was the world that paid him to give massages to ignorant tourists. Rachelle walked in, ready for her massage, swallowing a mouthful of water from a plastic bottle and handing it to her sister waiting outside.

The dinner buffet in the hotel was an orgy of bland European food, great red whales still scantily clad, and beach gigolos latched like parasites onto their hosts. The dazed local staff, nearly gone mad from fasting, watched the tourists gorge. All of the wait staff disappeared for several minutes as the call to prayer, the call to eat, echoed faintly in the distance.
The strain of Ramadan was evident in Arabic class. Our teacher, usually kind and forgiving, ignoring our butchery of his native tongue, became frustrated with our floundering efforts. He assigned an entire chapter, wishing us to memorize every word to be recited and tested on the next day. We sat in silence, each pondering our fate. Class abruptly ended. Without a cigarette, the teacher could not continue.

Daniella and I went downtown in search of food. She couldn’t stand it anymore. She needed to eat, she needed to drink. The first few days of Ramadan seemed like any other on Avenue Bourgiba. The cafés with their overzealous waiters still spilled out onto the street. Great masses of red whales mingled with Tunisians eager for some tea, a bite to eat, and a smoke. The tolerance shown at the beginning of Ramadan had vanished. Tables were stacked alongside piles of chairs and mounds of umbrellas. Most cafés were closed, their doors chained shut. Some remained open, shielded from the street and those observing the requirements of Ramadan with long sheets of brown paper taped inside the windows.

Café du Paris was one such establishment, a venerable den of sin, a parasite latched onto the main artery of Tunis. Men and women, their heads down, avoiding eye contact, rushed in and out of the front doors. Indulging in food, drink, and cigarettes was their crime. Dashing forward, we burst into the café only to be met with a wall of tobacco smoke so thick it put even the trendiest of German discos to shame. Choking and gagging, we made our way across the room, not able to see the bar, losing sight of the door. The fallen sat huddled around their tables, not making eye contact with anyone, not acknowledging each others’
presence. Daniella ordered a juice and pastry, consuming them quickly, wishing to escape the den of sin.

I was in shock. Gazing about the darkened room choked with fumes, I saw not one foreigner eager to sin. All who occupied this desiccated place were native born. The very idea of a Tunisian not observing the fast had never crossed my mind. Café du Paris confronted my misconception, destroying it with cups of tea and croissants.

We ran out of the café, bursting through the doors onto the street, a great cloud of smoke following close behind. Tears streaming down our faces, we breathed in the fresh smog of Avenue Bourgiba. Men, their heads covered with chechias, exuding piousness, looked at us with scorn. Several walked past, turned around, and dodged into the café, removing their chechias before entering, not wishing others to know of their faux piety.

That night, after Iftar, Farid told me that in spite of all of the talk of fasting for Ramadan, only half the population actually fasted or even tried. Farid stated that the rest put on a facade, wishing to demonstrate to all just how pious and dedicated they were. While Farid was ardent in his claims, he viewed the Tunisian landscape through a decidedly upper-class lens. “In the time of Habib Bourgiba,” Farid recounted, “fasting was forbidden. He proclaimed Tunisia must not lose a month of productivity and, to build a new and better future, we mustn’t fast.” With the change, when Habib Bourgiba was retired by Ben Ali, Ramadan was reinstated to appease religious elements that, in turn, supported the new government.
Farid had returned from Senegal. His business remained unspoken. To celebrate his return, I was asked to invite one of my classmates for Iftar. Reclining on the low-slung sofas, Farid told the story of the floods of biblical proportion in Ariana, my friend’s adopted neighborhood, the previous Ramadan. Farid’s brother’s house, where my friend lived, had been inundated. The neighborhood filled with three meters of water, toppling buildings, setting cars high atop walls, and forcing the residents to evacuate. Farid’s father, ensconced with his brother, would not leave the house even as the water rose to the top of the garden wall. He and his cousin arrived by boat, wading in water up to their necks to get into the house. They forcibly removed his father, holding him high over their heads above the deluge. Only after he was out of the house and saw the level of the water did he finally calm down and agree to leave. His father, Farid informed us, suggested he relocate long before the waters rose to such epic proportions during the second flood. Unlike Hayya Mishmish, we were told that Ariana was not designed for rain. Farid’s tale and the Ramadan soap operas ended. I walked my friend outside. Heavy, stinging rain fell against our faces. My friend looked nervous.
Farid and Basira’s eldest daughter, Farah, came home from Paris, where she was studying, to enjoy the last few days of Ramadan with her family. Had I not known she was Tunisian, I would have assumed her to be Parisian. Her French was flawless, with perfect accent and expressions. She was thin and chain smoked, dressing in the scanty fashion of inner-ring Paris. Had it not been for the periodic bursts of Tunisian Arabic in between her beautiful, flowing French, no one would have suspected she came from Tunisia. The call to prayer, the call to eat boomed out across Tunis. Farah welcomed the sound, finally feeling at home. We feasted on her favorite dish, couscous with lamb.

Everything was different in the medina during Ramadan. Daniella, itching to go shopping, had roused me from my slumber before dawn, insisting we arrive at the mouth of the medina before the first shops opened. The shops filling the narrow lanes and alleys had been converted from selling cheap plates, djlabas, and stuffed camels meant for tourists. Everyone now sold new clothes, sweets, and shiny, metal trinkets, all for Ramadan. Halfway along our route, a peculiar event took place. Instead of bearing left, as we usually did, I suggested we go right to explore a new part of the medina. Much to my surprise, the normally timid Daniella led the way into uncharted territory.

We shuffled down an incredibly narrow passageway packed with the denizens of Tunis, eager to shop, eager to buy, eager to sell. An hour of slowly navigating our way through the covered passages buried deep below the buildings found us far from any exit point, utterly
surrounded by the wonders and splendors of the hidden world of the medina. No tourist group ventured down this tightly packed alley of clothes, fabric, shoes, pots and pans, cologne and perfume, luggage, wedding gifts, mirrors, fruit, and recycled electronics. We explored alone, unnoticed by the throngs of Tunis, feeling at home in the real souk, at home with ourselves.

The crowd grew thicker and slowed. We crawled along toward a bright shining portal. Suddenly accelerating, we burst forth from the passage as water squirts from a restricted hose, shooting into the bright, burning light and exiting the medina far to the north of where we entered. Blinking, Daniella looked around, feeling exposed and unsure, not knowing where she stood or who saw her arrival. She pulled me back toward the small, blackened portal which spouted a great stream of humanity on one side while sucking in a great stream on the other. We were sucked in, propelled back into the darkness, back into the safety and security of the medina, the familiarity of the unfamiliar world.

Shuffling along, the crowd pulsed and surged, stagnating at times, like segments of an inchworm moving along a twig. In between the stalls selling spices and belts, I spied the entrance to a mosque. The crowd stopped, permitting detailed observation of the scene. A great mob of men crowded around ancient marble wash basins, water pouring from bronze spigots, splashing through the basins and down to drains in the floor. We surged forward. The washroom receded from view. Slamming to a stop once again, I found myself in front of an open door to the prayer hall. Reed mats were laid in between ancient marble pillars salvaged from the ruins of Carthage. Men sat, swaying around in small arcs, chanting
Daniella saw none of this. She spied a good deal on shoes. The crowd moved forward, placing us in front of the shoes. Daniella got her good deal. I bought only memories.

Shadows marched across the boulevards and alleys around the school. Shade engulfed once sunny walls in a dark, cold embrace. We were still at school, looking for a way home before the city came to a grinding halt for Iftar. Rachelle and I walked up to a main thoroughfare outside the boundary of the neighborhood, waving at taxis in vain. All were full, all heading to the suburbs for the call to prayer, the call to eat. We plodded on, narrowly missing several taxis, losing them to elderly women entirely too strong and fast for their age. The sun threatened to plunge below the hills, cutting us off from food, and forcing us to walk home on empty stomachs and without water. A taxi drove by, its service light switched off, indicating that the driver had taken his taxi out of service and was on his way home. We waved at him, begging and pleading that he take one last fare. The taxi drove on for a bit then turned, narrowly dodging a large work truck and vegetable cart. Pulling up alongside he implored us to hurry, that he would try to get us home before the sun fell. We pulled into traffic, nearly sideswiping a van.

The normal frenzy of Tunis traffic reached a fervor pitch, horns blaring, people running, everyone rushing in a mad ballet of confusion and mayhem. All were desperate to get home, in time to eat, in time to smoke. In between bouts of waving his fist angrily and honking the
horn at drivers that cut us off, our driver explained that he was trying to get to his family in La Marsa, but he would help Rachelle and me get home if we promised that in the future we would help someone else as he had helped us. We gladly promised this service. Rachelle asked what he would do if he were caught out in the open at sunset. He pulled a few shriveled dates from the ash tray, blowing off dust. These, he said, would be his food. A grimy bottle rolled out from under his seat. That, he said, would be his water. We arrived at Collise Soula and paid our selfless driver, rewarding him with a handsome tip, something almost never done with the taxi drivers of Tunis. He smiled, wishing us bon appetite, and pulled out into traffic, rushing to return to La Marsa before the curtain of night fell, before the call to prayer and the call to eat bellowed across Tunis.
Michelle and Rachelle, the almost inseparable twins were standing with a distraught-looking Daniella on the curb next to Collise Soula. I looked at Daniella, my eyes questioning, “Why? What are they doing here?” Michelle and Rachelle turned in unison, spying me, shouted in their false singsong voices, “Oh hi! You finally made it! Now we can go on our little trip!” I gagged, nearly losing my pre-dawn breakfast at the thought. Now wishing only to get back to Tunis or, failing that, lose the twins in the Tunisian countryside, I hailed a taxi. Daniella and I were off on our vacation to a new corner of Tunisia, with Michelle and Rachelle in tow.

The call to prayer, the call to eat long since passed; my two classmates and I emerged from the Hotel Novelty in the middle of downtown in a seaside tourist town on the northwestern fringe of Tunisia. A few hours before Iftar we explored the town, searching for supplies and scenic views. Women, out in full force when we first arrived, melted away with the setting sun. We were now surrounded by an all male street, thronging with men, their pants black, their hair full of gel, out for the last time before nightfall. Some streets teemed with pious men, hustling up and down the street searching for forgotten items for the Iftar feast. Other streets were packed with men smoking, drinking, and eating, all of which usually kept away from public sight in the capital. Walking along the beach, we even spotted several couples engaged in acts entirely inappropriate for Ramadan. This town was different from Tunis.

Across the street, the bar blasted tinny music into the night. The attached restaurant marginally hid the alcohol behind false pretenses. Great pools of yellow light flooded out
into the street, beckoning sinners to enter. The bartender whisked us away from the bar, away from the beer, away from the raucous drunks and back to the small dining room by the kitchen. A cork popped from a wine bottle. Men argued loudly in a corner, their table piled deep with empty beer bottles. Caps littered the floor, diffusing away from their table. A cluster of women sat hunched over a table, surrounding a bottle of wine with their stares.

We sat, the bartender closing the door between the bar and the dining room, cutting us off from the town drunkards and women of ill repute. While we ate, an old American woman entered through the rear door closely followed by several local men, their hair long, attempting to imitate Fabio but failing miserably, their muscles scrawny and frames thin. Earlier in the day we had spied a yacht anchored in the harbor hailing from San Francisco. The men gathered around the woman, as if old lovers, drawing near, drinking in her faded light like sunflowers turning toward the sun. Cats circling beneath our feet, bolted, running for the faded sun’s table, screeching and meowing for attention, for food. Cats jumped into her lap, onto her table, swarming around, all flea-bitten, all begging for food. She fed the cats like she fed her sunflowers, making them beg for food, for attention. We left for the hotel, pulling the twins behind us, not wishing to extract them from the bar in the wee hours of the morning.

The night watchman sat behind the front desk, twirling a pen between his fingers. A cigarette languished in the ashtray, sending lazy, curling wisps of smoke skyward. He spoke, in fluent English, inviting us to tea. Our night watchman was the son of the owner. He told us of his wonderful job as a teacher of French in Germany. When asked where he learned
English, he answered, “Why, Paris, of course!” His brother came downstairs to join us for another cup of tea. Both brothers loved the war-mongering president of America and felt he was doing good work in the Arab world. Alarm bells rang. They invited us to a disco in the Zone Touristique, the strip of beach populated with resort hotels. In what was almost certainly a first for the twins, they turned down the invitation to party, instead exchanging phone numbers with the brothers, asking they call the next time they visited Tunis. These men were agents but of what creed or stripe we did not know. We retired to our room, not wishing to be interrogated by smiles and tea anymore.

The next morning the Hotel Novelty was empty, save for us and the two agent brothers. Ours was the only key not hanging on the hooks behind the desk. The breakfast tables were covered in a fine layer of dust, having sat long empty. One was set with plates, cups, and a basket of French bread. Pre-packaged sponge cakes, imported from France, decidedly unhealthy, sat on our plates. The brothers brought us coffee, cheerily inquiring where we would be going that morning. Rachelle blurted out our plans for the day, alerting security agencies around the world to our presence and destination. Daniella and Michelle scowled at her. Neither of them had any desire to be tracked by the governments of the world on our vacation.

The road to the recreational hilltop station of Tunisia wound up through the mountains, covered in cork forests, thick with green. The regional landfill, burning in several places,
smoldered below the road sending large plumes of putrid smoke drifting skyward. Goats grazed among the piles, eating whatever they could find. Whipping around corners, passing slow-moving trucks without any visibility, we closed to within several hundred meters of the Algerian border as we approached the town. Getting out at the crossroads on top of the ridge where the town was perched, hanging between the Mediterranean Sea and the vast interior, we were space aliens. The town ground to a halt, all looking at the strange creatures, arriving unexpectedly in the middle of market day.

The only open hotels in town were a mixture of garish hunting lodge and misappropriated Swiss chalet. The twins, hungry, forced us into the most ostentatious of the hotels, intent upon eating lunch. They served us in the dining room, seating us away from several groups of men, drinking beer, smoking, and playing cards in the middle of the day, long before Iftar, long before the call to prayer. Boar was on the menu. All forms of pork product, ostensibly made from the local wild game, graced the menu. Both Rachelle and Michelle ordered pork sandwiches, hungry for swine.

The twins, now fat and happy, followed Daniella and me into the women’s cooperative, the only attraction in town save for the trees and the boar. The woman answering the door looked shocked to see tourists in her workshop. Had no one told the cooperative that they were featured prominently in a major English-language guidebook? Michelle ran over to a basket piled high with knitted gloves, digging furiously, as if searching for a truffle. Rachelle began taking photos of the women working without asking for permission. Daniella and I introduced ourselves to the women working the looms, painting masterpieces in carpet.
A meter round, meter long bundle of carpets lashed beneath my backpack, we bade the women adieu, stepping into the dirty lane.

While rolling up our carpets, it seemed as if the entire town had been notified of the three Americans who had just shelled out more money to buy carpets than many people made in a month. Our procession to the louage station was a spectacle the likes of which the town had never seen. Rachelle, not seeing any louages parked where we had been let off, started inquiring with taxi drivers in the high, squeaky voice she used when she tried to be cute. One man quoted her an outrageous price, ten times what we should have been charged. In the midst of the market, surrounded by fruits and mounds of Chinese sandals, Rachelle got in the driver’s face, bellowing at the poor man. Daniella shrunk into the ground, trying to appear small. Men, their pants black, hair gelled, circled, wanting a closer view of the beast. Michelle pulled Rachelle out of the cab, ordering her to follow her down the hill to where the louages were parked. We escaped just in time. Vultures circled, eager to feed, eager for a taste of tourist Dinars.

Jendouba was once a North African transit hub. Now it was no more than a regional transport center since the rail link connecting Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco had been severed. Jendouba served as a louage rallying point, a central node on the great network connecting Tunis to the north central interior. A brief visit to the once-prosperous, now ruined Roman city of Bulla Regia behind us, we piled into a louage leaving for Le Kef and better surroundings. The wind-whipped streets of Jendouba thronged with young men, their hair thick with gel, their pants black and dusty.
The town receded in the distance, our louage catapulting along at speeds excessive even for normal louage drivers. The sun burned low in the west, out across the dry, brown plains of tilled earth and dead grass, parched for lack of rain, begging for the downpours of Tunis. The twins, oblivious to the muted beauty of the world, sat next to Daniella, chattering incessantly, frothing at the mouth, telling Daniella how good their noontime meal had been and how they didn’t understand our refusal to eat for, after all, we were travelers and could disobey customs as we wished. A pure white light of hatred boiled in Daniella’s eyes. I blotted out the squealing, concentrating on the dying sun, trying to forget their complete misunderstanding and insensitivity. They were embarrassing and a potential risk for both Daniella and me.

With the tie points on my backpack long since broken, I hefted the bag full of carpets onto my shoulder. We climbed the steep streets of Le Kef, searching for a hotel before the call to prayer, the call to eat. The streets swarmed with men, their pants black, their hair full of gel, all wearing black, long-sleeve dress shirts. Save for my two classmates, not a single woman was in sight. One hotel after another turned us away, drawing into question our decision to venture farther south, our decision to escape the dull streets of Jendouba.

Daniella, begging at first, and then negotiating fiercely, secured our lodging at the Sicca Veneria, a hotel overlooking Place de l’Independence, one of the main hubs of the city. Unhappy with the price, she negotiated for a television, something unheard of in the budget hotels of Tunisia. Filling out the guest cards, we spied a man hurry past from the kitchen,
carrying a TV, trying to hide it with his coat, a bent coat hanger flailing wildly in the air, slapping his face, striking at his eyes.

The television only received one channel, the Tunisian national station. We settled in, waiting for the call to prayer, the call to eat. Cannon shots rang out over Le Kef, echoing off the high Kasbah walls perched on a rock overlooking the town. The streets emptied. I drew a bath for Daniella, imploring her to relax while I saw to the twins’ needs. No one, not a policeman, not a taxi driver, not a hustler graced the streets. The twins and I were alone in Le Kef, alone on the street, searching for an ATM and a cigarette.

The sun long since set, life flooded back into the streets. Daniella, Michelle, Rachelle, and I set off in search of food, having only quenched our thirst in the room. The elevator door opened unexpectedly on the plunge to the ground floor, halting a few stories short of our mark. Two women, wearing red and white athletic training sweat-suits stepped in. Their muscles rippled beneath the fabric, pulsing to the rhythm of the descending car. In the lobby we found two men similarly dressed and muscled, and an older man with a pot belly and matching red and white coat. This was the Tunisian national weightlifting team and their coach. The entire Tunisian national team, all four of them, were staying in our hotel during Ramadan; they all spoke English and very much wanted to talk with native speakers. Dodging the strongmen, we escaped to the street.

Up and down the boulevards we stalked, our stomachs crying in pain. The twins whined like little girls in spite of their noontime meal. Swarming everywhere, men, in their black pants,
displaying their shellacked black hair, wearing black, long-sleeved dress shirts, gawked and stared at the women, at Daniella and the twins, the only women out on the street in all of Le Kef. During the daytime or alone, outside of a big group the men would have been friendly and sociable. Under the cover of darkness and in a large group, the men went from being individually smart to collectively brutish.

Daniella clutched my arm tightly, cutting off the circulation, driving my hand numb. The men of Le Kef seemed to circle, hungry, schooling in a great frothing foam of hair gel and black pants, drawn by the scent of female blood. Their eyes looked dark and glassy to me. I thought their eyes looked devoid of a soul, unblinking, always watching us. Ben Ali smiled down from the flapping flags, overseeing his shiver of men dressed in black, overseeing the impending feeding frenzy. While Michelle stayed close to Daniella and me, Rachelle trundled on ahead as if she were walking down a sunny country lane in springtime, completely oblivious to the swirls of inky blackness, the schools of seemingly faceless, soulless men, circling closer and closer, eager for the kill, waiting for the first person to strike.

The frothing inky sea of gel and black pants swelled to bursting. We were thrown up onto the shore of another hotel with a small restaurant. Candles flickered atop the tables, casting a shifting, yellow pallor across the dirty, checkered tablecloths. A small girl ran across the room, dodging chairs, and darting into a darkened doorway. The men, stacked to the horizon, milled about outside the door, confused and disoriented, maddened by the sudden disappearance of their prey and cross that the game was suspended. The girl’s mother came
out, holding the small child in her arm, propped upon her hip. Seeing the mob slowly circling outside, she walked to the open door, closing it against a sudden burst of the sea. Flipping a switch, the room was flooded with light, washing out the black night, the black pants. We were saved and there was food.

Without the twins for the first time since leaving Tunis, Daniella and I emerged on the street in the early morning light. We had chosen to wake early and see the town while the twins thought it important to slumber until the air was warm. The mobs of men from the night before were nowhere to be found. Women replaced them, bustling about searching for Iftar supplies. The integrity of the old medina of Le Kef had long ago been destroyed. Only chunks remaining; only part of the high walls still stood.

Near our hotel, we found the reason for Le Kef’s existence, the reason for thousands of years of human settlement atop this barren rock in the middle of a vast, brown plain. A small spring, barely trickling, mostly capped over by the municipal water authority, trickled across a rock set in a deep, sunken park, many meters below modern-day ground level.

The ruins of a Roman bathhouse emerged like a skeleton near the spring, only partially exposed, still supporting many surrounding houses. Rather than let the grand old arches of the baths go to waste, later residents built rooms and houses into the domes and galleries, filling in the deep basins of the frigidarium. Archaeologists, no doubt of French provenance,
had demolished many of the later structures, revealing parts of the baths. Much of the complex remained buried in the walls of neighboring houses. The site was strewn with garbage as if from a wild party the night before. An old, bent man, wearing a heavy brown cloak with hood drawn stooped, picking up bits of trash from amid the rubble. As we left the baths, I talked with the man, complimenting him on the morning’s progress, giving him a Dinar, asking he continue to take care of the site. He smiled, firmly grasping my hand, thanking me for noticing his efforts, for validating his worth and labor.

Along the old city walls, we stumbled upon Bab Ghedive, a gate in the fortifications leading from the confinement of the medina directly into the wide-open countryside, filled with green, flat pasturelands. Standing in the arch, gazing over the lawn, manicured by a herd of goats, we saw a man riding atop a donkey nearly obscured behind a load of soda bottles, on his way to the Berber villages high on the ridge above Le Kef. He passed us in the arch, the bottles clinking in the plastic crates, the man wearing an old, worn chechia, pious year-round. Closer inspection of the manicured green lawn revealed strange marble columns sticking just above the ground at regular intervals. Two staircases, behind what looked at first to be great boulders but were really ruined walls, descended into the darkness. Beer bottles cascaded down the stairs into the deep confines of the subterranean world. These were Roman cisterns, built in a low spot between ridges, making the ground flat and smooth, perfect for grass, perfect for sheep. Women worked nearby, drawing wash water given to the future by the ancient citizens of Le Kef.
A rough-hewn trail, worn smooth by the generations passing through, meandered up the ridge, disappearing over the top and out of sight. A group of Berber women emerged from Bab Ghedive, from the city. Daniella, perhaps rejuvenated by the morning twins-free stroll, approached the women, chatting with them, befriending them. They walked together, climbing up the steep trail to the villages above. I followed, not wanting Daniella to disappear over that ridgeline forever. Michelle and Rachelle stayed behind in a huff, not wishing to physically exert themselves, not wishing to risk mussing their hair. The man on the donkey returned to keep them company with the clinking of the empty glass bottles. I found Daniella sitting with the women at the top of the ridge, all winded from the climb. She had pulled her camera out and was taking pictures of the women, of herself, and the village. Her anthropology training, sorely lacking for many weeks, had returned. She was at home among the orange-dyed hair, the henna tattoos, and the brightly colored dresses. She had found her place in Tunisia.

The trance broken, Rachelle called Daniella’s phone, whining for us to return, whining for attention other than her sister’s. We descended, running into more women climbing the hill, carrying great trays brimming with warm pastries. They gave us some, insisting we take them without pay, bidding us eat them that evening. The twins waited at the bottom, stamping around like agitated donkeys, eager to return to town, eager to find more food, jealous of our pastries.

A bakery, the first of the day, had opened. It was nearly noon. We stopped, buying bread for the twins. Back at the hotel, we found maids cleaning and preparing the room. Removing
her luggage, Michelle stomped downstairs, proclaiming she would eat in the lobby because she was a traveler and travelers were allowed to eat. Rachelle ran after her sister, eager to eat. We followed a short time later, finding them happily munching away, smoking cigarettes, and drinking water in front of the clerk standing behind the counter. Daniella paid our bill, shamed by their actions, her eyes begging the clerk’s forgiveness.

The last seat in the louage to be filled was taken by an ancient woman using a tattered white plastic stepping stool as a walker. She could not get into the van on her own. Several louage drivers, discussed the news of the day over the hood of a van. They came over, lifting her gently and lovingly into the seat. She was traveling alone to Tunis to be with her family for Eid al-Fitr, the feast and celebration at the end of Ramadan.

What torture I experienced not knowing what would issue forth from the twins’ mouths each time they opened, from American gait and mannerisms. They dressed wrong. Their clothes were entirely too tight and revealing. Unintentionally—or perhaps intentionally—they flaunted their body at all who passed. Refusing to communicate in Arabic, they insisted on yammering on in English at the most awkward times. While I strove to integrate with Tunisian culture, altering my walk and struggling to learn Tunisian Arabic, it seemed as if she tried to remain painfully American. On the other hand, as I slowly turned native there is little doubt that my actions also confounded and embarrassed the twins. I found my patience growing thin for those who did not try to acclimate as I did.
Passing the outskirts of Tunis, passing a line of auto repair shops, I glimpsed a sight both awesome and strange to behold. Amid the blackened, oil-drenched filth, the derelict, parted-out cars, the shops cobbled together with spare parts sat a stretch Cadillac limousine. It glistened in the sun, a fresh coat of wax shimmering and dancing across the immaculate black paint. A pair of long horns reached across the hood, spanning the grille, lending the vehicle a mystique not often seen on the streets of Tunisia. A brand-new Texas license plate, framed with golden barbed wire was bolted onto the front bumper, fresh tags affixed to both corners. The limo was out of place. The twins, Daniella, and I were out of place. No matter if we were ugly Americans, frightened tourists, or tried to blend into the background, we were still foreigners in a foreign land.
Living with Tyrants

People all around the world live with tyrants. My time in Tunisia was no different. Tito, the pipsqueak Chihuahua with the mangled leg, always made his presence known and felt. His eyes and ears followed my every movement in the villa. Whenever I stepped beyond the bounds set by the cross little dog, he let me know by nipping and biting at my toes and growling and barking at my ankles. Even when the little tyrant was asleep in the house, his presence was felt. The day I moved in he came to visit. My baggage lay in a jumble on the floor. Making a grand entrance, he proceeded to inspect the luggage and mark his territory. The little man peed on my bags. It was obviously his room, and he would not let me forget it.Finished with the bags, he flagged many other things as his property. The room always smelled a bit from the three-legged tyrant. My only consolation was that he wasn’t a Great Dane.

To the tyrants of the world…
To the lovers of the darkness…
To the enemies of life...
You ridiculed the pain of the innocents.
You deformed the charm of existence.
And you've grown but seeds of sadness in their land.

Abou-Al-kacem Echebbi (1909-1934), Tunisian Poet
The delivery truck was not in the driveway. Farid, Basira, and Samia were still at the wedding. Earlier in the morning Farid had instructed me to check on Hadia. I went around to the front door to say hello. Hadia wanted company other than the two dogs and the midget tyrant. We chose a video from Hadia’s large collection of anime. Rather than watch the show, I spent most of the evening holding the despot dog at arm’s length to protect my ankles and toes.

The show finished and Tito deposited outside, we lounged in the TV room, talking about many different issues on Hadia’s mind. Chief among them was how much she hated living in Tunisia. She told me she was often hassled for not dressing or acting like a Muslim. She told of the Islamic courses she was mandated to take in school and of the religion teachers preaching fire and brimstone. Recounting to me with a degree of teenage bravado, she told me how her teachers always singled her out for eternal damnation. She never spent much time in her religion classes because she was always thrown out for asking the wrong questions. Clearly, she was proud of how easily she was ejected from the class on a regular basis. It was a mark of distinction that set her apart from her classmates and, in her eyes, raised her status with me. She even used language more associated with Christian teenage angst to help plead her case.
Aside from her religion teachers, she told me of the women that approached her on the street. They informed her that she was on the path to hell due to her dress and actions. Her own grandfather even told her she was bound for Hades because of the way she dressed. The man lived only a few houses away but Hadia claimed to only see him at most once a year because of Hadia’s propensity to not dress like a proper Tunisian girl. Mind you, she didn’t dress provocatively or at all scandalously, at least whenever I saw her. She told me that she simply refused to behave like was expected of a Tunisian girl. Instead she claimed that she believed in her own personal freedom to do whatever she chose, even if it was something girls didn’t do. The depressing chat finished, it being well past midnight, I retired for the evening. Always on guard, Tito launched a surprise attack as I walked back to my room. I was too tired to bother shooing him away.

Hadia’s problems smacked of an angst-filled youth who felt oppressed by her surroundings. From what I understood of normal Tunisian religion classes, they were much more watered down courses than Hadia led me to believe. Was she oppressed from without or from within?

Traveling to and from Bizert one day, I discovered there was no need for distance markers on the highway. Flags and streamers draped across the road fluttered in the breeze at regular intervals. Always watching, never blinking, President Ben Ali’s omnipresent political party had found it necessary to command the local officials to blanket the freeway with flags,
streamers, banners, and all manner of patriotic propaganda to support the president in his re-election campaign. The flags and streamers alternated photos of Ben Ali with the Tunisian flag, red with a crescent moon and star. These colorful orgies of Ben Ali marked the kilometers, climbing up latticework and marching along the freeway.

As with every arrival, my return from Bizert that evening produced great pleasure in Tito’s twisted little mind. The tyrant ran out of the house, nipping and biting at my ankles. I tried to shoo him away from my socks by way of scolding and then by the force of feet. All was in vain. Had it not been for his crippled leg, he would have followed me into the apartment for the evening. I left him yipping and yapping at the door. He ran around to the windows, barking at me from the other side of the metal bars as a bird is taunted by children from the outside of its cage. Tito had missed me during the day. A smile graced his face, happy that I, his pet, had returned.

Studying for an exam, I found myself interrupted by a man who wished to discuss the book Nineteen Eighty-Four. He was armed with a shabby photocopy of the book, marked up with generations of notes and doodles with certain passages highlighted in the most nonsensical ways. My newfound Orwellian friend soon informed me that all second year English students at the university were required to read the piece. As an extra large portrait of Ben Ali gazed down from above, I mused that assigning the book was a rather brazen maneuver
by the university. The conversation progressing, my musing turned to bemusement as it
became clear he interpreted the book very differently than the way I had been taught.

Regardless of my attempts at an explanation of its content, he was more interested in telling
me what he had been told the book was supposed to mean rather than my opinion. “Winston
Smith,” he informed me with an authority wrought of his professors’ instruction, “was a
traitor and deserved what he received. Big Brother loved him but all Winston had in his
black heart was hate.” I asked if he saw any parallels between the totalitarian state set forth
in the book and the state in which his country found itself. A taboo topic nearly breached, he
excused himself and moved away quickly, not wishing to associate with a subversive.

The next morning, I sat with a friend in a café across the street from the school. We were
disturbed by my distraught-looking utopian friend. He asked if I would accompany him to
the library for more conversation on my view of the true meaning of the book. My friend,
sipping at his tea, raised an eyebrow, questioning just what this obviously agitated second
year English student possibly could want with dystopian discourse.

Finishing my snack, I followed him back to school. Up in the study rooms he again espoused
his views of Big Brother only loving while Winston had a heart of coal. Again, I suggested
an alternate interpretation. While strenuously rebuffing my explanation, I could see he was
listening and thinking. Other students began to gather around asking even more questions
about the book and asking for my interpretation of key passages. Perhaps the students only
wanted to use me to help with their English homework or maybe there was something more. Maybe they wanted to hear a different view of the world.

Threading our way through Hammam Lif, we found it difficult to discern the new route to the national park. New overpasses and highways had been built among houses and shops where once small winding roads trundled through farm fields. It was all a sign of more progress, given to the citizens of Hammam Lif by their president. The fluttering banners and flags of the omnipresent Ben Ali at times turned the road into a tunnel of color.

Our party went down to a café along the beach. Across the street was an old, dilapidated casino from the colonial days. Long since shuttered, it stood as a testament to change.

History records the Phoenicians gaining a foothold in Tunisia, slowly taking control of the land and displacing the Numidian inhabitants to the hardscrabble lands of the south. Then the Romans and their legions came, utterly destroying Carthage in a series of three bloody wars. For six hundred years, the emperors of Rome extracted wealth from Tunisia, enslaving the land. Vandals, crossing the Mediterranean from Spain, left a swath of destruction through Tunisia, only leaving toppled monuments and defaced statues in their wake. The Byzantine Empire, the last vestige of Roman might, maintained weak control of the chaotic lands for only one hundred years. Berbers and remnants of Byzantium joined forces, trading control of Tunisia with invading Arab armies for thirty years. Various Islamic factions
larded over Tunisia until the arrival of the French in the 19th century. Even with independence in 1956, the country remained out of control of the people. Tunisia had been overrun by outside forces, changing hands with the seasons for thousands of years.

The whole beach along Hammam Lif was littered with deteriorating colonial architecture, a crumbling monument to Tunisia’s former masters. We drank our tea, gazing out to sea, surrounded by the ruins of the seedier side of life in the French outer realm. Gnarled palm trees swayed in the breeze in front of the shuttered casino, jostling the flags and banners which proclaimed Ben Ali’s many marvelous deeds.

Inside every commercial establishment in Tunisia, from the grandest of hotels to the most modest of pastry shops, an official government photo of Ben Ali gazed down, watching over all who entered serving as a constant reminder of his omnipresence. Our little café by the beach was no different. Ben Ali smiled down at us, pleased that we enjoyed his tea.

Several of my classmates and I strolled along the wide boulevards dividing the trendy new development, Lac Palace, into neat blocks of office towers, condominiums, and town houses. The eerie silence of the empty city weighed heavily on our ears as we searched for a restaurant. Rather than the bustle and hubbub of even the quietest streets in Tunis proper, we were wrapped in soundlessness. One or two stray office workers flitted from dark stairwell to dark lobby, keeping their heads down, unaware of our presence in that silent place.
A small worker’s lunch stand pricked the calm, drawing us in with faint sounds of Mosaïque FM, Tunis’s most popular radio station, playing the latest hits of France and the Maghreb around the clock. A faded, dingy radio sat perched on a small ledge behind the register, covered in a layer of grime and sand and crackling with static. Mosaïque FM faded in and out of reality. A few men in dark blue suits sat in the back of the restaurant, smoking and watching a small TV with the sound off, oblivious to our presence. We ordered sandwiches, watching the man behind the counter fan flies off of the tuna and fluorescent processed meat. The eatery was small, dark, and cool, standing in stark contrast to the scorching, blinding white concrete and glass canyons just outside the door. Ben Ali smiled down, watching over the proceedings.

The sun beat down from directly overhead, washing out any hope of shadowy refuge. Ben Ali’s eyes followed us, smiling from posters smeared down the sides of buildings. Flocks of half-hearted flags hung limply in the still, deafeningly silent air. I bit into my sandwich, shattering the quiet. We slogged along through the heat, as if dragging great anchors, wishing for the gentlest of breezes and the slightest of sounds to lighten our load.

The main boulevard was empty save for one taxi lazily driving along. Fleeing Ben Ali’s smiling gaze, we flagged the cab down. It pulled up along side us, windows rolled down. The man beckoned us enter. Banners, mutely shouting Ben Ali’s gifts to the world, closed in, grabbing at us with their words. We jumped in the cab and sped away. The campaign
posters, banners, and strings of flags fluttered behind us. I was relieved that we had escaped Ben Ali’s loving embrace.

Several days prior to the Tunisian presidential election, Katy, the large, kind and sweet black dog came into heat, driving Tito mad. The little three-legged terror zealously guarded Katy, never straying from her side for an instant. Basira found the lovesick Tito adorable saying, “Poor Tito! Katy is the only one for him! He will not leave her side to eat or drink. He would rather die than leave her.” Farid was not as pleased. They had locked Tito in the stairwell on the other side of the door separating my room from the main house, trying to force him to eat and drink. His love remained outside. All night long Tito barked, whined, yipped, and howled, pining for his love, pining for a dog five times his size. Deranged from lack of sleep, Farid threw Tito out with his unwitting fiancée at 4am. He slept the rest of the day, rising only for dinner, cursing the dog as we ate.

The day of the election arrived. The maelstrom of flags, banners, posters, and press attention centered on Ben Ali, president of Tunisia, hit its peak as polls opened. The other three candidates, one of which openly endorsed Ben Ali prior to the election, were hardly known. Their brown, blue, and red posters appeared only at official polling stations, without even a
photo of the candidates. The outcome of the election was preordained. Parliament had changed the laws specifically so Ben Ali could run for a third consecutive term. This was a great victory for the beloved president, tarnished only by the four percent of the vote that he did not receive. In all previous elections, Ben Ali handily won with near-100% approval. The American embassy released a press statement congratulating Ben Ali and praising Tunisia for its strong democracy. I never found a single operational polling station. Many locations were designated for voting, the official candidate posters glued to walls, but none opened or operated. Voting was reserved for those marking ballots for the correct candidate. Only they knew how and where to vote.

Soon after Ben Ali’s re-election, I sat waiting for Daniella with Mr. Rokki, her host family uncle, discussing the news of the day, both of us fixated on the television, watching the BBC. A suicide bomber had blown himself up somewhere in the Middle East, overshadowing news of the impending American presidential election. The headlines were splashed with claims of terrorism and the gloomy news of forecasted tourism losses in Egypt and Jordan.

Mr. Rokki turned, looking at me mischievously. He asked, “Have you ever met a terrorist?” Thinking of Tito, I said, “No, not a human terrorist anyway.” “Would you believe,” he said, “that sitting in this very room there is a terrorist?” I looked around, confused as only the two of us occupied the space. No man hid beneath the sofa or behind the drapes. He continued, “I once was a terrorist. In 1952 I was arrested at the age of 16 for terrorizing the French
population of Tunisia. They threw me into jail for a year so that I could think about what I had done and reform my ways.” Looking at the now somewhat frail Mr. Rokki, I asked, “What did you do that so terrorized the French? Did you burn a loaf of French bread or squish a round of cheese beneath the wheels of a taxi?” “No,” he replied proudly, “I signed a manifesto written by the students of Tunis protesting the continuing French occupation.”

We bade Daniella’s terrorist host uncle goodbye, promising him that we would report back on the evening’s activities. It would soon be election day in America, the day so many across the Middle East and North Africa had dreamed for, the day that the incumbent president might be removed to be replaced with someone more gentle, more kind, less intent on killing Arabs and generally making a mess of the world.

At the Sheraton hotel high on the hill above Tunis, we entered the foyer of the grand ballroom, acting like Americans, speaking English loudly so that we would not be hassled passing through the metal detectors. In the ballroom, we found hundreds of people milling about, feasting on food laid out around the room on great circular tables, inviting all to feed. Groups of anglophiles clustered by the more meaty dishes while francophones preferred to remain near the cheese and fruits, each clustered into their own linguistic bubbles. Everyone in the entire country had been invited to the party. Tunisians mingled with American consul officials while Frenchmen chatted up Rwandan office workers over sparkling cider. A raucous group of British and Australian oilmen occupied the bar in another part of the hotel, their laughter penetrating through the din of the ballroom. Many expatriates and some of the more bold Tunisians brought hard drinks back from the bar, some attempting to conceal their
contents under the guise of soft drinks or fruit juice. Others drank openly, some already intoxicated. It was a party, a party for the ousting of the president.

Huddled over in one corner, fixated on the giant screens projecting CNN, we found our schoolmates. At the opposite end of the room another set of screens displayed Al Jazeera and a French language channel.

The party swelled the ballroom to the bursting point. Standing on a small stage, the ambassador called for attention. He read a speech, first in English, then in French, butchering both languages as only a southerner with deep pockets to fund presidential campaigns and buy such an ambassadorial appointment could do. Grand words about the importance of elections, democracy, truth, justice, and the American way fell out of his mouth like dead fish spilling from a ship’s hold.

I spied the American cultural attaché, weeping softly in the corner. It was bad enough that the ambassador had butchered the English version of the speech the attaché wrote but to butcher the meticulously translated French version? It was more than the poor man could handle. Later that evening, as the results began trickling in, he began to drink. Before the end of the night, he and most of the rest of the embassy staff were very drunk and very sad, crying on one another’s shoulders, distraught at the idea that they must spend another four years under the president who had destroyed their diplomatic lives.
The rest of our group left save for myself and one friend. We stayed on, watching in horror as more and more bad news rolled in. State after state reported in, falling to the incumbent. The television screens displayed a map of America, covered in the color of the incumbent, the victor.

Intoxicated diplomats of all nationalities wept softly in small clusters. One elderly supporter of the incumbent sat, asleep on her chair, a campaign sticker stuck to her chest. In all the great ballroom that night only two supporters of the president were found: the ambassador and the old woman, asleep in her chair. Even the few lucky marines, allowed out of their house for the evening, wished that the challenger would win. They were eager for a change in military doctrine that would see their fellow soldiers withdrawn from wars that had no end, which made no sense, and which cost the lives of their friends.

Guests slowly drifted out of the ballroom. Some returned to the bar while others sat in the lobby, crying. Many of the staff members from the embassies dragged themselves upstairs to rooms rented specially to celebrate the dawn of a new age. Instead, they celebrated the death of their dreams.

The hotel kicked my shell-shocked friend and me out at 7am, into the harsh, muted light of another day in Tunis. The sky, sensing our mood, sensing the world’s loss, filled with dark clouds. A light rain fell over Tunis, washing away the dreams of a better tomorrow. We
walked, numb with disbelief, not wishing to face a taxi driver and his questions of why the American president was re-elected, why we, as a nation, as individual people supported his war-mongering ways.

The highway between the Sheraton Hotel and Hayya Mishmish was twisted mass of gridlock. My friend walked with me, not wanting to return home, not wanting to face her bubbly roommates. Rush hour traffic ground to a halt. Cars slipped and slid, trying to sneak around the side on the once hard but now soft, muddy shoulder. We found ourselves walking between lanes of stopped traffic on the tarmac, avoiding the morass on the side of the road.

Up the road a distance we saw the trouble. A car was broken down in one lane, blocking traffic and bottling up the masses. Its front bumper was crumpled in a bit with steam rising from the radiator, joining the mist above. One man tried to push the car from behind while another one steered. It inched along, excruciatingly slow in its progression. Hundreds of horns honked. People leaned out of their car windows, shouting at the men, waving angry fists at the troublemakers.

My friend looked at me with mischief in her eyes asking, “Want to help?” The men were shocked when the two of us ran up and latched onto the back of the car, pushing with all our might. The driver shouted “What luck!” as we pushed the car up the hill. We maneuvered the people-powered car through traffic, depositing it and the two men on the side of the road and out of traffic. A great flood of cars unleashed like a torrent down the highway, rushing pell-mell to the next bottleneck. Walking away through the mist and fumes, over the din of
horns and engines we heard the man exclaim again, “What luck!” My friend looked at me, smiling.

Late in the afternoon, the sun madly rushing downward, obscured by the cloudy sky, we steeled ourselves for the harsh reality of the day. The rain poured down, turning bare earth into yellow and red soup. We sloshed through lakes of water, pooling in depressions, flooding across the highway, threatening the commuter train. Her little umbrella and my thin raincoat were no match for the deluge. We arrived at her apartment completely soaked from head to toe with the warm, stinging tears of Tunisia. Two glorious re-elections of two beloved leaders was too much for even the sky to handle. Tunis wept.
Farid, my host father, pulled the delivery van up to the house. The dogs went wild, lunging and barking at the van doors. Basira, his wife, came outside to collect the dogs, locking them up in the house. The van rocked oddly in the driveway. Returning, Basira opened the door to the laundry room. Farid emerged from the back of the van leading a sheep. A second followed shortly after. He had been out shopping for the yearly ram for Eid Kabir, the feast of the sacrifice. One sheep was for our family while the other was for one of Farid’s relatives.

The sheep lived together in the cramped laundry room, halting all clean clothing production for a week. Their bleating penetrated the thick walls of the house, keeping me awake at night with dreams of mutton. The dogs were always by the door to the temporary manger, sniffing and smelling, desperate to find out what was inside.

It was Eid Kabir. My host family asked me to help with the slaughter, standing in for their son who was attending university in Paris. Men walked through the streets of our neighborhood, calling out their services as slaughterers for hire. Farid brought one of the butchers into the hard, asphalt yard. The ram emerged from its manger, unaware of the fate about to befall it. The butcher aligned the ram, orienting it in the direction of Mecca. A quick slash across both jugular veins by the razor-sharp iron knife brought forth a torrent of blood. Farid urged me to pose with the knife over the expiring sheep, taking a photo for posterity.
The sheep lay there on the asphalt, gazing up at us with terror-filled eyes. One final mighty kick and a rattling gasp marked the end of our ram. Hadia, the young daughter of Farid and Basira, hid in the house not wishing to see the slaughter. I was fascinated, unable to tear myself away from the butcher as he went to work. Growing up on a farm, watching pigs, cows, chickens, and turkeys meet their demise had conditioned me to see not a horrific and grizzly act, as Hadia did, but simply a fact of life.

I shed no tears for the animal as the butcher lopped off its head and feet. He strung it up by its hind legs, skinning the steaming carcass. Slashes to the belly let loose a torrent of entrails that plopped into a waiting tub held by Basira. Finished with his work, the butcher was paid both with money and with part of the liver and pancreas of the dead ram. He headed down the street carrying his tools and calling out his services in search of the next house that needed a butcher.

Farid and Basira worked together, chopping off great hunks of meat to cook for dinner. The blood began to coagulate in the driveway. Farid washed it all into a flowerbed, telling me that it provided nutrients for the bed for the entire year. They hung the carcass in the laundry room, above where the sheep had been stabled.

The carcass slowly twirled, twisting on the wire suspending it from the rafters. We worked beneath it, cleaning the stomach and intestines. Several days later, we feasted on a dish resembling haggis, made with the stomach and intestines and laid over a bed of couscous.
The texture of the Tunisian haggis was like nothing I had ever experienced. Little fingers protruded all over the inside of the stomach, tickling my throat as I ate it. The intestines were used to bind the stomach together, holding in meat and vegetables. It was chewy at first but melted as I swallowed each bite.

Bibi and Tito, the two Chihuahuas, were allowed to come outside to inspect the aftermath of the slaughter. Bibi, her tongue always looking for something to lick, lapped up bloody water from the flower bed. Tito ran over to the ram’s head, barking at it, staring into its eyes frozen with terror. Farid cooked some mutton on a small grill near where the hooves had been placed. We fortified ourselves for the long, busy day, eating the flesh of the ram.

At noontime, Farid and I reconvened in the laundry room, knives in hand. We lopped off a hind leg. He placed it in a frying bath of olive oil and vegetables, letting it cook for several hours. The other hind leg was severed later, Basira taking it to one of the local mosques. That quarter, as the Koran dictates, was bound for charity. Half of a sheep remained hanging in the laundry room. The feast of mutton would continue for many days.
The Ninja of Thala

My friend Jing and I once made a brief stopover in the small Tunisian town of Thala to change louages on our journey south to Kasserine. The first louage due to depart only had one seat free. After spending several minutes attempting to persuade the driver and the other passengers to grant both of us passage, a late-coming National Guard soldier wishing to leave immediately decided that we would wait.

Jing and I walked to the next louage in the queue for Kasserine. We hopped in the empty vehicle and settled down for a long wait. In smaller towns it can take all day before a louage has enough passengers to leave.

It began to snow. In spite of it being February, the snow struck us as a bit odd. Thala lies only 150km north of the Grand Erg Oriental, part of the Sahara Desert. The men standing around by the louages all wore what can best be described to westerners as Jedi cloaks and Jawa anoraks to blunt the cold. George Lucas, in his infinite wisdom, lifted large portions of Star Wars and the entire planet of Tatooine (a corruption of the town and district of Tataouine) from Tunisia. Everyone had their hoods up, protecting against the inclement weather. Snow piled up in little mounds on top of the Jawas and Jedis. It was a whimsical sight in an otherwise dull town.

As we sat watching the snow fall, I observed a Jedi emerge from a nearby alleyway. This was no ordinary Jedi. He staggered a bit. The man rambled slowly down the street in our
This particular Jedi had approached me earlier asking for money. I rebuffed his then-sober advances and kindly suggested he look elsewhere. Now, fortified with stiff drink, he was back. Our drunken Jedi stopped at the first louage he happened upon. He opened the door, poked his head inside, and asked for spare change. The women inside gave him a Dinar or two. He exited the louage, closed the door, pocketed the change, took a swig from a small bottle concealed in his cloak, and stumbled to the next louage. This repeated several times before he came to us.

The intoxicated man slid the door open and stuck his head inside. Several seconds elapsed before he realized that we were not giving him money, and that Jing was not Tunisian, but in fact quite Asian. People with Asiatic features are a rare sight in Tunisia, especially in small, out-of-the-way places like Thala.

First in Arabic, and then French, he asked us for money. Likewise, first in Arabic, and then French, we told him to go away and leave us alone. In general, I don't like panhandlers but I will say this for him: he was honest. He informed us up-front that any money we gave him would be used to buy more alcohol. In spite of our protests, he plopped down next to me.

His breath reeked. The man brought a little white plastic bottle out and took a sip. He handed it to me for closer inspection. In French it was labeled "Burning Alcohol" which, I could only assume, is similar to American rubbing alcohol. The bottle sported markings indicating the poisonous nature of its contents. After another swig, he realized that Jing and I
both spoke English. He started asking Jing what Tokyo was like. Jing is not Japanese. She hails from Shanghai, not Tokyo. Sadly, the distinction was lost upon our friend.

The conversation plodded along, periodically returning to the issue of money, until our new friend asked Jing what it was like being a Ninja. You see, our dear drunken Jedi's life-long ambition was to become a Ninja. Tragically, as he laboriously recounted, "the man" kept him down and he had yet to realize his ninja dreams. Jing, always up for a bit of fun and still smarting from the nationality misidentification, began to describe a rather entertaining code of Ninja ethics. The driver came by and shooed our ninja-wannabe out of the louage. We thanked him and went back to idly observing the snow.

Wrapped tightly in his cloak, the driver ambled back to a nearby coffee shop under the watchful gaze of hundreds of flags of Ben Ali. The Ninja-crazed town drunk, sensing an opportunity to learn more about the Ninja way, rejoined us in the louage. During our brief respite, Jing informed me that I was to continue to keep distance between her and our friend. She was rightly concerned that the cigarette she was smoking--a smooth, full flavored Mars Light, the finest of Tunisian brands--might ignite the man's breath. He came back slightly more intoxicated than before.

After a brief continuance of the Ninja-themed conversation, our friend took another nip from the bottle of burning alcohol and promptly lost the ability to speak English. The man now switched into French. Jing, far more fluent than I, translated the bits I didn't understand between stifled fits of laughter. He rambled on and on about his burning desire to join the
Ninja order and fight "the man." (Surely he could not have been referring to Ben Ali, beloved president of Tunisia!) I believe this man had seen one too many Jackie Chan films. Another nip from the bottle, and his French was lost. I found myself pressed into service translating for the beyond-bemused and now slightly-irritated Jing on, of all topics, how to be a Ninja. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that my mediocre Arabic would be put to such a weighty task!

With our assistance, the town drunk fully explored the finer points of ninja life that day in Thala. Finally, as the snow let up a bit, a strapping young National Guardsman came to wait in the louage. He politely, but forcefully, removed our Ninja-in-training and sat down to wait with us out of the weather. The drunken Jedi staggered off into the swirling snow having met his first in-the-flesh "Japanese Ninja." He was now ready to follow the Ninja way.

The Ninja of Thala was no different than other drunks and panhandlers, the fallen members of society. He sought out those who did not belong, knowing people out of place would be more susceptible to his fiscal advances. The women in the louage in front of ours were not from Thala but a distant city, waiting to return home. He singled them out like he did us – by finding those that looked out of place with themselves and their surroundings.
Night Bus to Tunis

I arrived at the main bus and louage depot in Kasserine at dusk. All of the louages had already left for the night. The nearest hotel, the prison-like youth hostel, was over three kilometers away and the local taxis looked hungry. I asked a man at the station if there were any more buses that night. In fact, there was one bus that would depart in two or three hours, and for, of all places, Tunis! I decided to take this bus.

I settled down for a several-hour wait outside the bus station in Kasserine. The stars came out. Some soldiers arrived to wait for the bus and the little café, run by a man and his Down Syndrome-affected assistant, closed for the night. At about 10 p.m., one of the men sitting next to me asked for the time in Tunisian Arabic. I was wearing a little black skull cap that I bought in Tunis to keep my ears warm. We soon struck up a conversation that carried on for a good 30 minutes until the bus showed up.

As we were getting ready to get on the bus he inquired (in Arabic) “So... You aren’t from Tunisia, are you? I know! You’re Algerian!” I said, much to his utter astonishment “No, I’m not Algerian.” He then said, “I know! You must be Libyan,” to which I responded, “No, I’m not Libyan.” Quite confused, he asked, “So if you aren’t Algerian and you aren’t Libyan, what are you? You speak Tunisian Arabic with an accent so you can’t be from Tunisia.” I replied, “I’m American.” He looked at me, blinked, and didn’t say another word. His brain couldn’t process what I had just told him. I was an American, I spoke Arabic, and I was boarding a night bus near the Algerian border bound for the capital of Tunisia. He sat in
the front of the bus and got off after a few stops. I never saw him again. I sat in the back of
the bus with the soldiers on their way to Tunis. I paid my fare, settled into my seat, pulled my
cap down over my eyes, and drifted off to sleep to the reassuring roar of the diesel bus
engine.

Around 1 a.m., I briefly regained consciousness to discover that we were entering Le Kef. I
didn’t realize that the bus ran through Le Kef. Instead of making the straight shot to Tunis,
we got a scenic night tour of Tunisia along the Algerian border. I drifted back to sleep.

Something was jabbing my face. What was all that noise? Light suddenly flooded into my
vision as my cap was pulled up above my eyes. I couldn’t make anything out. Someone was
shouting at me. There was a cold piece of round grey metal poking my forehead. My eyes
began to focus. I could see a muzzle. I could hear Arabic. I could make out a large clip, a
finger, and a trigger. There was a man shouting at me. He sounded very cross. The world
finally came back into focus. An overzealous National Guard officer had a fully loaded AK-
47 pointed squarely between my eyes, his finger was on the trigger, and was shouting at me
in Arabic, something along the lines of “Okay, you Algerian scum! Show us your papers or
your head will go missing!”

I fished a photocopy of my passport out of my left pocket and handed it to the officer. He
stormed off the bus after collecting identification from a few other passengers. Several
minutes later he came back on and asked very politely, in French, for my original passport. I
handed him my passport upside down, obscuring my nationality a few seconds longer. He
grabbed the passport and stormed off the bus.
After about ten minutes a different, more senior officer came onto the bus and started handing back identification papers. Mine was the last. He said to me in broken French, “I’m so sorry for the inconvenience. There’s been a mistake. We thought you were someone else. Please enjoy your stay in Tunisia.” I put my passport away, pulled my skull cap down over my eyes and went back to sleep as the bus pulled away from the roadblock.

Something was jabbing my face. It was cold and felt like steel. What was all that noise? More light. Oh no. Not again. As I feared, I was once again staring down the barrel of a fully loaded AK-47 being pointed at my temple by yet another fine officer of the Tunisian National Guard. Again, he yelled at me in Arabic. This time it was something like, “Give me your papers you son of an Algerian whore! Wake up or die!” I handed him my passport straight off this time, not wanting to delay the bus any more than necessary. He snatched my passport and tromped off the bus.

Ten minutes later he came back on the bus, visibly shaken, and handed back my passport. He said to me in French, “I’m so sorry for the confusion. We mistook you for someone else. Please have a nice time in Tunisia.” I looked out the window as we pulled away. Across the road a small 1970’s-era Renault R4 pickup was pulled over to the side with three people standing outside in the glare of the headlights of a large National Guard Land Cruiser. A guardsman had a rifle trained on the little group while another radioed back to headquarters with a whole stack of papers spread out on top of the hood of the Land Cruiser. Stacked in
the back of the pickup several dozen sheep waited quietly. It seems I wasn’t the only one getting the full treatment that night. I drifted back to sleep.

I woke up with a start when the bus engine died. I pulled my cap up and peeked outside the window. A few small streaks of orange blazed across the sky. It was 4:30 a.m. I had no clue where we were. I asked one of the military men sitting near me for our location in Arabic. This was the first time I had spoken since I got on the bus. Never during the two incidents had I uttered a word. The man stared back at me, not comprehending his own mother tongue. I asked again. He continued to stare. I asked in French if he spoke Arabic. I asked in French again. He suddenly realized that, in fact, I spoke Arabic and that I was speaking to him. A broad grin broke out across his face as he told me “We’re in Tunis at Bab Saadoun.” I said thanks and told him good morning. I got off the bus and walked the four kilometers to my house as dawn broke over Tunis. It had been an eventful night.
The man was dressed in outlandish camel pants, a pirate’s shirt and vest, and a keffiyeh wrapped around his head. How anyone, aside from the tourists, could take him seriously was beyond my comprehension.

Yelling and screaming, he cursed my mother and threatened to end my wanderings. Behind him, a line of eight gleaming white Land Cruisers idled in the oasis. Parked alongside the massive hunks of metal, my little Peugeot 206 hatchback was dwarfed.

The tourists, sitting at tables under a low-slung tent waiting for their noontime meal, turned, watching our angry exchange. They could not understand why their driver was bellowing at me in Arabic, nor could they quite comprehend how my car had made it out to the oasis set deep in the sand dunes. Some of the other drivers rushed over, trying to shush the irate man. They all wore comical outfits, ridiculous by Tunisian standards, covering jeans and dress shirts hidden below.

The cheery little Peugeot managed to reach the oasis some 100 kilometers down a gravel and sand road. Were I to believe the tour operators, the road would only have been passable by a Land Cruiser, being much too rough for the likes of a compact car. The tourists believed the trip only could be made with a guide, supplies, and luck. There I was with a rented car.
Driving down that long, desolate road I encountered several large convoys of Land Cruisers, rushing past at breakneck speeds. Some headed to the isle of Djerba and the tourist beach resorts while others plied the sandy track south to the oasis. All tried to force me off the road, enraged that I was out there, spoiling their world.

At times I saw great billowing clouds of dust race across the desert, coming closer and then moving off again into the sand. A pack of Land Cruisers burst over an embankment in front of my car, racing pell-mell down the road before veering off again, down a hill and off into the dunes. The road was not adventuresome enough. The road would not satisfy the tourists seeking their thrills.

This was not the first time I had seen the wool being pulled over foreigners’ eyes. I remembered once before, at another oasis in another little rental car, I spied a billowing cloud of dust come bounding across the desert. My little car drove on a fresh, perfectly paved road. Land Cruisers emerged from the desert, leaping across the road. Tourists hung on for dear life as the drivers of those vehicles painted a picture of mystique and inaccessibility. I pulled up at that oasis, parking alongside those Land Cruisers. The drivers did not yell at me then, but they certainly scowled.

Their scowl may have been justified. None of the men truly chose to wear the ridiculous costumes and drive fat tourists around their country, playing up to racial and cultural stereotypes. The economic realities of Tunisia had forced them to become caricatures of themselves to make an honest living for their families. My presence endangered their
livelihoods, putting at risk the stream of cash flowing in from north of the Mediterranean by the planeload.

Back at the oasis, the irate driver continued to froth and foam. I stood, not saying a word, amused at his outburst. The long guarded secret of the Land Cruiser operators had been let out of the bag. “You’re ruining the illusion,” he screamed.
I struck out into the storm, leaving the safe confines of the tiny oasis of Ksar Ghilane, a rough outpost of civilization buried deep in the south of Tunisia amid the waves of sand undulating off to the horizon. My head was shrouded beneath a wide-brimmed hat and my eyes protected by sunglasses. I carried only a bottle of water into the stinging wind.

Before I left safety, I had heard the wind blowing through the tops of the trees in the oasis but did not fully appreciate what that roar meant. Out of the shelter of the oasis, I found a major sandstorm underway. The sky and the ground merged into one field of orange. Somewhere in that raging torrent of sand an old Roman fort, the last outpost on the Limes defensive, beckoned. I climbed a large sand dune, gazing out into the sea of shifting sand. Far off in the distance, I thought I spied the squat shape of a rock and mud rampart, rising up out of the dunes. Looking backward, the oasis, only a kilometer away, appeared as a dark blurred smudge in a sea of swirling sand.

Up on another hill of sand, where before I had seen a fort, only a gnarled bush stood, taunting me with its leathery leaves. Another squat, square smudge appeared on the horizon. The oasis was a faint speck of darkness in a maelstrom of orange. I marched on through the blinding sandstorm. A half-hour passed, slogging through the constantly shifting sand. My shoes filled with grains, weighing me down like great anchors. Barefoot in the sand, I found the going much easier.
Massive humps and mounds of sand reached up, meeting the heavens. The wind-whipped sand swirled, obliterating the distinction between sky and ground. I walked on air, choking on the earth clogging my lungs. The oasis had long since disappeared from view. I was alone and without bearing in the storm. All I could do was continue to walk in the direction I thought the fort to be.

Coming around a dune, the fort startled me, looming large on an outcropping of rock poking above the sand. Running, stumbling through the flying grains, my feet cracked and bleeding from the sand and the rocks, I made it inside the fort. The wind screamed outside, demanding I emerge, hungry for my soul. I huddled near the middle of the small fort, surrounded by the ghosts of Roman legionnaires, long abandoned in the shifting sea. Why was I out there, huddled hiding in a forgotten fort, the earth and sky screaming for my head?

Many months had passed since I first studied Arabic. My original motivation had been a friend, insisting I join her in a language class. That first day, all those months ago, she never arrived. I could have walked away to never encounter Arabic, Islam, tyrants, or Tunisia but I didn’t. I stayed and I learned, alone. Hiding in the fort, I felt abandoned by the very friend who had pushed me out into the sand sea.

With the passing of every day in Tunisia, the distance between me and my home had grown. This day, surrounded by the ghostly screams of the past, present, and future, I felt lost from the last shreds of my American identity. It slipped away like the life slipped away from the eyes of the slaughtered sheep, slowly draining out, leaving only black pools where the bright
glimmer of life once shown. I was without identity, trapped in limbo between two oases, that of America and that of Tunisia.

Peeking over the battlements, I saw no sign of life. Not a bush, not a bird, not a tree, not a poster of Ben Ali, nothing. The sand marched away, rolling to the horizon in all directions. No one would come to my aid. No one would give me an identity. How long I hid in the fort, desperately trying to hide from the world I cannot say. The sky grew dark, signaling an intensifying of the storm and the coming night. My water nearly gone, I could not stay hidden behind the ancient walls.

Out into the storm I ran, blindly plotting a course in the imagined direction of the oasis. Up and down over heaving dunes of sand, the wind blasting my face with fine granules. I couldn’t breath. The sand filled my mouth and clogged my nose. I pressed on, headfirst into the storm.

An hour passed battling a cruel mother nature. Cresting a dune, a small smudge appeared before me. Tumbling down the dune, I ran across the barren landscape, the oasis of Tunisia looming larger and larger. My feet were bloody and cracked. My face was raw and wind-scarred. My lungs filled with sand, barely allowing me to breathe. The dark, cool palmerie beckoned me enter, welcomed me in its friendly embrace.

Inside all was different. The screaming roar died down to a dull whoosh, swishing the tops of the palms high overhead. A man walked past carrying a rusted old hoe slung across his
shoulder. He approached, asking if I was okay, unable to fathom someone foolish enough to venture a crossing between oases in the storm. I smiled, nodding my head. I was home in Tunisia.
Penetrating the Party Headquarters

The gleaming high-rise climbed before me, growing on Avenue Bourgiba, the central artery of Tunisia. Purple and white banners mingled with red and white Tunisian flags. The smiling face of Ben Ali was everywhere. No one escaped notice from his watchful eyes.

This was the Party Headquarters, the very nerve-center of power in Tunisia. High above the gated grounds, a whole floor was dedicated to the president’s office. The highest levels of the machine occupied the building, chugging and grinding away, spitting out propaganda, tugging on the puppet strings of Tunisia.

A mix of heavily armed guards, policemen, crack military squads, and plainclothes party dogs milled around the foot of the building in an intricate dance of high-powered weapons. I approached the gate, my face bright and smiling. A policeman brought me up short, his AK-47 barring my way. He asked what business I had within the halls of power. I replied that I had been told to come to the highest echelons of authority to request a few simple posters of Ben Ali.

For months, I lived under the unblinking eyes of Ben Ali. Wherever I went, be it in a restaurant, at a market, in a bank, on the street, or at school, his eyes followed. There was no escape. I tried many times to flee his watchful gaze, ducking around corners, jumping into taxis, hiding under my bed. It did not matter. He was all seeing, all knowing, and he demanded my love and devotion.
My mind, perhaps gone mad from the strings of flags alternating with photos of Ben Ali fluttering over every street, had hatched a plan to possess some of those smiling posters. The week prior, a party dog, his frightened tail tucked between his legs, had directed me to the core of Tunisian power when I inquired where I could find posters of the magnificent president to take to America. Without thinking of the potential consequences, I had walked up to the front gate looking for acceptance only to encounter the guard who now menaced me with his weapon. From far above I felt the piercing gaze of Ben Ali, watching, deciding my fate.

His radio squawked, an answer returning from the central nexus. I was permitted entry to the lobby where I was to await further instructions. The throng of armed men parted, letting me pass to the imposing glass doors. Inside I found tight knots of men in suits rushing about the room, bouncing off one another and the walls like super balls.

A man in a suit approached, asking for my name and identification number. Truthfully, I told him that I did not have a number as I was not a Tunisian. Somewhat shocked, the man asked where I was from and my purpose for approaching the apparatus of the Tunisian state.

I told him of the many long months I spent in Tunis, studying Arabic and the culture. Throughout it all, I said, President Ben Ali had smiled down upon me, “blessing” my exams and my life. Coming to the party headquarters was only natural, for I wanted a memento of
my time under his fatherly gaze. The posters, I explained, would be used in America to show all of my friends and family the ubiquitous ruler of Tunisia.

Nodding his head vigorously, the man agreed that I must have some posters of the president to take back to America. Calling on his radio, the hiss of static filling the cavernous hall, he told the people above to expect my arrival. Motioning, he directed me toward a bank of three elevators, instructing I use either the first or third. The middle elevator, he explained, was reserved only for the president and his innermost circle.

Whisking up thirteen floors, I emerged into a bright hallway. The president’s office was just one floor above. His presence was felt looming large, gazing out over all of Tunisia. A man behind a desk bade me come and sit while he worked the phones.

Shortly, another man emerged from behind a big door covered in leather. This was the director of political information. He greeted me warmly, inviting me into his dark, rich office, full of luxuries never seen on the street far below. I recounted my story, again asking for some posters so that I could share the image of Ben Ali with the people of America. The man smiled broadly. He threw out his arms saying, “Yes! You shall have your posters!”

We crossed the hall into another room. Shelves of posters laid flat spanned floor to ceiling, shelved down tight little aisles. The director walked between the rows, stopping at one. He pulled out a few posters. Farther down he selected a few more. This went on until I had one
of every poster that graced the streets of Tunis. Sliding them into a tube, the director shook my hand, thanking me for my love of Ben Ali.

Passing down the elevator, through the cavernous hall, out into the fenced yard swarming with guards, and through the gate, I felt as if I were floating. My heart soared, beating strong and proud, attempting to get as close as possible to the posters clutched against my chest. On the street I hailed a cab, wishing to speed away with my prize. I had been within mere meters of him. He had seen me and blessed my presence, accepting me into the fabric of Tunisia. My mind danced, its strings being pulled by his eyes.
Attack in the Medina

Nine months after first arriving in Tunisia with only a rudimentary understanding of Arabic, I had integrated into Tunisian society and life. On Fridays, I could be found buying alcohol on the black market alongside the other Tunisian sinners. Everyday I found myself able to converse more and more fluently in Arabic. I also discovered that I had a knack for creating eloquent and offensive swears at appropriate times.

It was a hot June day in the Tunis medina. I walked with two women, fresh off the plane from America, through the covered souks. One of the women had never been outside the Midwest. Tunis was by far the largest city she had ever visited. A silvery, new camera dangled from her wrist. We walked with impunity, enjoying the mostly empty streets of a Sunday afternoon. Ben Ali’s smiling eyes offered us his loving protection. Proudly, I showed the women my city, Tunis. Proudly, I showed the women my country, Tunisia.

A man ran past, clutching something shiny. One of the women screamed. Reacting on instinct, I gave chase. Our pounding feet echoed through the alleys, ringing and reverberating in the arches. The uneven cobblestones, long a complaint of tourists, provided a sure footing for the man and me. Reaching out, I brushed his shoulder with the tips of my fingers. He wheeled around, a crazed look in his eyes.

The thought never occurred to me the man might have a knife. Concealed beneath a piece of brown paper a stiletto blade lay dormant, waiting to be awakened by hot Tunisian blood. The
paper ripped off of the blade. His face contorted into a ball of rage. Sub-guttural screams pierced the air. Who screamed first, me or my assailant, I do not know.

The knife flashed, sun glinting from its blade. It hissed through the air, striking at me, striking at my very core. The cords holding the blindfold of assimilation tight over my eyes began to fray, threatening to reveal my place in the world. One snapped, sending my mind reeling, blinded by a small glimpse of who I really was.

Clinging to the world of shadow, I asked who this man thought he was, trying to gut a fellow countryman. The metal rushed downward, plunging into my identity as I dodged the blade. I screamed, blind rage taking hold. My mind refused to see reality.

The man’s eyes, wild with malice, momentarily lost focus, congealing as great orbs full of terror. Spittle flying, I yelled for the police. My booming voice penetrated the old medina with Tunisian Arabic. The man had misjudged his prey. I would not be mistaken for a red whale. Pounding inside my chest, slamming against my ribs, I felt my heart coursed with hot Tunisian blood.

The man took flight, scared out of his mind. I ran after the fleeing murderer of identity, no longer fighting for the camera or my life. I was fighting for my country and my soul.
I nearly had him. His thin, boney back danced just out of reach of my enraged hands. The man panicked, tossing the camera aside. Remembering the two wide-eyed women left frozen behind me, I allowed him to escape.

Calling down the medina, I yelled after him “Yatick Asbah” which translates roughly to “I wish you had a penis.” He was lucky, and he knew it. My muscles gorged with blood, adrenaline, and testosterone twitched and quivered, begging to fight. Clinging to the metaphorical severed cords of the blindfold, my mind refused to see. I swore a good deal more as some men wearing chechias, the red felt hats indicative of piety, came running down to see what had happened.

The men and I spoke rapidly in a tumble of Arabic. “What happened?” they asked. “Was anyone hurt? Is everything okay?” I recounted the story of the madman bent on stealing the camera. That shiny piece of plastic, metal, and glass sat forlorn in the gutter. Stooping to pick it up, I discovered that it was not an expensive digital camera as I and, no doubt, the thief had believed. The camera, like my identity, was a cheap knockoff of a famous brand. Inside there were no fancy digital circuits. The camera used film.

We walked back to the women, shivering in fear where I left them. The men asked I translate a message to the statues, bidding me tell them that all Tunisians weren’t thieves but just one or two bad apples did such things, as could happen anywhere in the world. They said, “Look! The camera could have been stolen just as easily in New York, Paris, or Rome.” While true, it was of little consolation to the woman from the farm.
Still shaken, the women followed me and the men back to a busier part of the medina. The blade still flashing before my hooded eyes, I wished that I had caught the guy simply to ask him what he was thinking. Why would he attack a fellow Tunisian? Why would he steal a foreigner’s camera? Did he not understand that such actions only serve to hurt the good name of Tunisia and reinforce the stereotype of thieving, untrustworthy Arabs? Had he needed money, he could have simply asked his local mosque for assistance and charity. Had he needed food, he could have asked any of his neighbors or friends. Were he to explain his situation to me, I would have happily given him a few Dinars or taken him to dinner. I was heartbroken. He had destroyed my Tunisia.

Back in the tourist souk, we entered the first shop with a friendly-looking salesman. I recounted our story. He took us in and had the women sit, afraid that they would faint and fall. Pouring cups of water for the women, he asked me to translate his sorrow and remorse for our experience. This was not normal, he told the women. Begging them with his words and his eyes, he implored the women not to judge Tunisia by that one vicious deed. His soothing words calmed the women down, helping to restore their confidence in the shattered world. Mere words could not restore my crumbling identity.

My muscles still bulged. Veins throbbed, filled with deep-blue blood on the surface. The shopkeeper understood my feelings. I told him my story, the story of becoming a part of the land and the people. I told him how I was usually mistaken for a North African and how, each time it felt like the best compliment of my life. Most people treated me as they would
treat any other Tunisian. Tunis was my city. The same blood coursed through my heart and
his. The thief did not simply try to steal a camera. He attacked my soul.

We stayed with the shopkeeper for an hour. He was very concerned for our wellbeing.
Begging the women to give the medina another chance, he asked us to come back another
day, promising that he would make sure we had a better experience within the old city walls.
We revisited our shopkeeper friend a few days later. There were no knives and there was no
swearing. It was a much better day in the medina but it no longer felt like home. My mind
was losing its grip on its hard-won Tunisian identity.
Epilogue

Time has passed since I left Tunisia, affording me a slight degree of perspective. But really, it only has served to muddle my thoughts. What did it all mean? What happened to me while I was there?

Until the man attacked, swinging and stabbing with his knife, I felt as if I had been accepted into the tribe. Everyone treated me as if I were North African. Flowing from one part of Tunis to another, no one questioned my provenance nor suspected I was anything but native-born. That singing stiletto blade sliced the metaphorical blindfold off of my eyes, allowing me to see the world for what it was.

Nine months taught me how to mimic the movements of Tunisia. My gait altered, disguising my American feet. I learned how to speak passable Tunisian Arabic, retraining my vocal cords to make the foreign sounds. My clothes had changed, American jeans cast aside for black pants. Thick gel coated my hair, cut by a Tunisian barber to look like I belonged. My body grew thin and tan, blending in with the young men on the street. Deep in my heart I even felt as if I belonged.

The immigration official at the airport sliced through the last vestiges of my illusion. He asked in Arabic and then in French if I was a spy. Feeling shame for not answering my supposed brother in his native tongue or even in the language of the colonizers, I pretended not to understand. It was all a sham. I could never become Tunisian. No matter what I did, I
would always be the outsider, only a tolerated presence among the tribe. My imagined brothers would easily turn their backs upon me if the winds of change blew in the wrong direction. Even Ben Ali would never accept me as one of his countrymen.

The re-entry into America was difficult. Reverse culture shock plagued me for over a year. Everywhere I went I only could see red whales. In my absence, my friends had been replaced by dull, unenlightened tourists. America no longer felt like home and Tunisia wouldn’t have me. I was disoriented and adrift, not knowing who I was or where I had come from. For many months, everything that had happened to me in Tunisia felt like a trick and a lie.

Only with time and distance have I attempted to come to terms with what I experienced. A part of me will forever be lost in Tunisia. Another will always remain in America, anchoring me to my own tribe.
Works Referenced


APPENDIX A: ALTERNATE WORKING TITLES
The following titles were considered but rejected for this thesis. They are presented here with the belief that they may prove useful at some point in the future as the author continues to write this work-in-progress.

- We go Room Now
- Standing Out as a Stand In
- Taking a Stab at Tunis
- The Dogs of Tunis
- Orgy of the Bland
- We Feasted
- Ben Ali Smiles
- Ben Ali Smiles Down
- The Glorious Tito
- Blubbering Baby
- Tito in the Sea
- Bleeding Feet
- Burning Alcohol
- Night Bus to Tunis
- Yelling and Screaming
- Ben Ali’s Beach Gigolos
- The State of Seduction
- Seduction
- Thinking of Tito
- Occupation Preoccupation
- These Colorful Orgies
- Maghreb Around the Clock
APPENDIX B: FUTURE CHAPTERS TO BE WRITTEN
The following is a partial list of future chapter titles which remain to be written.

- The Helpful National Guard
  - Maktar
  - Haidra
- The Not-So-Secret Police
- South Trip
- Mides
- Horsemen of the Sea
  - Horse Fights in Douz
- The trouble with Libyans
  - Libyan Attempt with Anne
  - Aborted Attempt with Parents
  - Friends Try
  - Mistaken Identities
  - Sfax Consul
- Marble Factory
- Rent-a-Cock
- Commonwealth Parties
- Bourgiba School
- Climbing Mountains
- Smart-Stupid Women
- Gay Tunis
- Mr. Green
- Love and Harrissa
- Drunken Hercules