

# ‘AZIZ’ by Charlie Kolb

## (continued)

through Said, I was told that Aziz was the ideal candidate for a prosthetic hand. There were a variety of options, but all were expensive; even with the doctor being willing to work for free, this would require a grant of some kind. Though the doctor said he was willing to start work right away, I asked him to hold off while I researched the funding possibilities.

Aziz was ecstatic on the ride back to Er-Rachidia, but I was more subdued; I knew how much work I had ahead of me, and I knew how easily everything could come crashing down around my ears, sliding away like sand through my fingers. That night, I sat on the front steps of the apartment building where we were staying with my friends Marcus and Dipesh, looking up at the stars. I thought of the impossible responsibility and fragility of the task ahead, and how much was riding on it. I remembered what Aziz’ father had said to me a few weeks before as we sat at a café table back in the village “I know that this may not happen. But if you do this for my son, the whole valley will be happy.” The door opened behind me and Aziz sat down on the steps as well. “Hassan, I know this may not work out, but I want you to know that either way, we’ll still have a party in my village to celebrate.” I sat there in silence, not knowing what to say.

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*Aziz, me, and Said in the Auberge in Merzouga*

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Peace Corps grants are tricky. They come in a variety of forms, but all are clear that they should be used only for a “sustainable” project, that benefits the community rather than the individual. What I was trying to do for Aziz, was not a Peace Corps project by the standard definition. It would change only one life, rather than many. In my estimation, this was still entirely worthwhile; I came here with the hope that if I could change one life, help even just one person, my time here in North Africa would have been worth it. But how was I going to do it?

I researched on my own for awhile, making phone calls to various Peace Corps staff members trying to work things out. Finally, we found what we were looking for, a much needed loophole; one that could make many small scale projects that don’t fit Peace Corps guidelines a reality. It was so simple, I was at first wary of its legality. Although I wasn’t allowed to raise the money on my own, privately or through grants, there was no reason that an association could not do it on Aziz’ behalf. In essence: If I never touched the money, I wasn’t raising it. I racked my brain, trying to think of a Moroccan association willing to accept donations for a project like this. When I put the question to the Peace Corps staff on the other end of the phone, they replied slowly:

“You misunderstood; when I said ‘any association’ I meant any association.”

“So, means any non-profit back in the states?”

“Yes!”

“How about a church?”

“Sounds fine to me.”

I immediately sent an email to Christ the King Lutheran Church, back home in Durango, Colorado. I told Aziz’ story, and what I had been able to do so far. Their reply was brief, and very positive. The tagline of the email? “Let’s give the boy a hand”

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Summer crept by, and I watched as my friends back home, faculty from my college (Fort Lewis), and colleagues from my work with the parks donated to Aziz’ cause. Ramadan came and went in a blaze of dehydration and delirium and I soon found my hands full with the Wedding Festival in Imilchil in mid-September. The nights lengthened and grew colder; the days began to be filled with the crisp, golden light of another Atlas Autumn. Finally, I got an email. We had reached, and overshot, our original goal on 9/11, the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks in New York which planted the bitter seed of distrust and hatred of Muslims in many Americans. Aziz is muslim, and this fact had been emphasized passionately by my old friend, Kip Stransky, during that service. He explained that on that day, of all days, we should remember to love those who are different from us and to extend our love and goodwill even to those that society tells us we should despise. After all, isn’t that what Jesus would do?

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The leaves had been swept from the poplars by the river by the bitter winter wind, by the time the doctor informed me he had finished. We set a date for mid-December, and again I found myself sitting with Aziz as we waited for the transit. The morning was pale with frost and the people followed the weak sunlight from café to café as it slowly moved from one side of the street to the other. The first snow of the year glistened on the mountains high above and I was just beginning to warm up when the transit arrived.

In the days that followed, Aziz and I made our way to the Northeast corner of Morocco. We stayed with friends of mine the whole way; they were very generous to take us in, and I thank them for it. Errachidia was the first stop, then ten hours by bus across the Saharan plain to Oujda, a rest in the beautifully forested village of Tafelghalt, and finally to Nador, a city perched on the shores of the Mediterranean. It was a journey of firsts for Aziz, and he marveled at things that I too often take for granted. Here are a few highlights: Stoplights exist to regulate traffic, ice can be used to cool drinks, occasionally the water that comes out of the tap is hot, just because the nice man tried to sell you something doesn’t make it legal, and so on and so forth. It was quite an experience for him, and for me as well, as I got a fresh look at my own life (which



I long considered to be mundane and rather normal) through the Aziz’ eyes. We stayed in a hotel, for which the doctor had kindly paid the bill, and walked along the seashore for awhile which was another first for Aziz.

My friend Socorra, who had been in Morocco as long as I, joined us in Tafelghalt and accompanied us to Nador to help out with translation. She was proving an invaluable source of support to both Aziz and me, as Aziz was not always on his best behavior, so two pairs of eyes were better than one. He started calling us ‘Mom and Dad’ which I found rather appropriate as we always seemed to be hollering at him about various things. In the space of two minutes I had informed him, much to his chagrin, that, no, he couldn’t ride the pony that we passed and Socorra then had to pull him out of traffic. So yes, ‘Mom and Dad’.

After our walk, we took him to McDonalds, (yes, there’s one here too) a



place I avoided like the plague in the states but rather enjoyed in the Moroccan setting. To Aziz it was a veritable 'cave of wonders', with well dressed people forming orderly lines to place their orders, music playing quietly from invisible speakers, and a non-fluctuating room temperature. I can empathize with him of course, as central heating now makes me patently uncomfortable (do people *really* need their houses so warm!?). Socorra and I chatted in English, blessed English, as Aziz tried to figure out what to do with his cheeseburger and McFlurry. He enjoyed it of course, but not nearly as much as the two rounds of bumper cars I paid for at a traveling carnival on the way back to the hotel.

By the time the doctor arrived the next morning, I had few remaining fingernails after biting most of them to the quick. We exchanged our greetings in the hotel lobby and proceeded up to the room. The new hand was a wonder, a delicate sheath of life-like plastic skin fitting over a carbon-fiber frame. Aziz was dumbstruck by how real it looked. He told me he had never seen anything like this; to be honest, neither had I and I told him so. The hand was adjusted to fit right there in the room and, after an hour or so, it was on Aziz wrist and he was running around giving everyone high fives. The doctor was grinning ear to ear, as was Socorra who had been an amazing translator. I smiled cautiously, not believing it was done. But as I looked at Aziz' face, I saw ecstasy; so different was he from the tired and downcast boy I had met on the road nearly a year before, that I could scarcely believe them the same person. We had done it, he and I, a little project that could have died at anytime was kept alive by a veritable chain of friends and advisors. This wasn't my doing, as the doctor insisted to Aziz, I just had the pleasure of being the facilitator—a catalyst for change. But after all, isn't that what Peace Corps is all about?

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As the rain slowly dies down and daylight begins to fade from the hotel courtyard, I shut off my computer and sit in the dark quiet, listening to the drops of water falling from the drooping leaves of the palms. I think of all that I have seen in the past 22 months here. I think of the four months I have remaining in Morocco, and wonder what challenges and opportunities they hold for me. But most of all, I think of Aziz and smile.

*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:

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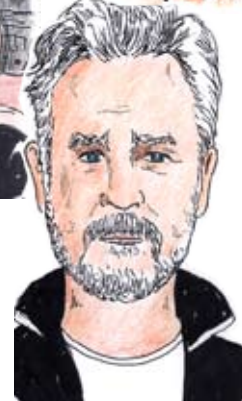


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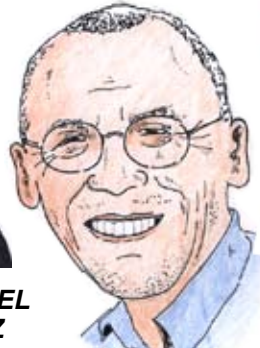
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