



Giving Aziz a Hand...

Rain falls softly from a slate grey sky, and drips slowly from the drooping tips of the palm leaves that dominate the view from my hotel window here in Rabat. Birds sing unseen, sheltering from the rain, and people rush across the courtyard beneath my window. The rain today is a slow, gentle fall, almost a mist, and smells of the nearby sea. It's quiet, for the city, though the call to prayer drifts in on the breeze every few hours. It's a good day to just sit and write; a good day to read and think. This I do, for a time, but my thoughts seem to turn where they have tended to over the past few months; they turn to a 17 year old boy in my village named Aziz Atmani.

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I met Aziz in the early spring of last year while I was on a walk from the nearby lake, accompanying Molly's dad and stepmom back to the village. I remember the day very well, it was clear and cool, and from the top of the volcanic sill above Lake Tis-lit, we watched as a pale gold of the spring sunlight painted a startling array of swirling colors across the flatlands between the two lakes. Mark and Molly had gone back another way and I agreed to take the parents back; following the road below a neighboring village, and crossing the fields back to my house.

It was late in the day by then, and the slanting light cast long shadows on *Tissekt Tamda*, the mountain that looms over my village. The children were walking home from school in clusters of three or four and greeted me loudly and raucously, laughing at my accent when I replied. All save one.

I didn't see the boy until he was at my side, he said nothing and looked at the ground. He was small and thin, dwarfed by a massive wool coat that was several sizes too big for him; still looking at the ground, he greeted me in a whisper. When I replied, he finally looked up at me. He had the look of the *Amazigh* that live in the deep mountains; slanting almond eyes, high cheekbones, and brown hair. He said his name was Aziz. I was at a loss as to why he had approached me, most kids just greet me and run off howling with laughter; and yet he lingered. I asked what he wanted, and the resulting string of Tam was even more confusing. One word kept popping up, however; *afous*, or hand. I looked over at him, belatedly noticing that one sleeve of his overcoat hung dark and empty. He had no left hand, and he was asking me what I could do about it.

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I flushed and said I didn't know anything about prosthetics, that I was an environment volunteer and that wasn't my area of expertise. He looked unsurprised, and slowly walked away. By this time, Molly's family had walked off ahead and I was left alone in the fading light, watching Aziz' back retreat down

the road, every movement giving off an air of defeat. "*Blati!*" (wait), I said as I trotted to catch him. I put a hand on his shoulder and looked at him again before saying "I don't know anything about what you're asking, but I will research it; that's all I can promise." For the first time, he smiled.

A few weeks later, I had him into my house to take a couple pictures of him and what was left of his hand; as well as getting a clear view of what had happened that had caused him to lose it. He told me slowly and haltingly, and I had to ask him to repeat much of it before I got an idea of the story:

There had been an accident, two years before, when Aziz was just fifteen. Like any fifteen year old boy, he loved playing with fire, regardless of the consequences. I flushed, recalling several close calls I had had with bottle rockets around the same time in my life. Aziz, it transpired, was an avid watcher of NBC action, a channel where they play old, American action movies over and over, without ever once saying that they are *fictional* (this is important). One

day, after watching a movie, Aziz decided to make a pipe-bomb. He took a length of metal tubing and stuffed it with industrial-grade *fertilizer* (widely available and loosely regulated in a country whose primary natural resource is phosphates). The only problem now, was a fuse... for which he used a *match*.

You can all guess, as I did, what happened next. The makeshift explosive detonated before he could throw it, leaving his hand a charred ruin. What little remained was amputated at the hospital in Er-Rachidia. I could only imagine the pain and horror of that four hour ambulance ride; the smell of burned flesh, the screaming. Yet he told it to me so matter-of-factly, he had had two years to come to terms with what had happened; what had shattered his life forever. He had gone from whole and normal, to broken and outcast in a matter of seconds. A few snapshots and he stood up, we had gone quiet after his story, but he broke the silence and said "*shukran*" (thank you). Then he took my hand, kissed it once, and ran out the door into the darkness of the street.

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Four months later, after several meetings and innumerable emails and phone calls, Aziz and I waited side by side for a midday transit. It was mid-July by then, and the leaves of the poplars shivered in the warm breeze. The mountains were lit up by the flat, hot light of the summer afternoon,

and people hid from the sun in cafés; beneath awnings or sometimes even an umbrella. A month or so before, Hakim, my contact in Rabat, had put me in touch with a prosthetics specialist who lived and practiced in the Spanish enclave-city of Melilla, on the northern coast. He had taken an interest in Aziz'

case, and was on vacation in our area. Our destination was Merzouga, where we would meet the doctor on the fringe of the Saharan Erg, a dune sea. But first we would spend the night in Er-Rachidia, which Aziz had not returned to since the accident.

The transit arrived in short order and we watched as the miles of silent mountainsides and deep canyons slid by our window. A taxi from Er-Rich completed this leg of the journey, and soon we were sitting together at my favorite café, drinking sweet coffee and enjoying the shade provided by the towering eucalyptus trees in the back garden. My friends, Driss and Said, both joined us and Aziz looked back and forth between us as we spoke in English. I explained to him that one of them would be our translator tomorrow, to enable me to speak with the Doctor, who spoke Spanish, French, and Moroccan Arabic—no Tamazight. The entire process hung on what he would tell us the next day, and it would be then when he would tell us whether or not Aziz was even eligible for a new hand.

Said agreed to join us the next day and the rest of the evening was spent introducing Aziz to other volunteers who were in the area. He also had the opportunity to try his first pizza, which he thoroughly enjoyed. We went to bed exhausted, and met Said the next morning at the taxi stand. The morning sunlight was already hot on my back as we crammed into the taxi bound for the city of Erfoud, considered by some to be the gateway to the northern Sahara. I ended up buying out the additional seats in another taxi who said he knew where the *Auberge* was that the doctor had referred us to. Before long we were powering across the Saharan *Hamada*, rock-plain, and watching as the heat roiled off the scorched landscape of blackened rock in shimmering, viscous waves. Soon, the sparkling sea of dunes rose from the rippling horizon, their gigantic reality seeming a fevered mirage in the midday heat.



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Merzouga itself was not much of a town, the center being a cluster of one-room shops and small hotels, half-swallowed by the eternally encroaching sands. Sun-darkened men in indigo *jelaba* robes and a few tired looking camels watched as we drove around trying to find our destination. The *auberges* were scattered along the edge of the erg itself, and the shining red-gold dunes loomed over everything as we searched. After a time, we pulled up to a low, earthen building half-buried by the shifting sands. My throat was dry, and sweat rolled down my back as I stepped out into the sunlight and knocked on the front door.

I was greeted by a rather suspicious Moroccan man, who turned out to be the owner, demanding what my business was asking after one of his guests. I looked sideways at Said and asked him to translate for me. "Tell the Spanish doctor that the American is here to see him, and be fast about it." Shooting me a glare, the proprietor vanished into the dark interior leaving us to stand in the heat, which had climbed to nearly 115°F. After a while, a tall gray-haired man came striding up the hall toward us, with the proprietor trailing behind him sullenly. I had never been more relieved to see anybody in my life.

Aziz was measured and evaluated in the doctor's sweltering hotel room, and a cast was made of his damaged wrist and forearm. Speaking with the doctor

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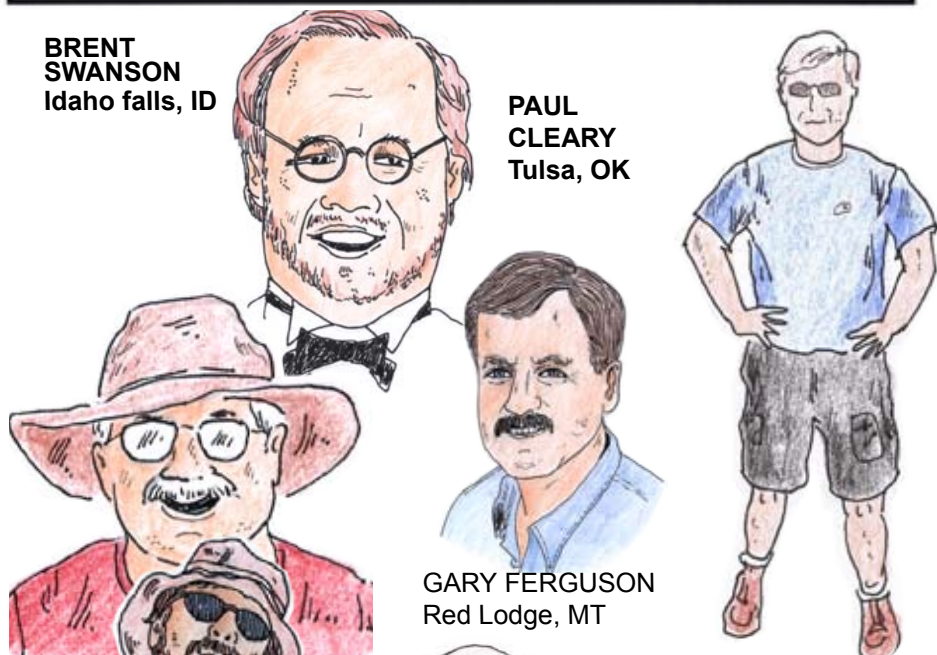


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