



## Holidaze

It is starting to get cold here. Once again, the trees flame with gold that rains down on the barren fields whenever the wind sweeps down the valley. I can see my breath most mornings, and know that the shower of leaves will soon be replaced with spiraling snowflakes. Images flash in my mind's eye of the time I have spent here; I see the folded mountain above the village striped with fresh snow, I see men and boys huddled around the café woodstoves, pulling their woolen robes tighter about them. I see the haze of woodsmoke from countless fires, settled low against the valley floor in the early mornings that shine with silver frost. Winter is coming once again, and I suppose that it is better this year to have an idea of what is in store, rather than simply facing the unknown as I did last year at this time.

Today, the third of November, marks twenty months from my arrival here in Morocco. Everything is on repeat now, no season will take me by surprise, and many of my friends have already begun to fret over my imminent departure at the end of April, which draws ever closer. Returning this past week from a two-week trip to London, I asked my friends if they had missed me. They said yes, but that it was okay if I traveled because they knew I was coming back. One of my friends, my best friend "Haddou", said that it was okay "until my final trip"; the one that I would not be returning from. We didn't talk for a few minutes after that. The forging of strong friendships, born of strangeness and isolation, only to be forced to abandon them at the end of our term, is just another of the hallmark difficulties that comes with Peace Corps service. Like most other trials here, it is best ignored until it is absolutely necessary. For now, I find preparing for my second winter is a welcome distraction.



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I have cleaned my house top to bottom, everything has a place now that isn't a pile, and I continually check to make sure the woodstove and butane heaters are in good working order. My store of firewood will be purchased from a friend of mine next week and I will borrow a chainsaw from another friend so I can cut it all down to size. Although I have a very nice hand-forged axe, there is no place near my house that I am able to split the six-hundred kilos of rounds that I have lined up. The roof has lots of space, but is in imminent danger of cracking from the shock. Rooftop chainsawing is acceptable though, and I can guarantee you that I am the only government certified sawyer in the valley...

Once winter sets in, be it next week or next month, my house seems to shrink down to two rooms; the kitchen and the study. The living room, so pleasant in the summer, gathers dust and cobwebs, and my bedroom is sealed like a walk-in freezer. My kitchen stays warm when I cook, and many of my winter days are spent listening to the hiss of the pressure cooker and smelling the wonderful aroma of baking bread. I sleep in my study near the stove, on a small foam mattress across from my desk and surrounded by my books; lots of reading and writing to do in the next few months. My initial goal for Peace Corps reading was one-hundred books, and I have twenty-six left to read.

(My complete reading list is posted on my blogsite---the address of which is provided at the end of this dispatch---if you are curious.)



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Growing up at 7500 feet in Southwest Colorado, I have always enjoyed wintertime. I love the crisp bite of the air in late autumn, the endless acres of bone-white Aspens, and the spindrifts of snow swirling off the summits of the La Plata Mountains against the azure winter sky. Each year, as the holidays grew closer, my parents' house would be filled with light, laughter, and music. I remember fondly the smell of turkey and pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving, or the heady aroma of baking gingerbread at Christmas. My father would always make a large pan of it for the family, and serve it with a steaming lemon glaze ladled over the top from the copper-bottom saucepan. The tree would sit in the same corner as it had every year previous, and the house would be filled with the cool scent of spruce. Sometimes as a small boy, I would sit next to the tree just before bed, and watch the shimmering, fractured light which played on the living room walls.

In my family, each tree ornament has a memory of a specific Christmas. Some of them I had made as a child, such as the wooden-lathe star on top of the tree I remembered weaving years ago as part of an art class, while still others had been made by my parents when they were children. Some were made by my brother, and the rest were received as gifts from friends and relatives.

Taken together, the tree is a history of our family. Presents were always well thought-out and well received and my brother and I spent many sleepless Christmas Eve nights lying awake staring at the ceiling, while our parents rummaged about downstairs playing at being Santa Claus.

Many years, many memories, and, though this is may give away just how young I am, never before have I spent a Christmas away from my family and home in the Rockies. Standing on the train platform in Rabat one night last month, my heart leapt when I saw a building above the tracks illuminated with spotlights of red and green. Is it decorated for Christmas? I wondered for a moment, before remembering that red and green are the national colors of Morocco.

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Decorated for Christmas or not, it's the holiday season once again, which is an intensely strange time of year here in North Africa. Never before in my life have I lived in a place where Thanksgiving and Christmas are completely unheard of. Expecting my friends here to remember western holidays is like expecting them to remember my birthday; there's just no reason for them to know. At the same time I have to make it a point of remembering the holidays on the Islamic calendar, which all move 10 days back each year. Ramadan, with its feasts before and after, and the Night of Power, when the entire Koran is read from start to finish; there is also the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, and of course L'id Khbir.

This year, L'id Khbir is a scant four days away at the time of my writing. It the great feast of Abraham and arguably the largest holiday of the year, with travel being well nigh impossible for a week before and after. It lasts for three days, and begins the first morning with the ritual slaughter of a fatted ram. Just yesterday my host family offered to let me make the cut myself; this an incredible honor, as the carotid artery, jugular vein, and trachea all must be severed in one strike, so as not to taint the meat with blood. I politely declined, commenting that I would be ashamed to do something so sacred while not being a practicing Muslim. My family just smiled, and I think I may have gained more favor in refusing than I would have by accepting.

The ram will be butchered after the killing cut is made, and my immediate host family (as well as my extended host family) will feast on the meat for three days of celebration and fellowship. Last year at this time I found myself growing homesick as I saw relatives embrace and exchange excited greetings; some had not seen each other for a year or more. I sat in the corner of the salon next to the crackling stove, and listened to rapid-fire conversations in a language I could not understand. But despite my linguistic ignorance, I was treated with respect and love as if I were a family member long lost, who was just now being welcomed back into the fold.

I am excited for this year's feast, though I am a now a vegetarian and cannot participate in the intense carnivory. I look forward to being able to speak the language and participate in the conversation. I will get to be a part of the family stories, and will be able to contribute to the ribald jokes that will be bandied about by the men in one room while the women cook in the other. It is a rich experience to say the least, but I am not sure how much it will soften the blow when Christmas comes and goes unnoticed. Someone who works in the tourist business may make an offhand comment to me in the week following or preceding Christmas day, but I don't anticipate more than that... at least from locals.

Peace Corps volunteers are each other's best means of support at any time of year, and we ensure that no one has to celebrate the holidays alone. I attended a Halloween party a few days ago in Er-Rachidia, down on the edge of the Sahara. I was surrounded by friends, old and new, in a room full of wood-nymphs and mermaids, galaxies and gym rats, party-animals and zombies. I am now juggling Thanksgiving invitations, to see which makes the most sense to attend. It's a difficult decision, as nearly all volunteers are incredible cooks, but I think I will go south to the city of Tinjdad, drawn by the promise of made-from-scratch pumpkin pie. As for Christmas, I want to celebrate it quietly in my village.

Up here I have the best chance of a white Christmas, and a bag of decorations left me by a previous volunteer will serve to make the house festive. I purchased a tin of Christmas biscuits and a Christmas pudding while I was in

the UK last month, and hope to serve them to a few close friends on Christmas morning, as the snow falls outside. As for the tree, I have a blank space of wall in my living room and a variety of paints. Maybe, just maybe, as I put the final touches on the wooden-lathe star on the top-most bough, it will start to feel like Christmas over here on the other side of the world.

As my service begins to wind down, and the end draws ever nearer, I realize how amazing this experience has been and all of the things I have learned. Christmas in the Atlas is yet another link in the chain, and I am sure it will be a merry one.

Happy Holidays!  
Charlie

*"The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views or opinions of the U.S. Government"*

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The Zephyr looks forward to sharing-regular reports from Charlie. You can also follow him via his blogs:

<http://charlieofmorocco.blogspot.com>  
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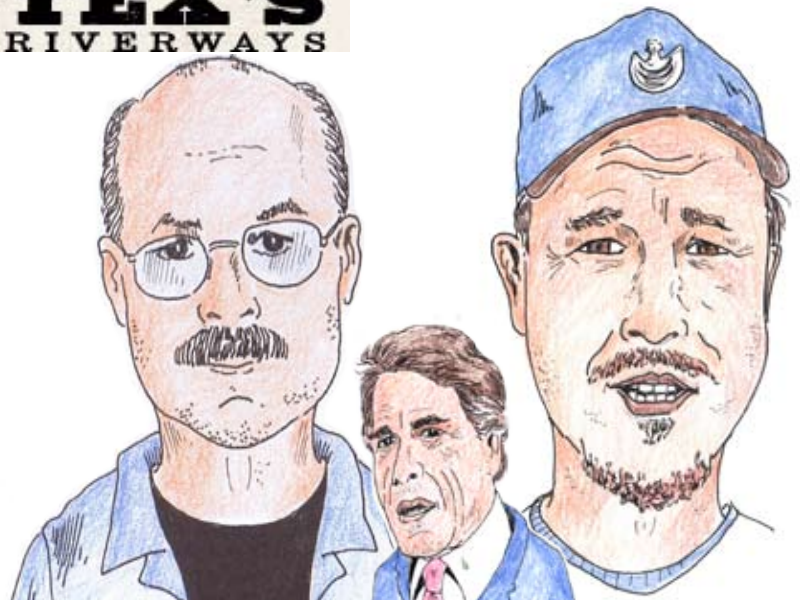


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