

Drawing a Line in the Sand

The Western Sahara

It was a time of no war and no peace. The ceasefire held, but cracks had started to show. The refugees were waiting, and though Malainin told me there was courage in patience, nearly forty years had already crawled by. More than a hundred thousand refugees had built a nation out of nothing on wretched, hard-packed sand. They were ready to cross over the Wall that separated them from home.

The “Wall of Shame” was built of sand and stone, but also of rumours, half-truths, and bluster. I had heard that Israelis designed the Wall and Americans provided the radar installations. I’d heard that the entire Moroccan army stood along its length and that the minefields lining the Wall were true catalogues of ordnance: three million mines of every brand and design. Someone told me the Wall was all that was keeping the Saharawi people from reclaiming their territory. Someone else told me it stretched for 2,700 kilometres, while another person said it was much less than that. I heard it was the longest wall in the world.

The Saharawi refugee camps lie on the eastern side of the Wall, near the city of Tindouf in the Algerian Sahara. The Algerian government granted the land to the refugees, but the Hamada du Draa is not much of a gift. The few hardy plants that survive here on the rocky limestone plateau grow armed with thorns. This land is far from imagined desert scenes. There are no sudden green oases here and no slow shift of curving dunes. Instead, there is pallor and gales that whip in winter.

Only the Saharawis themselves interrupt the paleness of the landscape. The men walk through the camps in blue or white robes that crinkle like tissue, are embroidered with gold thread, and are scented by tea and tobacco smoke. The women swaddle their bodies in colours that don’t exist in the natural desert. Bold reds. Tie-dyed blues and greens and purples. The colourful fabrics keep their skin cool and colourless. The women prize desert-pale skin. I found this vanity strange. But then again, here on the barren plain, any life at all perplexes.

Malainin Lakhel fetched me from the Protocol where foreign visitors are housed. He was tall and thin, wore glasses, and spoke in whispers that suited the vast silence of the desert where he lived. Malainin was the secretary-general of the Saharawi Journalists and Writers Union and spoke internationally at conferences about life in the refugee camps and the Saharawi struggle for independence.

Outside the peeling-paint exterior of the Protocol, the morning air remained cool, the sky sallow and overcast. Old shipping containers and wrecked cars lay on the sand. Wind moaned and tossed trash while Red Cross trucks sat idle. A half-dozen taxi drivers waited for fares inside their cars, but hardly anyone else was around. The sand blew into my eyes and burned. I tried to keep them open because it hurt less than closing them; each time I blinked, my eyelids dragged grains over my corneas and it stung.

I followed Malainin into a small shop that sold camp essentials: cooking oil, canned fish, detergent, tea, some wrinkled potatoes in a bin, and a few bolts of cotton on the counter. The cloth wraps into *lithams*, the long turbans the Saharawi men wear. “Choose a colour,” Malainin said. I opted for olive green and the shopkeeper measured out a couple of metres. Malainin draped one end of the cloth over my head, pulled it tightly over my chin, and wrapped my head with the rest. “You can pull it over your mouth when the wind blows,” he said. He bought a black *litham* for himself. “I am always losing my turbans.”

Malainin and I left the shop and escaped the wind again in Restaurant Beirut near the highway. Malainin dribbled water from a plastic jug onto my hands over a basin. The chefs were offering spaghetti, camel with rice, and chicken. We both opted for the chicken, which we ate with our hands as a television in the corner showed Al Jazeera. Malainin asked me what I wanted to do in the camps.

“I want to see the Wall,” I said.



The Moroccans built the Wall, but the story begins with the Spanish. In the late 1800s, Spain made a colony out of a bare patch of desert along the Atlantic coast south of Morocco, north of Mauritania, and west of Algeria. They dotted the coastline with trading posts and forts and called the region the Spanish Sahara. The Saharawi nomads who had driven their camels and built their tents on the land for centuries resented being annexed into a foreign protectorate. The Spanish, for their part, didn’t have the stomach for aggressive colonization, at least not in the harsh Sahara. Aside from a few half-hearted forays into the desert to quell the loudest resisters, the Spanish generally left the Saharawis alone.

In 1936, Spain’s Generalissimo Francisco Franco split the region into two territories, Río de Oro and Saguía el Hamra, and instituted full colonial rule. Even then, the Sahara hardly interested Franco until geologists found high-quality phosphate, used to make fertilizer and steel, near Bou Craa in the late 1930s. The Spanish built the city of El Aaiún near the Atlantic and linked the port to the phosphate mines with a conveyor belt nearly a hundred kilometres long.

In Hassaniyya, the Saharawi language, the word for “tent” is the same word as “family.” I stood on a hill overlooking February 27 Camp, named after the holiday that had just passed, and saw the tents rising between the houses like white sailboats on a sand sea. Abdulahe, a friend of Malainin, pointed to the tent where he was born. “You know, when I travel from here, I miss the tent,” he said. “The tent makes me feel my roots. My nation. I was born in a tent. Grew up in a tent. You know, it means a lot to me.”

Malainin had promised to arrange for me to see the Wall, but nothing happened quickly in the desert, and some days nothing happened at all. I spent much of my time in Abdulahe’s care, moving from camp to camp, tent to tent, lying on foam mattresses. I learned what I could about life on this side of the Wall before I had a chance to see the berm itself. I became a reclining witness to the camps. Abdulahe often asked me, “Marcello, are you boring?” He meant to ask if I was bored, and though I didn’t admit it, I often was. This frustrated me at first, but I soon surrendered to the camp’s rhythm of slowness. The refugees had been waiting here for three decades for something to happen. I could wait a few days. There is courage in patience, after all.

February 27 Camp has a central mosque, a women’s hospital, and a school for girls, but most of the buildings are family homes built of brick and slathered in mud stucco. Instead of digging foundations for these houses, the Saharawis lay rows of bricks directly on the sand and use stones to weigh down the flat, corrugated steel roofs lest the winds wrest them away. The homes are not meant to stand forever. The families would happily walk away from them if they were ever granted independence.

Abdulahe and I descended the hill and walked through the camp. I told him I liked the thin pipes the old men smoked, and he said he knew a *tienda* where I could buy one. Children called out “Hola” to me and demanded *caramelos*. I found it strange to hear so much Spanish in the middle of the Sahara, but as former colonists of Spain, nearly everyone can speak the language: children learn Spanish in school. Many Saharawis also study abroad in Spain and Cuba. I photographed a group of children sitting on aluminum water tanks. They cheered and waved two fingers at me in the victory sign.

We came across a group of men sitting cross-legged in front of a grid they’d drawn in the sand. They played a game with twigs and pebbles that looked something like checkers while their friends suggested strategies and applauded particularly clever moves. Long turbans enveloped their heads in grand folds I mimicked without success with my own olive green cloth. Orange sand, tossed about by the wind, got caught in the black fabric.

When Abdulahe was a boy, his parents sent him to a boarding school in Algeria’s capital. “I remember my mother telling me I was a refugee, but I never knew what that meant until I went to Algiers,” he said. “The Algerian students had money. They had sweets and toys and bicycles. The Saharawi students at the school had nothing. Not even a house to live in. When I came back to the camps in the summer, I asked my mother why the boys in Algiers had so many things that we did not have, and why they lived in houses and I lived in a tent. My mother told me, ‘It is because you are a refugee. They have a country. You do not.’”

Although Abdulahe studied law in Algiers, he never worked as a lawyer. He drove a taxi for a while in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, and worked on a fishing boat in the Atlantic. Now he worked with the camp youth. Abdulahe ran a weekly radio show and hoped to make documentary films about the life of young Saharawi refugees.

Abdulahe and I took lunch in the tent of one of his relatives. The tent was cool and spacious, with a few blankets piled in one corner and a sewing machine in another. A wire ran from a television to a solar battery outside. Two cellphones were strapped to the central tent pole, which doubled as an antenna and improved the reception. There were three young women inside, Abdulahe’s cousins. One laid a blanket for me to sit on. Another dribbled lemon-scented perfume on my head by way of greeting. The third fetched a charcoal brazier, which she fanned with a flattened milk carton, and brewed tea. Abdulahe’s mother came in, her face as round and inviting as ripe fruit. She asked me if I found the desert too hot. I replied that it was snowing in Canada and that I appreciated the heat. She pointed to the door flap of the tent where the midday light poured in and offered me a spot to sit in the sunbeam.

Abdulahe asked if I had any money to help pay for our lunch. I handed him a thousand Algerian dinars, about sixteen dollars. He passed it to his mother. The bill was the smallest I had but was, apparently, far more than we needed. In addition to the meal — lamb and squash couscous and a stack of curried camel kebabs — his mother gave me a handful of plastic jewellery and a bolt of yellow cloth imprinted with orange flowers. “Gifts for your wife,” she said.

Some of the refugees run shops and restaurants, and a few draw pay by working for the NGOs that function in the camps, but most refugees survive on aid. They receive regular rations of food and tea. Camp officials deliver water every ten days or so, less frequently during the dry summer, from faraway wells. The provisions, however, are meagre, and most refugees rely on family members working abroad in Europe, Algeria, Libya, or Cuba to wire remittance money.

Abdulahe’s uncle Mohammad joined us, and we all ate from the same platter. My hosts pushed the best morsels of lamb over to me. They filled my glass of apple Fanta before it was finished, and when I mentioned how much I liked the rich and gamey camel meat, they saved the rest of the kebabs for me.

Unlike the Wall that divides them from their homeland, nothing separates the visitor from the Saharawis. They quickly granted me their trust. Every family I visited was the same. I needed only to appear and they opened their world to me. The moment I sat, a glass of tea was placed before my knees. A pillow came for my head. Laughter was immediate. They invited me to rest, to eat, to sleep.



Salek wore a black leather jacket and carried his wallet on a chain. He had dark brown eyes and a shy smile and blushed when Malainin teased him for chasing girls. The Moroccan courts had found Salek guilty of assault, theft of state property, and distributing Polisario flags. A ten-year prison sentence waited for him on the other side of the Wall in Smara should he ever return home.

In the Western Sahara, Saharawi teenagers channel their natural tendency towards rebellion and misbehaviour into political protest. They tag public buildings with pro-Polisario graffiti and wave Saharawi flags. The Internet flickers with blurred video of Saharawi boys and girls, their faces hidden behind cloth, draping flags from power lines or spray-painting *Viva Polisario* onto buildings. They are the new foot soldiers in the battle for independence.

Two years before my visit to the camps, a nomad in the liberated zone lost track of his camel herd. One camel climbed over the berm and the rest, seventy animals in all, passively followed; intellect is not one of the camel's gifts. By some miracle, they didn't plod over any land mines. The camels passed a Moroccan army patrol and the soldiers herded them into a pen near their camp. The camels had been branded with Polisario markings and were, in a sense, spoils of war. The branding meant the soldiers could not bring the animals to market in Smara: no one would buy animals that were clearly stolen. To spite the Saharawis, the soldiers decided to starve the animals to death.

Rumours are perhaps the only things that travel fast in the desert, and soon everyone in Smara was whispering about the captured herd. Saharawis have a close relationship with camels. For centuries, camels have provided transport, meat, leather, and bone. The animal symbolizes Saharawi culture. The theft and abuse of the herd by Moroccan soldiers deeply offended their nomadic blood. Saharawis in Smara could only watch as the herd started to die off. After three months, those that remained were little more than skeletons.

Salek, seventeen years old at the time, assembled three friends for a mission of liberation. The boys watched the soldiers for a week to learn their routine. Then one night they sneaked out of Smara towards the camel pen. The boys jumped the Moroccan guardian and tied him to his chair with a length of rope they had brought with them. Salek gave the prisoner some water and placed a cloth below his head so he would be comfortable. "We told him his friends would untie him in the morning," Salek smirked. "We didn't want to hurt him."

They opened the gate. At first, the camels didn't move. The boys had to slap their haunches until the animals finally lumbered out of the pen. The boys split the camels into four groups of about a dozen. Each boy led his humped charges towards the valleys of Wad Seguria, and they agreed to meet later at a desert well they all knew. The boys reasoned that if the camels were divided, there was a chance at least some of them would remain free. A few might even cross back over the berm. Before they left, Salek took a wad of small Polisario flags out of his bag and scattered them in the pen as a final act of political mischief.

Each boy brought his camels into a different valley and set them free. Salek led his quarter herd to a spot where freak rains had washed away the berm and the land mines. He was the last to arrive at the well, and even in the darkness Salek could tell that his co-conspirators were smiling. The camels had all been freed. Exhausted, the boys slept beneath the lopsided desert stars and the reliable beauty of the Saharan sky.

The next morning, they started to return to Smara, but Salek had another idea. "Let's talk to Mustapha," he said. Mustapha, a nomad, lived in a tent near the main highway and was a reliable source of gossip. The boys wanted to know if news of their caper had spread. Mustapha invited the boys in for tea. Before the first pot of water had boiled, he said to them, "Do you remember those camels? Some Saharawis stole them from the Moroccans last night. They tied up the guard and threw Polisario flags all over. The Moroccans went crazy."

The boys grinned at each other from across the tent.

"The Moroccans know who did this," Mustapha continued. "Someone saw them. An informant. He recognized all of them. The Moroccans know all of their names and are waiting for the boys to return to Smara."

Salek and his friends knew they had no choice: they had to go over the Wall.

The boys had no water, no supplies, and no plan. Their families couldn't help them and they might never see them again. The boys only had each other, but Salek told me they were not afraid. They all knew people who had disappeared in Moroccan custody; all four would choose a land mine over a prison sentence. "Most important thing," Salek said, "is me feeling so close to my death."

It took the boys three days to reach the berm. They waited for dark before they climbed over the first wall and crossed through the strip of no man's land. The shortest boy was clumsy and slipped as his friends tried to boost him over the final barrier. Then their eyes filled with light. A soldier had heard the noise and caught them in his flashlight beam. For a moment the boys couldn't move, as if the light alone shackled them. They assumed the next light they saw would be a muzzle flash. Instead, the man turned to alert his fellow soldiers and the boys leapt over the Wall. Panic boosted them this time. They hit the sand on the other side and ran until their legs screamed. They found a nomad in a tent who led them to a Polisario military post. The next day they were delivered to the camps.

"I hate this story," Salek said. He meant he was tired of telling it. His parents still lived in Smara, and he hadn't seen them since the night he left to free the camels. "It was very important moment. To go. Go family. Go school. Everything change. Life change. Very important. I do not have the words."



After ten days in the camps, I was finally going to the Wall. By then, though, I wondered if I needed to see the berm at all. The refugees cannot see the Wall from their camps, and nothing compels them to drive out and view it. The physical structure does not matter to them as much as what the Wall represents: exclusion, the theft of their land, and the separation of families. The Wall cleaves the indivisible desert and separates a single people into those under occupation and those in exile. The berm is an unseen demon in the distance, standing between where the Saharawis live their half-lives and where they yearn to be. It doesn't matter what the Wall looks like as long as they are on the wrong side of it.

My driver remembered to stop for cigarettes, and he stopped for camel meat, which he bought out of a white van holding a butcher and two swinging carcasses. He also remembered his cigarette lighter. But he forgot to bring a functioning jack. When a tire blew out, he spent an hour digging a hole around the offending wheel to remove and replace it.

We drove to a Polisario border control post, where we picked up a soldier to act as our military escort. He wore army fatigues and plastic sandals but did not carry a gun. We stopped near some thorny bushes about three hundred metres from the berm, much closer than I'd anticipated. Malainin had sent his friend Salek to accompany me — not Salek the camel liberator, another Salek. He walked towards the Wall and waved at me to follow him. I didn't budge. "What about the land mines?" I asked.

"We are safe to walk a little further."

Many of the decades-old anti-personnel mines planted near the berm that continue to kill Saharawis and their livestock were made in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, countries that don't exist anymore because their composite states, like Kosovo, have since gained independence. It is a callous irony. I followed Salek, walking in his footsteps and staring at the ground in front of me. Salek laughed at me for being afraid. I couldn't see any mines, but I found the perforated end of a machine gun muzzle in the sand. Salek warned me not to touch it lest it was wired to explode.

Salek stopped about a hundred metres from the Wall. The Wall of Shame did not impress me. The berm stood about two metres high and was built with rocks and hard-packed sand. I expected some military majesty: towers and barbed wire and steel. Sharp edges and hardness. Instead, I saw a long hump of sand that snaked into the distance. The berm could have grown out of the *hamada* itself. It resembled a massive ripple of sand created by the desert wind. The Wall seemed more natural than sinister. Perhaps, after so long, the berm is an organic thing. Though they may dream of the sea, an entire generation of Saharawis knows no other boundary than this. The Wall has evolved from a military barrier into a symbol of Saharawi identity. The curved spine of a nation that doesn't exist.

Then again, this is all the barrier Morocco needs. Saharawi military tactics have always been based on lightning raids across open deserts. In ancient times, Saharawi soldiers rode camels; these days, Polisario troops drive jeeps. A heap of sand and rocks is enough to stop a charging Land Rover. This Wall might not inspire awe, but it does the job. Though I didn't know it at the time, this berm was the most effective barrier I would see on my travels, and the only wall that did what it claimed to do.

Through the zoom lens on my camera, I focused on two Moroccan soldiers who stood on top of the berm. Both wore drab army fatigues and were clean-shaven. One had an olive green cap on his head, the other a helmet. They smoked cigarettes and watched us. A radio stood between them in case we did anything worth reporting, and I imagined they were happy to see us. At least they had something to look at for a while besides the empty desert.

Salek and I walked back to the jeep. A small belt of rusted machine gun shells hung on a thorn bush nearby like a morbid Christmas decoration. Our driver snapped a few branches from the bush to build a fire and our soldier brewed tea. The driver hacked the camel meat apart with his knife and laid the slabs on the embers next to the teapot. Salek and I made tuna sandwiches and ate green olives while the camel roasted. We drank tea, waved away the flies attracted to the rich aroma of charring meat, and watched the Moroccans staring at us. Our driver stood and called out to them, sarcastically inviting them for tea.

Bashir told me that after independence, whenever it may come, the Saharawis will keep the Wall as a souvenir. But I wondered how quickly the desert could reclaim this land. Winter floods, like the one in 2006 that destroyed much of Smara Camp, could melt the berm away in a few seasons. Sandstorms will grind down what is left. The *hamada* will renew itself. The Saharawis will remember their history. They will remember their exile and their halved lives. But the desert will forget the Wall.



On most world maps, a dotted line marks the northern border of the Western Sahara. The territory is disputed: it is the Occupied Zone according to the Saharawi resistance and their supporters, the Southern Provinces according to the Moroccan king. On the highway, the only sign of the border was a trio of petrol stations selling cheap subsidized petrol and a tiny police post. Thousands of discarded plastic bags dotted the landscape, blowing in the wind and snagging on thorny bushes.

To get from the refugee camps to the Western Sahara required a convoluted journey and some paranoid preparation. Algeria's support for the Polisario strained relations with Morocco, and as I said goodbye to Malainin, he warned that the Moroccan authorities would deny me entry if they knew I had visited the Saharawi camps. So before I left Algeria, I sent my Sahara Marathon T-shirt, racing bib, and medal, along with a Saharawi flag I'd been given, home to Canada. I temporarily took down my blog. I also flipped through my pocket notebook and used a pen to change each appearance of *Saharawi* to *Babarawk*, a nonsense word I hoped nobody would ask me about. I considered disguising my journals, but since I could barely read my own writing, I didn't think there was much chance a Moroccan airport official could.

The land borders between Algeria and Morocco are closed — another consequence of their Western Sahara quarrel. To reach Morocco, I flew across the Mediterranean to Madrid, where I boarded a flight full of European vacationers back over the sea to Marrakech. My wife, Moonira, met me there the next day, and we spent two weeks in Morocco as tourists. With Moonira, I exchanged refugee tents for cool, clean hotels and rode camels instead of eating them. Moonira departed for home from Casablanca with a bag full of leather slippers while I made my way south, by bus, into the disputed territory of the Western Sahara.



In 1930, Michel Vieuchange, a Frenchman bored with France, became obsessed with Sheikh Ma al-Aynayn and the city he had built in the desert. Ma al-Aynayn was a nineteenth-century Saharawi warrior and Sufi sage who, along with his adherents, founded Smara in the Western Sahara. The city became both a centre of religious learning and a way station along the great caravan routes linking west Africa to Europe. Ma al-Aynayn resented the presence of Christian infidels in the Sahara, and his armies of Saharawi soldiers regularly attacked French army outposts on camelback. These guerrilla-like raids went on for years and would be echoed seven decades later in the tactics of the Polisario Front. The French eventually defeated Ma al-Aynayn's army and set fire to Smara, but the Polisario claim the Sheikh as their spiritual champion and the defender of Saharawi territory against foreign power.

Vieuchange wanted to find what remained of Ma al-Aynayn's holy capital. By the time he set out, Ma al-Aynayn was dead and the Spanish and French exercised control over the region. The Saharawi tribes, however, still posed a danger to Europeans. The Moors of the Western Sahara showed famous hostility towards foreigners, especially the hated French, and those who dared breach the sands risked both capture and murder.

The trip was agonizing for Vieuchange. For much of the voyage he disguised himself as a Berber woman — layered tunics, a suffocating veil, shaved legs — and as they neared Smara, his guides packed Vieuchange into a basket hanging from a camel. They arrived at Smara at noon on All Saints' Day in 1930. Vieuchange unpacked his camera gear and set out to photograph the city. His guides, nervous they would be caught with a French infidel in their care, allowed the explorer only three hours in Smara before stuffing him back into the camel basket. There was little left to see in Smara anyway. The city stood empty and half ruined. Vieuchange wrote in his journals: "Except for the nights when the fires light up your walls, for the days when camels, goods and men are installed on your earth, how truly deserted you are — town of desert — how often your walls know only the sun." Vieuchange's Smara was dead. Soon, too, would be Vieuchange. He died of dysentery on his way out of the desert. The last, ghastly, words in his journal were, "Stools — and stools — watery."⁶

I travelled to Smara to see what the refugees had lost and what life was like for those who resided in the disputed zone among their Moroccan occupiers. My Smara, unlike Vieuchange's, was alive, especially during the Thursday market. I walked from my hotel to the souk where I took breakfast from an egg-and-tea man in a tent at the edge of the market grounds. The vendor sat on an empty evaporated milk tin and served meals off a table made of upturned wooden crates. He cracked a cold hard-boiled egg from a metal bowl and peeled away the shell. Then he sliced open a piece of bread with a paring knife and mashed the egg and its blue-green yolk inside, sprinkling it all with cumin and salt.

The market was given over to heaps of fresh produce, a strange abundance in a desert town. There were piles of fennel, fat white radishes, eggplants, and red onions. Women shoppers picked through heaps of potatoes and muskmelons, bananas and peaches and avocados, all grown far from this place, and each knew to pluck the green tops from the onions before weighing them. One vendor splashed water on mounds of fresh mint and parsley to keep them from wilting in the heat that, by late morning, had begun to peak. A man sold flushable toilets near the gate. Young boys wandered between the stalls selling blue plastic shopping bags to those who were unequipped. Other boys pushed two-wheeled carts for big buyers. They competed with each other for customers and jammed their carts at the intersections between the market stalls. Sometimes they argued with each other; sometimes they cried.

Aside from the men in *derahs* and the uniformed soldiers, I couldn't tell the Saharawis from the Moroccans. No one knows exactly how many Saharawis live in the Western Sahara. In the disputed territory, counting is controversy. When the United Nations called for a referendum in 1992 so the Saharawis could vote on independence, census takers found themselves up against a wall of paranoia: each side blamed the other for padding the election rolls. The Polisario Front accused the Moroccans of importing dubious Saharawis into the region who they knew would vote against independence; tens of thousands were housed in a squalid camp outside El Aaiún until Morocco bulldozed the area in 2008 and resettled the settlers. Morocco charged that the Polisario exaggerated the populations of the refugee camps. The Polisario still demands that the referendum be held, and is confident their side would win, but it remains clear that Morocco will not agree to participate in a vote if there is a chance they might lose.

By late afternoon, the only fruits remaining in the market were bruised and squished. All that was left of the onions was a heap of discarded green tops. Fugitive tomatoes were mashed underfoot. There was enough work for all the cart boys as they wheeled their cargo to the parking lot, where taxis, trucks, and donkey carts waited to be loaded.

The streets became lively as the sun burned itself out for the day. On Stadium Boulevard, I passed shops selling *derahs*, *lithams*, and beautiful Moroccan caftans for women alongside everyday items such as clay braziers, tajines, and couscous screens. An old man sat and clicked his prayer beads next to sacks of spices and traditional medicines. Twice I saw beggars lay scraps of cardboard on the ground, strain their weak bodies to bend, and plead for charity. Young women, always strolling in threes with their arms linked like

Spain, like the rest of Europe, had little time left in Africa. By the 1960s, colonization had fallen out of favour and African nations were winning their independence. In 1966, the United Nations urged Franco to hold a referendum in the territory so the Saharawis could vote on sovereignty. Franco agreed, but he was in no hurry. At the same time, the Saharawis, who witnessed their neighbours in Morocco and Mauritania cast aside their colonial shackles, began to organize themselves as the Movement for the Liberation of the Sahara in 1967. The group marched in huge demonstrations that Franco brutally quashed. In one such incident, remembered by the Saharawis as the Zemla Intifada, the Spanish army fired on protesters armed only with stones. The soldiers killed eleven and wounded many others. Franco's heavy hand inspired the opposition to exchange peaceful demonstration for armed struggle. In 1973 a group of militants announced the formation of the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro: the Polisario Front.

As Franco's power and personal health begin to wane, another absolute leader, Morocco's King Hassan II, faced his own troubles. Moroccans had little faith in their "Commander of the Faithful." The king had barely caught his breath after surviving a bloody palace coup when members of his own air force attacked his private jet. Hassan escaped again, but he couldn't evade the growing anger of the populace. Moroccans rioted for bread and demonstrated for democratic reforms. Hassan needed to distract his subjects. He found an opportunity in the desert.

Armed with a dubious claim that the Sahara historically belonged to Greater Morocco, and buoyed by reports Franco was dying, Hassan marched 350,000 volunteers into the Western Sahara. The 1975 "Green March" claimed the region for Morocco, and Hassan quickly replaced his civilian marchers with Moroccan soldiers. Franco had neither the energy to resist nor anything left to lose. He defied the UN, pushed aside promises of a referendum, and signed a deathbed document dividing the Spanish Sahara territory between Morocco and Mauritania.

This outraged the Polisario. They had fought for the territory for decades and felt the Western Sahara belonged to them. In 1976, after the last Spanish troops left the region, the Polisario declared the independent state of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, the SADR, and raised the Saharawi flag. Then they went to war with both Morocco and Mauritania. After three years of fighting, the Polisario soldiers pushed the Mauriticians back to their border in the south and forced them to declare Saharawi sovereignty over the territory. Then they focused on the Moroccans. Although the Moroccan troops outgunned and vastly outnumbered the Saharawi soldiers, Polisario troops encircled and destroyed the Moroccan units one by one in daring guerrilla operations. They captured Moroccan weapons and equipment and managed to knock the phosphate conveyor belt out of service.

The Moroccans, losing the war, changed their tactics. With the help of France, Israel, and the United States, Morocco devised a new strategy based on desert walls or berms. The first wall surrounded the "useful triangle" of the Western Sahara. This barrier secured the entire Atlantic coast and the phosphate deposits at Bou Craa. Each time the Moroccans gained a swath of territory on the eastern front, they built another wall to secure it. By the time the United Nations brokered a ceasefire in 1991, six walls had been built. The walls extended eastward like ripples in a pond. Their combined length stretched to over 7,000 kilometres, longer than the Great Wall of China. The berm, apparently, can be seen from space.

Only the last wall, the longest, remains relevant. It was completed in 1987 and is still manned by Moroccan troops and watched over by UN peacekeepers. The Wall runs east-west along the border with Mauritania and north-south on the Algerian side, where it separates a narrow "Free Zone" from the rest of the Western Sahara that Morocco captured in the 1970s. Aside from Bir Lehlou, the SADR's interim capital, and another tiny settlement called Tifariti, the Free Zone is inhabited only by nomads, sand, and land mines. The berm, as the Wall is often called, is the longest and oldest still-functioning security barrier in the world. The Saharawis and their sympathizers call it the Wall of Shame.



As we picked at our chicken, Malainin told his story about going over the Wall. On the night before he left his home in El Aaiún, he and his brother, Salama, met with their father. "Be a good man," his father told Malainin. "And follow the Milky Way. In the summer it will always lead you south. Remember, too, that we are Saharawi. It is better for us to die in the desert than in a Moroccan prison." He gave his sons two hunting knives in case they needed to kill someone.

Malainin was an agitator for Saharawi independence and known to Moroccan police in El Aaiún. He endured two months in prison there in 1992 and spent the next few years collecting information on the Moroccan abuses of the Saharawi people. In response to his activism, the Moroccans arrested and interrogated Malainin many times. They imprisoned and tortured him. The situation in the region intensified in the late nineties. The mass arrests and "disappearances" of known activists forced Malainin into hiding.

By the summer of 2000, after eleven months underground, Malainin reached a breaking point. Any semblance of a normal life had been stolen from him. Malainin couldn't even visit his parents for fear of implicating them: activists stain everyone they touch with suspicion. He and his brother Salama, and another activist named Massoud, decided to escape to the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria. They would be safe there, but they would have to go over the Wall. The three men chose to cross on the Mauritanian side. They'd heard there were fewer land mines buried in the south.

When they left El Aaiún, Massoud carried a teapot and some loose black tea while Malainin and his brother held the knives. They each brought along a single bottle of water and packed their *derahs*, the long slit-sided tunic of the Saharawis. Though they were all heavy smokers — Malainin smoked three packs a day — no one brought cigarettes; the journey would be arduous and the men did not

plight. Nearly four hundred runners, mostly thin Europeans, spend the days before and after the race living with refugee families. The more people know about their cause, the race organizers reason, the harder it will be to ignore.

I didn't come to the camps ready to race in the desert; I'd only realized my visit coincided with the marathon while en route to Tindouf. My plane was crowded with white men and women in track suits — not the crowd I expected on an Algerian flight into the desert. Still, I wanted to run. I had not been a competitive athlete for nearly a decade, and never a runner, but I wanted to be able to say I ran in the Sahara. I wanted the T-shirt. I knew I didn't have the stamina for the full distance, so I signed up for the ten-kilometre race.

Because I woke late, I missed breakfast and was the last runner to press into the bus to the starting line. The other participants looked far more prepared. I had only hiking shoes to run in, and my stomach felt tight. I hadn't had anything to eat or drink since the previous night's camel couscous and apple Fanta. I couldn't even fasten my official number to my shirt. Another runner noticed this, took pity on me, and gave me a couple of safety pins.

The bus turned off the highway onto the flat desert and got mired in a patch of loose sand about two hundred metres from where we needed to be. Everyone stepped down and walked the rest of the way to a flagpole that marked the starting area. The start lines for the marathon and half-marathon stood somewhere far behind us, and those racers had already been running since before dawn. The fastest among them would eventually overtake the slowest of us. In the meantime, we waited for a starter's pistol or some indication that our race was to begin. I spotted the serious runners easily. They were invariably tall and lean and white and wore proper runner's bibs, little cloth caps, and nylon shorts cut high on their thighs. They strapped Lycra bandoliers with tiny plastic bottles around their waists. I imitated their stretches in the chilled morning air and tried to gather the nerve to ask one of them for a sip of water.

A few Saharawis were running as well, mostly teenagers in donated running shoes and loose jogging pants. The girls had scarves tied tightly around their heads. They didn't have any water either, but I watched them drink glasses of sweet tea in a nearby tent. Many of them looked as out of place amid the Europeans as I did, but for them the race was less an athletic event than an expression of existence. Morocco drew a line in the sand with the Wall. The Saharawis countered with the footprints of their youth.

An official appeared and spray-painted a crooked yellow line across the hard ground filling the air with a sudden aerosol stink. We all clustered behind the line. The real runners jostled their bony elbows near the front while the rest of us filled in behind. Someone blew a whistle and fifty runners trampled forward in the sand. The experienced athletes burst ahead in a smooth motion, their backs straight and their heels lifting little spurts of sand with each stride. The rest of us puffed along afterwards, giggling and apologizing in various languages as we collided into each other. Our initial cluster of runners divided like a cell, splitting into smaller and smaller groups, until I was trapped alongside a Saharawi girl who wouldn't let me pass her. Twice she sprinted ahead of me and each time she slowed to a walk, but as soon as I caught up she dashed off again.

Eventually I was alone. I jumped over a dry and flattened goat corpse and passed three women raking trash into piles for burning. The fragrance of smoke scented the otherwise odourless desert. The coolness of the morning melted into a thick liquid heat. February's Sahara, though, is no inferno. I'd gone for hotter jogs during Canadian summers. Blowing sand was a greater concern, but the wind was calm that day, the air dry but clean. A tall camel holding two turbaned riders in an ornamental saddle stood next to the water station at the three-kilometre mark. The men shouted "Bravo!" from their perch as a woman handed me a full two-litre bottle of tepid mineral water. Unrehearsed at drinking in motion, I ended up choking on more water than I actually swallowed and felt more embarrassed than refreshed. I grinned at the irony of nearly drowning myself in the Sahara and tossed the nearly full bottle onto the sand.

Truckloads of Saharawis rumbled up and down the route. The drivers pressed on the horns while their passengers leaned out of the windows to cheer on the runners and wave Saharawi flags. I lifted a weary hand to salute them. Once in a while I passed participants who had opted to walk, and occasionally faster runners swept past me. Most of the time, though, I had the desert to myself. Only the sound of the *hamada* under my too-heavy shoes crunched the silence. I sweated through my T-shirt. My thighs, not ready for such a morning, started to ache. My eyes stretched to the horizon over the flat sand on either side of me, and though I couldn't see it, I thought how alien the Wall must seem here in the otherwise boundless desert. How absurd that a man-made barrier striates such an expanse and renders any sense of freedom an illusion.

Near the finish line, the blanch of the desert gave way to walls of riotous colour. Hundreds of women, each wrapped in bright fabrics, flanked the final three hundred metres. Their desert saris, or *melhfes*, fluttered orange and yellow and blue. Swirls of purples. Splashes of black on green. One woman had pink pompoms on her veil. Despite the heat, many wore woven gloves to protect themselves from unwanted tans. For a few seconds, these women cheered for me. They ululated through their veils as I reached the final turn before the finish. Children held out their hands for me to touch.

I started to run faster. My eyes stung from the sweat that streamed into them. So much blood rushed to my head I could taste iron on the roof of my mouth. My knees hurt, but I sprinted the last few metres just to earn a shred of the ovation. Someone strung a souvenir medal made of recycled aluminum around my sweat-slimed neck, so light I could hardly feel it against my chest, and shouted out my official time. I couldn't hear it amid the shouts and the pulse in my head.

What started as an athletic boast became something more. Exhaustion stripped away my objectivity and replaced it with the loud spirit of the people. All I felt through my fatigue was their gratitude for my running under their flag. I was no longer the detached observer. In the middle of the desert, I was on their side of the Wall.

abandoned barricade seemed insignificant, but the effectiveness of this berm had led to the building of the rest and Morocco's eventual control of the Western Sahara. If the Walls were like ripples in a pond, this is where the pebble fell.

I turned to Nasiri. "Where are the policemen? The ones who followed us."

Nasiri looked down the empty street. "They have left."

I doubted they were ever there at all. I thought about the Berlin Wall Disease and wondered if the barrier had infected Nasiri with paranoia. I couldn't imagine why the Moroccans would be interested in me.



I spent a couple of days in El Aaiún, the capital city of the Western Sahara and Malainin's hometown. A stunning new mosque boasted carved plaster and stained glass. The mosque sat on a city square in the centre of town made of spotless tile where, on Fridays, local families laid out their evening picnics. As they sipped tea, young boys flouted the rules against playing football on the square and kicked balls around until policemen chased them away. Elsewhere in town, gleaming white UN vehicles crowded the parking lots of chic hotels: the UN peacekeeping force maintains its headquarters in El Aaiún. A new soccer stadium grew real grass — a near miracle in the desert. The wealth was inorganic, built of Moroccan subsidies and tax breaks, but manufactured prosperity is still prosperity, and the citizens enjoyed a sort of boom in El Aaiún that didn't exist in the cities of the north.

El Aaiún's Saharawi neighbourhoods boasted none of this freshness. I visited the old Saharawi district of Souq ez Zaj. The houses were falling apart and the walls marked with cracks and lesions. The Plaza del Canarias had none of the lightness and songbird whimsy the name suggested, only broken stone benches, old garbage, and a few emaciated trees. There was no one in the streets. A government information office stood in the middle of the neighbourhood, displaying victims of Polisario torture — dissidents who spoke out against the Polisario's autocratic rule in the 1980s. The men and women in the posters had blotched red bodies and broken faces with black bars over their eyes. The photos were designed to persuade the local Saharawis that the Polisario is no saviour and that they are better off as Moroccans.

I remembered Mohammad's daughter, Ama, who'd never seen El Aaiún but was sure the place was *zeina*. Lovely. She envisioned an ocean full of fish and rain falling from the sky. Real houses instead of tents. In the imagination of a refugee, any place on the other side of the Wall, wherever it is, must be beautiful.



I travelled to Tarfaya to meet Sadat, the great-grandson of Sheik Ma al-Aynayn. (The Sheik had no shortage of descendants. Though he had only four wives, historians claim he fathered 68 children with 26 different women.) Tarfaya is a tiny fishing village on the Atlantic Coast. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the French pilot and author of *The Little Prince*, lived here in the 1930s. A small museum dedicated to Saint-Exupéry and the Compagnie Générale Aéropostale he flew for stands near the beach. Tarfaya is just north of the dotted-line border of the Western Sahara and far from the Wall, but the town is important to the Saharawi story. Building materials for Ma al-Aynayn's Smara arrived at Tarfaya from the Canary Islands. Donald Mackenzie, the nineteenth-century Scottish trader who introduced tea to the Saharawis, built a trading fort here just off the talcum-soft beach. More recently, the Green March of 1975 assembled in Tarfaya before heading south and claiming the Western Sahara for Morocco.

Sadat was thirty years old and the youngest of twelve children, all of whom attended university and have become politicians, judges, and community leaders. He worked out of an office at Saint-Exupéry's museum as Tarfaya's cultural officer. Sadat's aim was to preserve Saharawi arts and traditions in the face of "Moroccanization," but he was not otherwise concerned with politics.

He told me about a friend who, after graduating from university, decided to go to the camps and join the Polisario cause. As soon as he arrived, he was jailed and tortured by Polisario troops who didn't trust his intentions and accused him of spying for Morocco. After his release at the 1991 ceasefire, the Polisario gave him a rifle and sent him to the front lines. The man fled the camps a year later and returned to Morocco; he travelled through Mauritania, not backwards over the Wall. Now he was living in El Aaiún. "The Polisario can claim no moral high ground," Sadat said. "Both sides have committed abuses."

Despite sharing the bloodline of Sheik Ma al-Aynayn, Sadat was no warrior for Saharawi independence. "It is time for the Polisario to stop talking about the mere idea of independence and start talking about the practicalities," he said. He mentioned a recent document by Peter Van Walsum, a UN envoy charged with overseeing talks between the Polisario and Morocco, who said that since there is no international pressure on Morocco to give up the territory, "an independent Western Sahara was not a realistic proposition."

"This has been a great blow for the cause of independence," Sadat said, although he agreed with the realism of the statement. He believed the best the Saharawi people can hope for now is some sort of limited autonomy within the Moroccan state. They should focus on keeping their culture alive, not on illusions of sovereignty, he said.

"But what about the refugees?" I asked. "They've been fighting for independence for more than thirty years. Some have given up everything for the cause. What would you say to them?"

"I would tell them to come here."



There would be bread in the morning. Sterilized milk from a box. A can of berry jam. I too started to associate “tent” with “family.” I knew, though, that their generosity was born of tradition rather than abundance. For the Saharawis, hosting visitors is an indigenous ritual. In the harsh desert, after all, an offered meal or glass of tea can mean the difference between living and dying.

After we ate, Abdulahe, Mohammad, and I stretched out on the blankets. One of Mohammad’s daughters, Ama, brewed more tea in the corner. She held a blue teapot at arm’s length and splattered tea into a tiny glass. Then she flicked open the teapot lid and poured the tea back into the pot with a deft twist of her wrist. Ama did this over and over again, and the glasses grew sticky from the splashing sweetness. The sounds — the spatter of the pour, the clicking teapot lid, the glasses against the metal tray — scored the desert afternoon.

Mohammad had fought against the Moroccans as a Polisario soldier in the 1970s when the war was most fierce. He once scaled the berm in the middle of the night to attack Moroccan soldiers sleeping on the other side. “I took two prisoners myself that night,” he said. Eventually he too fled to the camps, but he’d been back to El Aaiún recently. After the 1991 ceasefire, the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the Western Sahara began flying Saharawis to and from the camps in an effort to build faith between Morocco and the Polisario. Mohammad visited his brother in El Aaiún. It was the first time they had seen each other since Mohammad fled to the camps thirty years earlier. I asked him about their reunion, but Mohammad wanted to talk about El Aaiún itself. “The old Saharawi neighbourhoods are crumbling,” he told me. The only new homes belong to Moroccans from northern cities such as Marrakech and Fès. The Moroccan government lures these settlers to the Western Sahara with tax breaks and high wages in an effort to populate the disputed territories with non-Saharawis. He slid a glass of tea to me on a metal tray. “The Moroccans care only about the resources. They do not want to build a new Sahara.”

I asked Mohammad about an offer the Moroccan government had made to give Saharawis limited autonomy in the Western Sahara rather than independence — an offer the Polisario had rejected. “I was seventeen years old when I came to the camps.” He sat up and tugged on his sideburns. “Now I have grey hair. I would rather die here than accept integration into Morocco.”

Ama was born in the camps. Now in her early twenties, she’d never seen the land her father fought for. “What do you think the Western Sahara is like?” I asked her.

She flicked the teapot lid closed, smiled, and turned her eyes upwards. “El Aaiún is very pretty. There are real streets and buildings. Lots of cars. The ocean is nearby, and it is a huge distance filled with water. You can swim in it, and there are fish. And it can rain there for days.”



In the Saharawi tradition, tea is a trinity. The tea ceremony embraces three holy essentials, each beginning with the Arabic letter jim. *Jama’a* is the gathering. To drink tea alone is to waste it. *J’jar* means slowness. Proper tea cannot be brewed in haste. *Jmar* is the charcoal. Tea demands burning and boiling.

Abdulahe and I were at someone’s house — I don’t know whose — in Auserd Camp with Kamal and a cast of Abdulahe’s relatives, who came in and out of the room at random. A considerable *jama’a*. Kamal splashed a stream of hot tea into a row of glasses. He told me how you could once buy a camel for a cup of dry tea leaves. Then he told me about Damaha, his mother, who had joined us in the tent. Damaha fought the Moroccans long before they built the Wall. She marched with the protesters in Tan-Tan who agitated against the Spanish in the years before the Green March. Damaha had little education, but the Polisario leaders tutored and inspired her towards resistance. By the time the Moroccans replaced the Spanish as the region’s occupiers in 1975, Damaha had given birth to Kamal and divorced her husband. Her home became a Polisario safe house where Damaha hosted activists to discuss strategy and raise money. “Everybody gave what they could,” Damaha told me. “I knew a woman who stole her husband’s revolver to give to the soldiers.”

One morning, in the winter of 1978, Damaha was hosting a monthly committee meeting in her home. An out-of-breath Polisario official rapped on the door. “There will be a battle today. Our soldiers are ready to attack Tan-Tan. Be ready to assist the men with whatever they need.” At midday, the Polisario soldiers attacked Moroccan army positions. They held the town for four hours and released Saharawi prisoners from the jails. Soon, though, the Moroccan troops started to regain control of the town. In the early afternoon, three Land Rovers drove up to Damaha’s house and a group of Polisario soldiers rushed out. They were frantic. “It is no longer safe here. We are collecting all the activists and bringing them to the refugee camps.”

Damaha had always known this day would come; Saharawi activists in the Western Sahara may cling to hope but not to illusions. She already had a bag packed. Young Kamal, though, was not home. He had gone to play with his cousin that morning and had not returned. There was no time to look for him. She said a brief prayer that Kamal would find his way to his father’s house, boarded one of the Land Rovers, and escaped to the camps. Almost a year passed before Damaha heard that Kamal was alive and safe. October 14 — the date hangs at the front of her memory. Twenty more years went by before Damaha actually saw her son again. They reunited in the camps in 2001.

I tried to ask her how she could leave her child behind in a city at war, but Abdulahe wouldn’t translate the question for me. “You cannot ask her that,” he said. “She is a mother.”

Hamid, Abdulahe’s uncle, had a similar story. He was born in Smara during the early days of the war. His grandmother cared for

demure chorus girls, whispered as they walked. Two men selling cigarettes pegged me as a foreigner and called out, “Viva la Saharawi!”

Across Hassan II Avenue, the paved street yielded to gravel and the banal housewares gave way to flesh. Here, a strip of butcher shops lined up under crimson awnings. Great slabs of meat glistened under bright lights and the air felt cool with the metallic stench of blood. Skinned testicles hung from the carcasses to reassure buyers that the meat was male: Islam prohibits eating animals that are still nursing their young, so some Arabs eat only male animals to be safe. It was a lurid scene, all red lights and rawness.

I thought of the other Smara, across a minefield, over the Wall, and five hundred desert kilometres away from this place. I thought of the frustrated gardeners I’d met who tried to wrestle a few tomatoes out of the useless sand. I remembered the bins of wrinkled potatoes and the skinny sheep in makeshift pens. The camel carcasses hanging in minivans. I thought of the solar panels that offered each family a day’s brevity of electric light. Compared with its namesake camp across the Wall, Smara is Eden. I understood why some would rather endure occupation than live in squalor on the other side of the Wall. And I understood why the refugees, after thirty years of courageous patience, still breathe Smara’s name in reverent tones. A generation may well live and die in the camps without ever seeing this place, but they will still fight as long as the stories of Smara’s relative abundance drift eastward over the Wall.



The next day, I phoned a man named Nasiri whose number had been given to me by a Polisario representative in Washington. Nasiri met me at my hotel. He was short, bald, and slight, and when he shook my hand and realized how little French I spoke, he called someone else on his cellphone who could translate for us. We took a taxi to his house on the eastern edge of Smara. My translator, a twenty-year-old Saharawi named Omar, arrived at Nasiri’s house just as we did. We went up the stairs into Nasiri’s red-curtained salon and he immediately began to brew tea. I returned to the mechanics of Saharawi hospitality I’d enjoyed in the camps. The same tea ritual. The same bottles of apple Fanta. Only Nasiri had a proper house with running water and electric light.

Nasiri said little that I hadn’t heard before. The Wall symbolized the struggle for Saharawis living in the Western Sahara as much as it did for the refugees, and the Saharawis had the same faith in the Polisario Front, at least those who spoke to me. “If the Polisario says *intifada*, then we start *intifada*,” Nasiri said. “If they say open war, then we go to war.”

“Mustapha Bashir told me that the war will begin in less than a year,” I said.

Nasiri paused to raise his eyebrows. Then, in a quieter voice, he said, “If this is what the Polisario says, then we will do it.”

Nasiri told me that the Moroccan government in the Western Sahara imports great numbers of settlers from the north in an effort to reduce the percentage of Saharawis in the region and replace Saharawi traditions with Moroccan culture. I mused that this sounded similar to the scenario with the Israeli settlers in the West Bank. He frowned just as Bashir had when I mentioned Kosovo. The Saharawis do not like being compared to the Palestinians, who’ve fought for sixty years and seem no closer to having an independent state. Nasiri would rather equate the Saharawi situation with the East Timorese in southeast Asia. At least they finished their marathon to sovereignty.

Nasiri’s wife served us a huge slab of mutton for lunch. His daughter, four years old with a riot of curly hair, came and nibbled off her father’s plate. Midway through the meal someone knocked on the door and Nasiri rose to check who it was. When he returned, he sat back on the floor and said, “That was my friend. He said there are three policemen on the street. The Moroccans know you are here.”

I stopped eating, a greasy pinch of mutton frozen in front of my mouth. “Are you serious?”

“The Moroccans do not want foreigners meeting with activists.”

“If that’s true, why didn’t they stop me from coming in here? Why don’t they knock on the door right now and bring me out?”

Nasiri laughed. “Maybe they will.” Nasiri doubted they would do anything, however. Since things were relatively calm in the occupied zone, the police likely wouldn’t bother with me. But if it were a sensitive time — if demonstrations had just been held, or if there were negotiations ongoing with the Polisario — the Moroccans would have stopped me from meeting with Nasiri. They might not have let me enter the city at all. “Right now, they are on the street because they want me to know they are watching,” Nasiri said.

“Should I be worried?”

“They will do nothing to you. I am more concerned about him.” He nodded towards Omar.

Omar was not an activist. He was a university freshman studying English literature. When Nasiri had called Omar, he told him to go into the house before we arrived. That way, if the police were following Nasiri and me, they wouldn’t know that Omar joined us. But Omar arrived late. We all entered the house at the same time, and the Moroccans might have seen all three of us together. Because Omar met with us, especially with me, officials might start monitoring him. Omar told me he wanted to be a translator and would enrol in a translation academy when he finished his degree, but if the Moroccan government thought he was in league with the Saharawi resistance, they could make things very difficult for him.

“You could get into trouble,” I said. “You could have refused to translate for me. Nasiri would understand. And so would I.”

Omar shrugged. “I could not morally say no.”

After our interview, Nasiri walked me down the stairs and out of his house. He pointed to the horizon. “There is the Wall.” I squinted and saw a tiny brown ridge in the distance. This was the first of the six walls the Moroccans built in the 1980s. The

want to be weighed down by anything inessential.

The men hired a smuggler to drive them within twenty kilometres of the berm. They would walk the rest of the way to the border, wait for dark, then take their chances crossing the minefield to climb the Wall. They planned to reach Nouadhibou, a city on the Mauritanian coast, before noon the following day. They could rest with friends there before making their way across the Algerian border and into the camps.

Malainin knew they could cover the twenty-kilometre distance in a little more than four hours. After five hours, though, they still had not reached the berm, and after eight hours they knew something was wrong. But they kept walking. The cadence of the men's footfalls on the sand and their turban-softened breath added the only sound to the silent desert. The sun set and replaced the day's swelter with a cool and clear desert night. Glancing upwards, the men followed the Milky Way south just as their father had instructed, but by the time the sun rose they still hadn't reached the Wall. They plodded forward through the morning into the heat of midday. Sweat dried into ragged rings of salt on their clothes. In spite of the scorch of the August desert, the men never drank their water. "We are Saharawi," Malainin said. "We save our water for tea."

The men would learn later that their smuggler was a poor judge of distance. He had dropped them over a hundred kilometres from the berm, and it wasn't until the evening of the second day that they spotted the barrier on the horizon. They had intended to save the tea until they crossed over the Wall; it was to be a sort of toast to their success. But reaching the Wall after their 36-hour march granted reason enough to rejoice. They hid behind a rock, squatted with aching legs, and brewed tea on a tiny, discreet fire.

The three men sat until night fell, waiting for the Moroccan army patrol truck to drive past. The truck dragged a sweeper behind it to erase its own tracks and make visible those of any jumpers. Once the truck had passed them, the men stood to cross the minefield and unwrapped their turbans. Each man held on to an end of the cloth so they were a turban's length apart — about three metres from end to end. If there was a problem, they could communicate by tugging on the fabric. And if one of them stepped on a mine, they reasoned, the other two would be far enough away to survive the blast. They moved forward knowing that this desert, which was their birthright, the very sand the Saharawis had struggled for, could erupt into sulphurous flame beneath their thin sandals. They had no path to follow. No way to be cautious. No way to be certain of their footfalls. They could only hold their breath and walk towards the Wall. They were not afraid, Malainin told me, because in that moment there was nothing else they could do.

When they were a few metres from the Wall, half of a soldier's face flashed into view in the spark of orange light from his cigarette lighter. The men froze. Then, linked by strips of black cotton and a dark resolve, Malainin and Salama quietly slid the knives from their sheaths. The brothers stepped quickly across the sand. There was no moonlight to glint off the blades and betray them. Ahead of them, somewhere in the blackness, the soldier continued to smoke. Better to die in the desert than in a Moroccan prison. Better to kill in the desert than to die at the Wall.

Malainin is a poet. He writes verses about jasmine buds, doves, and blushing, bleeding hearts:

She came to me with memories of the feel of sand
Of her beauty when we made the desert our bed.
Do you remember the colour of my eyes when the moon is full?
Do you remember the poems
You sang for our parting on those sleepless nights?⁴

I couldn't imagine Malainin a murderer. Nor could I imagine the Moroccan prison cell where he was forced to stand for two days before being beaten and tortured with electric shocks for eighteen days more. I asked him if he really had been ready to kill.

"I was ready to walk across a minefield," he said.

By the time the men reached the spot where they had seen the lighter flash, the soldier had moved along in the darkness. The lingering scent of cigarette was too faint to follow. "We were both lucky," Malainin told me. "We didn't have to kill anyone, and he didn't have to die."

The first part of the berm is a metre-high sand wall lined with flat rocks designed to stop vehicles rather than people. The three men scrambled over it easily, but their sandals scratched against the stones as they climbed and Malainin feared the noise would alert the soldier. They paused and gripped the knives again, but no one came. They sprinted across a half-kilometre of no man's land until they reached a second wall, this one about three metres high. Once over this wall, they kept moving until they reached the railroad that links Mauritania's iron ore mines in the north to the port at Nouadhibou. They sat on the side of the tracks, put on their *derahs*, and brewed tea again, this time in true celebration.

After they drank their tea, the men found a transport truck mired in soft sand on the other side of a hill. The driver offered to take them to Nouadhibou if they helped him. The men spent two days unloading the truck, digging it out of the sand, and reloading it again. When they reached Nouadhibou, Malainin and his brother gave the driver the knives. "We didn't need them anymore," he told me.



Malainin and I took a taxi to Smara Camp, one of the six refugee camps on the *hamada*. Our driver clacked a cassette tape into the

stereo, but the sound warbled and whined. He ejected the tape and banged it against the steering wheel a few times. When he stuffed it back in, a quartet of British-accented voices sang a weepy country song:

Oh, I don't know why she's leaving,
Or where she's gonna go,
I guess she's got her reasons,
But I just don't want to know,
'Cause for twenty-four years
I've been living next door to Alice.

I turned to Malainin in the back seat. "What is this?"

"You don't know? It is Smokie. They are from England. You don't like them? They are very good."

"It's not what I expected," I said.

Twenty-four years just waiting for a chance,
To tell her how I feel, and maybe get a second glance,
Now I've got to get used to not living next door to Alice.⁵

"The Saharawi love Smokie," Malainin said.

The main refugee camps are named after the towns in the Western Sahara where every refugee still has family living under Moroccan occupation. The naming is a kind of longing, the expression of an ache for home. Smara Camp was named after a town just a few kilometres west of the first wall Morocco built in the 1980s.

It was February 27, a holiday marking the date in 1976 when the Polisario declared the founding of the SADR. We arrived just before the parade began. Refugees marched on the highway as wind and sand blotted out the sky. Retired freedom fighters in blue *derahs* and black turbans held flags and marshalled the procession, but most of the marchers were children. Some young soccer players wore green and white jerseys and kicked a ball around. Plastic bats rested on the shoulders of young baseball players. I found the American pastime out of place here in the desert until someone informed me the equipment came from Cuban donors: Fidel Castro is an occasional supporter of the Polisario. The young players waved gloved hands at my camera, but I received no smiles from the female Koranic students who toted wooden planks covered in holy verses or from the women in traditional black and white dresses swinging small scythes in the air. Saharawi flags hung from the saddles on tall camels. Young girls trooped past in green camouflage fatigues and backpacks made to look like army transmitters. The boys carried rocket launchers and artillery shells fashioned out of cardboard. They sang patriotic songs and marched in place, as if rehearsing for a future, inevitable war.

I ducked in and out of a nearby community centre to rinse the dust out of my contact lenses and considered the rumours I'd heard about these camps. I read the Polisario held refugees here against their will and that some Saharawis practise slavery. While I saw no proof of these things, I knew that in the darkest days of the war the Polisario detained and tortured dissident refugees who spoke out against the Polisario's autocratic rule. Many refugees fled the abuses by crossing back over the Wall. The tortures ended in the 1990s after the camp security chief and main perpetrator of the abuses, Omar Hadrami, was sacked. He defected to Morocco and today enjoys a high position in the Moroccan interior ministry.

I'd heard another rumour that Algerian militants aligned with al Qaeda recruited suicidal foot soldiers from among the men in the camps. Malainin dismissed these claims as Moroccan propaganda meant to discredit the Polisario and all they had built here. He told me that the Saharawi people are disinclined to join militant religious groups because, as former nomads, they are used to praying alone. Until recently, there were no imams in the camps at all.

After the parade, Malainin showed me the traditional mosques: half-circle lines of stones, only two strides wide, that lay in the sand near the highway. The circles always curve east and there is always a small heap of stones midway along the arc. Since there is no water nearby, the devout use loose sand to perform their ablutions. They rub the sand over their hands and face and feet as a surrogate ritual wash. Then they step into the circle one penitent at a time and bend their prayers eastward; the piled stones are cairns that point in the direction of Mecca.

I've seen some of the grand mosques of the Islamic world. Istanbul's Süleymaniye Mosque and the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Iran's Sheikh Lotfallah Mosque and the shrine of Imam Reza. They stand as architectural treasures, some scented with rosewater and adorned with tiles and mosaics and gold. They speak to the artistic beauty that faith inspires, with prayer halls that hold multitudes. But no majestic mosques marked the Saharan caravan trails. No communities of believers and no Friday congregations. For the Saharawis, religion is divine intimacy. They don't need domed ceilings adorned with mosaics to inspire them; they have the Saharan sky. The Saharawis can touch God from within a simple curve of stones.



him during the day because his parents worked out of town. One evening, his parents returned home to a bombed city and an empty house. Hamid, who was eight months old at the time, was gone. So was his grandmother. His mother ran to her neighbour to see if he knew anything. "The Moroccans bombed the city today," he said. "The Polisario came to evacuate civilians. Your mother left with Hamid in a Polisario truck. They went to the camps." Twelve years went by before Hamid's mother received news that her son was alive. Twenty-six years passed before she saw him again.

In 2005, Hamid's mother arrived in a car filled with women who had come from the Western Sahara to visit their families in the camps. Hamid bent down and peered into the taxi window. He couldn't tell which of the women was his mother. Hamid said he wasn't nervous about their reunion, but when his mother hugged him, they both cried. She held on to him for most of the day and slept beside him that night. "She wanted me to feel like I was her son," he said. They stayed together for a month before his mother returned to Smara. "After so many years, she was just another woman to me."

I wanted to understand his typically Saharawi dispassion. I was tempted to attribute his stoicism to faith, the Muslim trust in the will of God. Who are we to question the life Allah grants us? But Hamid gave me another answer: there is always someone with a more tragic story. For every mother who has been separated from her son, there is a story of a son killed. For every man arrested, another disappears. The men and women who escape today have camps to shelter them, but a generation ago the displaced had to build the camps from nothing. Dwelling on your own misery dishonours those who have suffered more. "Mine is just one more story in the body of the Sahara," Hamid said.

Damaha and Kamal left the house just before lunch arrived. Abdulahe, Hamid, and I sat upright long enough to eat a large platter of stewed camel meat then lolled again on the thin foam mats that lined the room. Hamid's three daughters joined us for another round of tea. They were bright-eyed and pretty, their faces surprisingly freckled.

"What will you do to help the Saharawis?" Nabba, the oldest, bluntly asked.

I didn't know what to say. I told her I wasn't an activist, but I would write about their situation so people in North America might know what was happening here. My answer was embarrassing. It felt feeble and idealistic, but Nabba nodded and pointed a finger at me. "Write about the right things," she said. "Write about the reality of the camps. Even though food is plentiful and we are not starving here, we will never forget our aim. Remember, we are the last colony in Africa."

The sisters, and Abdulahe, are part of the first generation of Saharawis born in the camps. They are in their twenties now, and a second generation of refugees will be born in the next few years. The children might be sent to school in Europe. They will experience life outside the camps. I wondered if the idea of an independent Western Sahara, a place they may never see, will become an abstraction.

"We will teach them," Nabba said. "Our children will know who they are." Her eyes flashed when she spoke. For the first time, I saw the resolve the Moroccans had failed to tame. Instead, they enclosed it behind the Wall.



Mustapha Said Bashir, a tall bear of a man, wore a ratty brown sweater that might've been inside out. Bashir was the brother of martyred Polisario fighter and national hero El-Ouali, the Saharawi Che Guevara, and the Polisario's deputy secretary-general. El-Ouali's portrait hung above Bashir's desk. I sat on a plastic-wrapped chair in his tidy office while he talked about the Wall.

"The entire Moroccan army is reliant on the berm," he said. Bashir spoke surprisingly good English. "The berm is their only strength. Without it, they could not resist our troops. Their courage depends on it. After their king, the berm means everything to the Moroccans."

"Do you really believe that the Polisario could defeat the Moroccan military?" I asked. "They have a huge army. They have modern equipment. And allies in Europe."

"We have done it before." He told me about the Polisario's arsenal of military hardware, mostly French- and American-made guns that Polisario guerrillas captured from Moroccan troops during the 1970s and 1980s. Bashir believed the decades-old weapons were all the Polisario needed.

I mentioned Kosovo to Bashir. He frowned, closed his eyes, and exhaled. The United States and most European powers were just then lining up to endorse Kosovo's declaration of independence and welcome the tiny Balkan republic into the community of sovereign states. Kosovo's path to self-determination took less than a year, while it had been forty-two years since the United Nations first called for a referendum on the future of the Sahara. The referendum has still not been held.

"International law is in the refrigerator," Bashir said. "We live in a lawless era." He believed the ceasefire would not hold for much longer, and that only armed conflict would earn the world's attention. "Frustration is gaining everyone. There will be a return to war."

"When?"

"Soon. In less than one year."



The organizers of the Sahara Marathon first conceived the event to encourage physical activity among the camps' children and to use the entry fees to fund sports-related projects. More than this, though, the annual race alerts an international audience to the Saharawi

Saleh runs the ugliest café in Tarfaya. Torn plastic and filthy blue mats scarred with cigarette burns covered each of the four tables. The cracked plastic chairs had been white in the distant past. Peeling, pastel green paint covered the walls, and a few bare bulbs, furred by cobwebs and dust, hung from the ceiling. Flies hummed everywhere and all his tea glasses were chipped. I suspected Saleh never cleaned anything, but he proved me wrong one afternoon when I saw him wipe each tabletop with the edge of a cloth he licked.

Saleh's was the kind of place you love *for* its shabbiness, not in spite of it. And you loved it for Saleh himself. Sadat told me that Saleh fought for France in World War II, but the French forgot about him. Saleh had a grimace for a smile, a pepper-grinder voice, and a face like something you could win at a carnival by tossing balls at milk bottles. His white hair curled like lamb's wool. Saleh dragged his feet when he walked, which raised the dust on the floor, but he brewed the best mint tea in town.

I walked to Saleh's café for tea one afternoon, but he waved me away from the door. When I returned to the café with Sadat later that evening, he asked Saleh why he hadn't let me in. The old man was aghast. "I thought he was looking for you!" he said to Sadat, his hands held before him in a gesture of innocence. "When I shook my head, I meant that you were not here! I didn't know he wanted tea. He never said anything! I would have served him. Of course! All he had to do was ask. Even if he did this . . ." Saleh mimed drinking from a tea glass. "He can come in any time. He just has to ask!" He walked behind the counter, shaking his head.

Saleh returned with two cigarettes for Sadat and faced me. "Even if you don't drink anything, you can come here! You can sit for five hours! Six hours! Read a book — anything. You are at home here. Life is good." He pointed upwards, and for a moment I thought he was pointing out the peeling paint, the cobwebs, and the dusty light bulb, but he referred to something beyond the ceiling. "God is everywhere! God is taking care of us!"

When he returned to deliver our tea, Saleh held my glass in front of me. "What is this called in French?" he asked.

"Thé," I said.

"That's all you had to say! One word! I thought you were looking for Sadat! You didn't say anything." He walked away again.

"He is going to be talking about this all week," Sadat said.



The next night, Sadat found me eating grilled sardines on Tarfaya's main street. "I got some calls today," he said. "You are the centre of attention here. Let's go somewhere quiet." He brought me back to Saleh's. The old man wore a pink sweater over a dingy white collared shirt. He served us mint tea and cigarettes.

"Three different Moroccan security people called me to ask about you," Sadat said. "They have been following you and want to know what you are doing here. I told them you were a student, and if the king wants to boost tourism in this country, he should leave the tourists alone."

I sat back in my chair. Sadat took a drag of his cigarette. I noticed he was missing part of a finger on one hand. I hadn't seen this before.

"Then they told me that you met with a well-known activist in El Aaiún," Sadat said. He mentioned a man's name.

"I didn't meet anyone in El Aaiún. And I don't know who that is."

"Okay. So they were lying. They were trying to trick me. They do this."

"I met with an activist in Smara last week. Not in El Aaiún. His name was Nasiri."

"I know Nasiri. That is probably why they are following you."

"They followed me all the way from Smara?"

"Yes. This is what they do."

"Do they know I am a writer?"

"Probably not. But don't worry. This happens all the time. A thousand times. This is what you should do. The police know your hotel. They were waiting there for you today."

"They were at my hotel?"

"Yes. So tomorrow morning check out of the hotel and come stay at my place. I have an extra room. No one will bother you there. You can stay as long as you like, and . . ."

I stopped listening to Sadat and focused on the strange tightness that was growing in my chest. I imagined uniformed men in Smara, El Aaiún, and Tarfaya calling each other with my name on papers in front of them. Flipping through ledger books at police posts to see where I'd been and when. Knowing my hotel and my itinerary and the people with whom I'd spoken.

I thought of the Sahara Marathon and how my name appeared on a long list of runners who had trampled the sands in support of a cause. I remembered breathing hard and flashing victory signs and feeling I was a part of something. But in the occupied zone I found a different sort of solidarity. My name was scrawled into a less innocent ledger. I'd crossed over another kind of wall, the one that divides the watcher from those being watched. I didn't feel afraid. The worst the Moroccans could do was deport me. But I felt small. Too small for this place.

The next night, I boarded a bus heading north. I told Sadat I'd spent enough time in the Western Sahara, I'd learned enough, and there were other walls I needed to write about. As the bus pulled away, I felt like a fugitive making a getaway in the darkness.

The Bogeyman is Coming

Ceuta and Melilla

The Africans at the Wall don't speak the same language, but tonight they share a common belief: if we are many, they cannot stop us all.

They camped for weeks in the forest. They prayed for rainless nights and ate what they found in Moroccan rubbish bins. They hacked footholds out of thick tree branches to make crude ladders. Now they wrap their hands with torn fabric to protect themselves against the barbed wire and wait under the half moon until their cellphones ring the signal. Then a surge of five hundred bodies crashes into the Wall, but it is too dark to see their faces through the security cameras. The bravest lead the assault. They lean their ladders against the chain links and begin to climb. Others scramble up behind them. Soon, men in uniforms appear on both sides of the Wall — Moroccan here, Spanish there — with flashing lights and the sweet stink of tear gas. The night goes medieval. Soldiers tear Africans from the wire while the climbers kick and claw. The chain link shakes and rattles. Sweat-glazed skin gleams under floodlights. A rubber bullet the size of a tangerine rips a toe from one man's foot. There is a Babel of screams: Arabic, Wolof, Hausa, Spanish. And there are gunshots. The noise drowns out an infant's cries. Women and children climb the Wall here too. Everyone dreams of Europe.

When the melee ends, tattered clothes snagged on the razor wire flap in the breeze coming off the sea. A man hangs by his neck. There are five bodies in all: two on the Spanish side of the Wall, three in Morocco. They most likely fell from the top of the Wall and were crushed in the stampede, but later there is talk of Moroccan bullets in the corpses. Some say a baby was one of the dead. Nobody knows exactly what happened. And nobody knows how many made it over. Two hundred, some guess. Probably more. The Spanish government calls in the army. The police take the ladders home as souvenirs.



One might blame Hercules. For his tenth labour, the mythic hero travelled to the edge of the world to steal oxen from Geryon, the three-headed grandson of Medusa. When Hercules reached the mountain that divided the Atlantic Ocean from the Mediterranean, he chose to smash through it rather than climb over. The seismic grandstanding let the ocean spill into the sea and forever divided Europe from Africa.

Half of the demolished mountain stands as Gibraltar. The other "Pillar of Hercules" rises on Ceuta, a narrow strip of land that dangles off Morocco's Mediterranean shore. Ceuta and its sister enclave Melilla represent the last remaining Spanish possessions in North Africa. They are strange geopolitical anomalies — each an Iberian fragment of Catholic cathedrals, midday siestas, and *arte modernista* surrounded by Muslim Morocco. As Spanish cities, Ceuta and Melilla also define the southernmost reaches of the European Union. Their city limits are Europe's borders. The enclaves, then, attract illegal migrants from as far away as south Asia. Scaling the fences into these Spanish colonial souvenirs means reaching Europe without risking a Herculean sea voyage across the Mediterranean.

I first saw the Wall from the Moroccan side, in Beni Yunis, a tiny seaside village where pastel houses hang off the forested slopes like Christmas tree ornaments. I arrived early in the morning. The Mediterranean draped fog on the hills while a few quiet men sipped tea, smoked *kif*, and read the morning paper in the lone café. After a tea I walked past purple thistle and wandering goats towards the army barracks with the motto "God. Country. King." written above the door. The Wall stood beyond the barracks, but an off-duty policeman stopped me before I got too close. The man welcomed me to Beni Yunis and wanted to talk. "All this belongs to Morocco," he said, pointing at the houses at the other side of the Wall, in Spain. "It should be returned to us. The Spanish oppose the occupation of Gibraltar by the British, yet they occupy Ceuta."

I asked if African migrants still camped in the forests near the Wall. "Not since September 2005," he said, referring to the night the Africans stormed the barrier. "The army went in and cleared everyone out." He pressed his wrists together to mime handcuffs. Spain also re fortified the Wall. What was a double fence became a triple barrier, and it doubled in height from three metres to six. Fat coils of concertina wire were laid along the foot of the Wall and additional barbed wire was strung along the top. Automated tear gas dispensers were planned but not yet installed.

From a distance, though, the Wall looked delicate. It reminded me of the silver filigree I'd seen in jewellers' souks elsewhere in Morocco. Something a bride might wear around her neck on her wedding day. Instead, it is Europe's iron collar. A ten-kilometre choker of barbed wire and steel.