

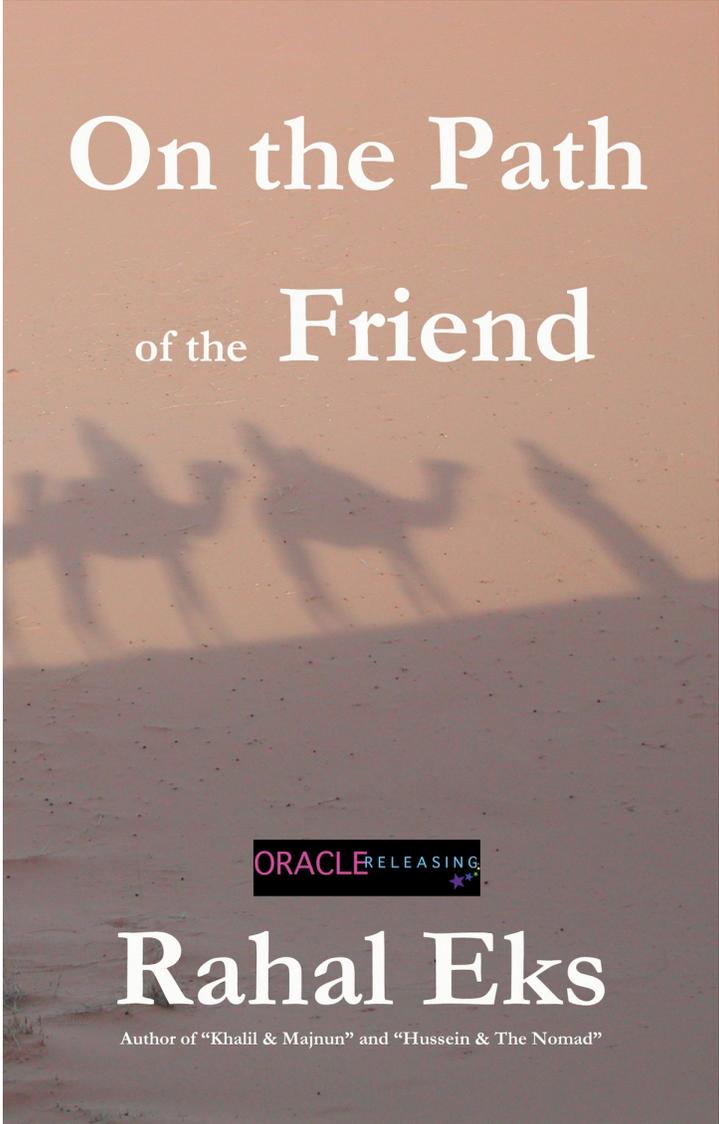
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On the Path
of the Friend

ORACLE RELEASING
★

Rahal Eks

Author of "Khalil & Majnun" and "Hussein & The Nomad"

Unpublished Material

The material in this publication is from the Rahal Eks memoir, *On the Path of the Friend*, a memoir on his life in the Sufi Tradition.

For more, purchase a copy of the book available at:

<http://rahaleks.com/store/>

THE SPY IN TUNISIA

I was traumatized by my Moroccan experience and having to leave my lover Hussein behind. His image waving good-bye to me at the Marrakesh airport stayed with me the entire flight across North Africa to Tunis. I was convinced I would never set foot on Moroccan soil. The recent nightmares had just been a bit too much. Therefore it felt somewhat easy to let go of my Marrakesh fantasy, but I definitely was not able to let go of Hussein, hoping he would soon be able to join me in my next ‘promised land’. Right away – like a good filmmaker – I projected new fantasies onto an imaginary screen. Before setting foot on Tunisian ground I was already idealizing the country and its people. I was in love with an idea, an ideal idea of Moorish delights in different drag: a more Mediterranean version, lighter and friendlier.

“Please remain seated until the plane has come to a standstill,” a female voice announced over the speakers in Arabic and French.

My heart was beating fast with excitement. I was traveling on a one-way ticket, somehow convinced that there was no life beyond Tunisia and things just had to work out. Going through customs and the passport control was fast and in no time I stepped outside the airport building with my luggage. It was a bright sunny day. In the air there was a slight smell of the Mediterranean. Waves of joy and relieve went through my entire being. I could have kissed the ground out of gratitude. Instead I screened the crowd who was waiting for arriving people. Supposedly someone was going to pick me up – a friend of a Tunisian friend – but I had no clue how he looked. All I knew was his name: Ali.

“Are you Rahal, coming from Marrakesh?” A very straight looking older man asked me.

“Yes, I am. Are you Ali?”

He smiled. Then he embraced and kissed me as if we were best friends since eternity.

“*Marhaba, bienvenue!*”

Ali took one of my suitcases and we went to the parking lot where his friend was waiting in a car.

“This is Mohamed,” said Ali. “He will rent you a small house in the *medina*.”

Mohamed was a slightly heavy, gray-haired man with a bright smile on his face. He jumped out of the car to embrace and kiss me in the same welcoming manner Ali had done. Before we entered our destination, the *medina* of Tunis, I was given a tour around town.

“My wife has prepared couscous,” said Mohamed. “I’m sure you are hungry. So let’s eat something in my house and then we will bring you to your new home.”

“Thank you, that is very kind.”

Over a late lunch or an early dinner, depending how one wanted to look at it, we signed the rental contract and then I was brought to my new *medina* home.

“Tomorrow Ali and I can help you if you want to buy things for the house,” said Mohamed.

“Great. Let’s meet in the morning if that suits you both.”

Mohamed and Ali were really nice and so helpful. Mohamed worked in an office in a government ministry and Ali in a neighborhood post office. They had both kindly taken time off work to help me. The local Arabic was of course something I had to get used to it.

After one week, I received a note that my shipment with paintings and other personal belongings had arrived at the airport. Excited I went there to get them. The custom’s officer opened each box and everything was pulled out.

“What about all these paintings?” he asked.

“Well, they are mine. I painted them. You can see my signature on each picture. I want to decorate the house I’m renting with my artwork. Is there any problem?”

“Yes, there is a problem,” he said. “We don’t know if the value of these paintings is 1 \$ or 1.000000 \$.”

“But I’m not intending to pay customs on my own artwork! This is crazy. After all I’m not importing any Picasso’s.”

“Are you a resident in Tunis?”

“I just got here a week ago. If I like it I will apply for my residence permit, if not, I’ll take my paintings and everything and will move on.”

“I’m sorry, but you need an Import Permission. Go to the Ministry of Commerce.”

Like a beaten dog I returned to the city and went to see Ali. The idea of dealing alone with any bureaucracy was not to my liking.

“It is too late to go to the Ministry today,” said Ali. “But I will come with you tomorrow morning.”

“*Alf shukur*, a thousand thanks!”

I decided to take the rest of the day off and explore the city. That was always one of my favorite times in new places. Aimlessly I strolled through the small Medina of Tunis with its colorful *souk* section. There were no false guides bothering anyone and people were very mellow. Tunis had a feminine vibe to itself, soft. From the old part of town I slowly made my way to the modern part, cruising along the downtown area in search for a friendly café. Soon I found one at a street corner with chairs and tables. But everything was occupied and I headed towards one of the entrances.

“*Andak nar?*” asked a young man at a table not far from the entrance door.

I lit his cigarette. He thanked me politely and I continued my way. But a huge man who looked like a bodyguard with a mean look on his face blocked the door.

“We don’t want your kind in this café,” he said with great authority.

What on earth was he talking about?

“*Pardon, monsieur*, you don’t even know me. I’ve never been here before. What is your problem?”

“I know your kind,” he said. “You don’t enter this café!”

“You’re crazy,” I said and left.

I checked out another café. There I was not bothered by anyone and the waiter was friendly. But this incident didn’t leave me in peace. I couldn’t take a ‘no’ for an answer by this blown up Tunisian *macho* creep and just in order to prove a point to myself I returned to the former café. This time I managed to enter through another door. Before I could order anything the *macho* creep spotted me and came running to my table and forced me out into the street. He was very rude and finally it dawned upon me that he was plagued by acute homophobia.

I explored other parts of town and observed that the guys who in Morocco or in Dubai would be flirting were rather low key in this place, if not to say timid. In spite of the modern flair of Tunis the climate felt a little conservative as far as queer life was concerned and I wondered why? I noticed the difference compared to my experiences in other parts of the Arab world. Hopefully soon Hussein would arrive from Marrakesh. I missed him so much.

The Ministry trip turned out to be nightmarish. Ali and I had to wait forever in a most depressing waiting room. The news concerning the ‘import’ of my paintings sounded rather complicated.

“The Goethe Institute is around the corner,” said Ali to me. “Perhaps the German cultural center might have an idea or be of help.”

We went and were attended by Rosa, a lovely Latin-American lady working there and with whom I could talk in Spanish.

“*Las leyes aduaneras de este país son bastante problemático y confuso*,” she said, “the customs laws of this country are rather problematic and confused.

Rosa’s German boss was on a holiday, but she advised me to go to an art opening that same evening and hopefully meet Abdullah, a Tunisian painter and gallery owner.

“*Muchisimas gracias*, I will come!”

On the way back to my place Ali stopped at a little shoe repair shop to greet a distant relative, a young man who was working there. He was perhaps nineteen years old and trying hard to grow a long beard.

“Miloud, this is Rahal, an artist friend I’m helping. He came recently from Morocco,” said Ali.

“*Marhaba*,” said Miloud.

While talking to us Miloud kept working, repairing an old shoe.

“Nice to meet you.”

“You are an artist? What do you do?”

“I’m a painter.”

“Painting is *haram*, forbidden in Islam,” said Miloud with great authority as if he were the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo.

“It is not forbidden in Islam,” I countered. “What is forbidden is to create idols and worship them. But art is something else than primitive idol-worship.”

I didn’t like the look of Miloud, nor the way he spoke. He sounded like a hardcore fanatical extremist with fossilized ideas of the wrong type. Ali tried to defuse things by telling Miloud about my travels and having studied in Europe. It made things worse.

“It would have been better for you to have grown up in an Islamic country instead of the land of the unbelievers.”

This was too much. His oozing ignorance and prejudice against anything outside of his cultural sphere made me angry and for the first time in my life I defended my adoptive parents.

“They are not unbelievers and they treated me very well and let me study.”

“All Non-Muslims go to hell!” grunted Miloud in a hateful way.

“Watch out that you are not going to hell,” I thundered back. “I know of quite a few zigzag Muslims who do as many evil things as other people from different religions or no religions. Your attitude sucks.”

Ali tried to calm down the scene, but I had enough of this young fundamentalist who was probably conditioned by Saudi Arabian Wahhabism or the Salafist variation or both.

“I think it is better to go. I have no desire to speak to hateful and narrow-minded people like this.”

Ali said good-bye to his distant relative and we went on our way. He was a softy, not taking a stand, trying to excuse Miloud’s stupid attitudes by his young age.

“Miloud is hanging out with the wrong crowd, with those who are arrogantly convinced that they are the only true believers, but their fossilized interpretation of Islam is truly dangerous,” I said.

Ali kept silent. He seemed to dislike arguments and discussions. He came across as a person who avoids confrontation, the soft-boiled-egg-type who assimilate no matter where and what. I thought it was a most scary attitude and thanked the Lord for being the way I turned out with clear likes and dislikes: I was spicy, I could bark, and when required I could easily defend definite positions!

In the evening I went on my own to the art opening. The exhibition consisted of paintings by a Kurdish artist who lived in Germany. I liked it. The foreign community of Tunis was present and of course Tunisians. All were 'cultured' people, heavily engaged in small talk. It made me feel like an alien who by accident had descended from outer space.

Finally Rosa showed up and went with me through the crowd to look for Abdullah.

"He is not here," she said. "But I'm sure he will come later."

That very moment a man entered the room. He looked like the Arab twin brother of Fernand Legros, the notorious art dealer who sold fakes to Americans. Abdullah had the same mustache, beard and long hair as Fernand. Rosa introduced us and Abdullah and I hit it off like a house on fire. He was delightful and only after three words by him it was clear that he was an artist. Abdullah felt like family to me, even though he seemed being a man in his early sixties. He was still very handsome and in spirit more like a lively and creative boy.

"Come tomorrow afternoon to visit me at my gallery."

He handed me his card and explained the way.

"Merci! I'll see you tomorrow."

Armed with my portfolio I set out by bus the next day to find Abdullah's gallery. It was quite far from where I lived, but I had no trouble finding it. Abdullah had built the house himself. The lower part was the gallery; in the upper part his private living quarters. The house was surrounded by a garden with a terrace. I really liked his work. Abdullah was the incarnation of an Arab avant-garde artist. Needless to say he was a misfit and the black sheep of the local cultural scene. Perhaps because of having this misfit thing in common we became friends right then and there. Abdullah also liked my work.

"Once we solved your customs problem you are welcome to exhibit your paintings in my gallery," he said.

Right away he produced a piece of paper in this regard, hoping it would help me.

"This is a beautiful country with nice people, but the bureaucracy is really a nightmare," he said.

It turned out that I wasn't the only one suffering from the local customs arias. He too had his bad experiences with them.

"Don't get discouraged, there will be a way. You have to have patience and determination. In addition to my help you should also wait until Rosa's boss is back, he might have more power and influence than I do. The more we unite our efforts the easier it will get."

We had coffee on the terrace in the garden and Abdullah cheered me up with his travel tales in Black Africa.

"I lived for some months with a tribe where the people were running around naked. In order

to be accepted I too had to undress. They were lovely people and it was very inspiring for me to paint in such a setting.”

Evidently Abdullah was not like so many Arabs who had issues with nakedness, I thought. It made him even more *simpatico*.

Hussein sent me a heart-breaking letter from Marrakesh. He was depressed about my departure. His mother had not sold the piece of land. Therefore he had no travel money to join me. But even more important, he seemed to have troubles to even get his Moroccan passport.

I had gone back to the Goethe Institute to ask for help from Rosa’s boss and he promised to check out some things that could be done to perhaps speed up the process. Abdullah’s letter did help a little, at least with the Goethe Institute to join the helping ranks. Together with Ali who always managed to get time off from his post office job we toured all sorts of offices in town. It became like a full time job to both of us.

One day Mohamed, my friendly landlord, invited Ali and me for a trip to Hammamet, he had some dealings in town and it would be a good opportunity for me see a bit of the country and another city. It was indeed a good idea, because by now I was rather wired up and bored to tears with my on-going office trip sagas and so little progress. Early in the morning we left Tunis by car and passed through lovely landscapes.

Ali and I strolled through the *medina* of Hammamet, while Mohamed took care of his business. The old part of town was right next to the water. We had coffee near the seashore waiting for Mohamed.

“I’d like to meet some Sufis,” I said to Ali. “Do you know any?”

His usual friendly face turned grim.

“Sufism is *bida*, an un-Islamic invention.”

“I disagree!”

“Anyway, I don’t know any Sufis and I don’t want to know them.”

I lit a cigarette and sipped on my coffee. Evidently Ali was less tolerant and open-minded than I thought. But before I could elaborate on our discussion he changed the theme.

“Don’t you think it is about time to get married?” he asked.

“I am married,” I replied.

“And where is your wife?”

“She lives in the United States of America. We are separated, but not yet divorced.”

“You should get divorced because in Tunisia it is legally not allowed to have more than one wife, even though in other aspects we are an Islamic country.”

“I have no intention to get married again.”

“But why not?”

Luckily Mohamed showed up and we were ready to return to Tunis. I hated these ‘getting married’ topics. And evidently I was not going to tell my Tunisian friends who were straight as an arrow and both had wives, that I was queer and preferred men. It was very clear with these two guys it wouldn’t go down well. Time to keep my big mouth shut up and remain quiet. For the rest of the return trip to Tunis we listened to Arab music in the car radio.

“It is the ‘*Aid al-Kabir* and you are invited,” said Mohamed one morning while dropping in.

There was no way in the world I could decline an invitation to the Islamic feast of the big sacrifice and I followed Mohamed to his home. It was an early morning and we enjoyed the most beautiful weather. The slaughtering took place in his huge patio and I had to be present. It was the first time that I saw any animals being slaughtered. And in this case it was not just the sheep of Mohamed’s family, but also the sheep of all the neighbors, due to his huge patio.

Soon the place was covered in blood and the men started their work. The women served tea and handed out sweets. I felt ill with the blood all over the place and had to use my will power to not show it. In the past in other countries I had always managed to sneak away to avoid this scenario. But this time they had me well cornered. Not that I am a vegetarian, I actually enjoy eating meat on occasion, even though I do prefer fish. But I could never ever hunt or kill any animals, not even a chicken – leave alone a sheep.

Being forced to watch the slaughtering was like torture to me. On top of that I later had to eat fast amounts of freshly grilled *shish kebab*. The eating orgy lasted from lunchtime to dinner. Everyone else had the time of their lives.

One day I decided to go to a *hammam* in the Medina of Tunis. I felt depressed and to be honest quite horny. So far I had been faithful to Hussein, but now it looked that his arrival could take a lot longer than anticipated. If he were in town I wouldn’t have done it, I swear. But he wasn’t. So I went and sure enough the scene was quite gay. However, things were happening rather on the discrete side. The men were checking each other out by eye contact and when you liked someone you followed him into one of the small cubicles with a door to have sex.

Soon I found a cute looking young Tunisian man who gave me the lobster-look. Under his towel I could see a huge hard-on. We kept eyeing each other and flirted for a while. Then we got up and disappeared in one of the cubicles and closed the door. Once inside all our discrete behavior was left outside and we went for each other in a most passionate way. Of course we had to be careful and not to make too much sensual noise. No moaning and groaning when coming. Yet it was delightful, pure lust and pleasure.

“I’ll go out first and you wait a while, people should not see us together,” he whispered in my ear.

“*Tamam*,” I said, “alright.”

He kissed me and was gone quickly. After a few moments I also stepped outside the cubicle

and with mixed feelings I got my clothes to get dressed. On one hand I felt relieved after this sexual adventure, on the other I felt terrible because for the first time I had betrayed Hussein, my lover.

At home I found a little note under my door, it was written in Arabic and it said that I should present myself at a certain police station the next morning at 10 a.m. – I called Ali to please come along, thinking it had something to do with getting my paintings into the country.

The police station looked gray and intimidating. An unfriendly policeman in uniform took the note I had received and asked for my passport. He placed both in a drawer near his desk and disappeared, while Ali and I waited. Twenty minutes later a slightly heavy policeman in civil clothes stormed into the office. He looked aggressive and wired up.

“Are you Rahal?” he asked in French.

“Yes, I am.”

He opened the drawer, took out the note and my passport and studied both.

“Where is your Moroccan passport?” he continued in French.

“Excuse me, Sir, but I don’t have a Moroccan passport.”

“But your name is Rahal and you came from Marrakesh, right?”

“Yes, that is true. My name is Rahal and I did come to Tunis from Marrakesh. But that doesn’t automatically imply that I am Moroccan.”

“What’s your origin then?”

I told him.

“Speak in Arabic.”

“There is no law in the world that I have to speak Arabic on command,” I countered in French, feeling rather annoyed and rebellious.

“You’re not leaving here before you speak in Arabic!” he screamed.

“What is the problem?” I asked, trying to calm him down.

“We will find out on the third floor, you will come with me.”

“My friend has to come along,” I insisted.

“No, he won’t.”

“Ali, please call my consulate to rescue me from this situation,” I shouted while being dragged away into a lift.

Ali just sat there motionless like a frozen sculpture and did not say a damn word. Then the lift doors closed and I was alone with the secret policeman.

“We will make you speak in Arabic,” he said with an evil grin.

I'm not a sissy type, but at this point I almost shit into my pants out of fear to be tortured by this nutty sadist on a power trip. It was an old lift going slow and making strange noises. Then the doors opened and I was pushed out onto the third floor.

There was the same gray paint on the walls as in the office below. It was a long corridor with various doors. Nobody was in sight. In a corner were a table and two chairs. We sat down and the 'speak-in-Arabic-torture' continued.

I still refused to say a single word in Arabic and remained firm but polite.

Suddenly the guy jumped up, I was first afraid he was going to hit me, but he opened a door and disappeared. I waited for a couple of hours it felt, then he came back to repeat his 'speak-in-Arabic-number'. The more he insisted the more I got determined to not speak in Arabic. The scenario was totally surreal, like a bad Kafka dream.

After another half an hour he gave up and brought me into another room. It seemed to be the office of the big boss. The aggressive secret policeman left us alone.

The big boss was a lot more polite and inquired about my personal story. Willingly I told him in polite French about my origin and where I came from.

"Please speak in Arabic," he too demanded all of a sudden.

Since he didn't come across so threatening I gave in and said a few sentences in Arabic.

"You are a liar," he interrupted me. "Your Arabic is not purely Egyptian; you sound more like a mixture between an Egyptian, a Gulf Bedouin and some Moroccan bits and pieces thrown in."

"Listen, I can explain that," I countered. "I was born in Egypt, but I grew up in Europe and I only learned Arabic when I was a grown up man. My first lessons I got when spending some time in Egypt, and later I lived a couple of years in the United Arab Emirates. Hence I have a bit of a Gulf accent. And from there I moved to Morocco. Of course some Moroccan slang words also crept into my personal cocktail."

"Why are you moving around so much?"

"I'm a nomad," I said jokingly.

He didn't like that.

"Are you a Muslim?"

"Yes."

"Do you practice Islam and pray?"

"You are not allowed to ask me that question. That is something between *Allah* and me."

For a moment he looked astonished.

"Yes, you are right with that. What do you do in life?"

“I’m an artist.”

“Oh, just an artist!”

“What do you mean by ‘just an artist’ – isn’t that good enough?”

In order to prove my point I pulled some newspaper write-ups out of my bag and an Arabic recommendation letter by an important personality of the United Arab Emirates. The big boss carefully read each word.

“May I ask you why I am being interrogated here? What is the problem?”

“Now there is no problem,” he said with a smile. “*Marhaba*, you are welcome and you may now apply for your residence card. We originally thought that you were a Moroccan spy.”

I couldn’t believe what I heard.

“We are a small country; Yasser Arafat has his headquarters here. Next-door there is Muammar Al-Qaddafi and on the other side fundamentalism in Algeria. So, we have to be careful and check on things.”

“I see. But right now I don’t think that I will want to apply for a residence card here. Before my visitor’s time runs out I shall move on.”

“As you wish, but from our side there is no longer any problem. *Ma as-salama.*”

My brain was running on over-drive. I originally was all set to stay in Tunis, but not anymore. The country had revealed its paranoid side to me. To mistake me for a Moroccan spy said it all. I had no choice but pack up and soon find another alternative.

Where to go was the question?

I decided to take some holiday time for reflection and then decide. My cash situation – if I were careful – would allow for that, plus another on-way ticket and the shipping of my paintings. There was no room for mistakes. I returned to the *hammam* to chill out and relax. Because to make decisions in a panic mode didn’t smell right. I was praying that Allah would give me a sign. And to get more grounded and into a somewhat calmer mood it wouldn’t hurt either to have sex.

This time I didn’t see any cute types in the *hammam*, but I managed to relax and calm down. After taking a last shower and drying myself a friendly Tunisian guy talked to me. He was gay, it was clear, and he was very interested. Alas, he was not my type, yet I liked him as a person. His name was Mahmud and together we left the *hammam* for a coffee elsewhere.

“Have you already been to Sidi Bou Said?” he asked.

“No, I’ve hardly seen anything here. I was too busy dealing with bureaucracy or being interrogated at the police office.”

“The police are very bad in this country. They really spy on people. I’m an activist with Amnesty International.”

“Oh, how interesting.”

“If you want to I could show you around tomorrow. We could go to the beach, and then to Sidi Bou Said. It is not very far.”

“That sounds good to me. I’ll meet you in the morning.”

“Come at 10 a.m. to this café.”

“I will.”

Mahmud showed up on time and by public transport we went to the beach. It felt great to pretend I was on a holiday. The water was warm and I swam out far. Mahmud stayed at the shore. He was a bit of a sissy and not a good swimmer.

For lunch we had fresh fish in a little restaurant. The food was delicious.

After another round of sunbathing we continued our way to Sidi Bou Said. It was like a white Moorish dream with old Arab-style houses overlooking the Mediterranean. I would have loved to live in this very spot – but of course reality set in right away: I remembered my recent experiences and Mahmud also told me about the high rents in this area.

The afternoon we spent sitting on a terrace with a great view of the sea, smoking *shisha*. I felt very nostalgic. Soon my Moorish dreams would be past history. And so far I had no clue where to go. I had seen the writing on the wall in Marrakesh and now even here. It was a real pity.

Even though Mahmud admitted that he was gay, he also added that one day he would have to get married.

“How appalling! How double-faced! How can you say this as if it were unshakeable fate? You are not bisexual. So it would be a horrid lie!”

“That’s the way it is here, unless I manage to leave the country and live far away from my family.”

“Where would you want to go?”

“Perhaps to France or Italy.”

I felt sorry for Mahmud because unlike me, he did not have a European Union passport to travel freely. It was unfair. I thought anyone should be entitled to freely roam around on this planet. Borders, visas and passports were such artificial inventions of modern times. In the old days people didn’t have to bother with that – but then again they didn’t have planes for easy traveling either.

In the evening we returned to Tunis.

“Call me, we could do more things together,” said Mahmud.

“Yeah, I’ll call you.”

It was nice to have a new friend.

The next day around lunchtime Mohamed, my landlord rang the doorbell.

“*As-salam aleikum*, come on in. How are you?”

“*Wa aleikum salam*. I’m fine. Did you enjoy the beach yesterday?”

“Yes,” I replied a little surprised that he asked me.

“And how was the lunch in the fish restaurant?”

“It was very good.”

“And I imagine you enjoyed Sidi Bou Said and smoking a water-pipe with your friend.”

“Were you watching me or what?”

“No, I wasn’t, but the secret police was. You are under observance. I have a friend who works in the Interior Ministry and he told me this morning.”

“I thought that the secret police calmed down about me after the interrogation?”

“You don’t know this country, my dear friend. For each citizen they have two secret policemen watching things. You were seen with a known homosexual who is also a political activist and the police hoped they would catch you both in illegal sex.”

“I don’t know anything about Mahmud’s sexuality, nor am I interested in him that way. He is a friend. And yes, I do know that he is a volunteer with Amnesty International. What’s wrong with that?”

“Don’t hang out with homosexuals. And be careful with political activists. This is Tunisia, not Europe or the USA!”

“I’m anyway planning to leave the country.”

“No, you don’t have to, please stay. You just have to select your friends a little and after some months the police will give up on you.”

I decided to visit Abdullah again and told him about what happened.

“For six months you have to keep a low profile. Then the police will leave you in peace. I’m also homosexual and I live here not being bothered. I’m just a little discrete.”

“I don’t think I can handle it. This is all too much for my taste. Besides, there is the trouble with my paintings to pass the custom’s office. It is all too complicated. I’m giving up and have to find another solution where to go.”

“Why don’t you stay here? Tonight I have an art opening and many friends are coming. Just relax and don’t decide things prematurely.”

“Alright.”

Actually the exhibition opening turned into a very nice party. There were many Tunisians, all of them men. And later two older British guys arrived on the scene: Andrew, a painter with an

aristocratic flair and a rather posh accent – and his friend John who was somewhat the opposite with his Cockney slang shining through here and there. Also in physical appearance they were like day and night. Andrew was elegant, slim and tall, while John was more of a street character, short and round, if not to say pounds of joy. Yet both were very likable.

“If you ever come to London you can stay with me,” said John, offering me his card. “I have a huge flat and I love having people stay with me.”

“Thank you very much. I might indeed show up one day.”

“Just call me first.”

The party went on until late and we all got drunk. Most people crashed in the huge living room of Abdullah’s private upper quarters of his gallery. I too slept there on a sofa. In the morning we all had breakfast on Abdullah’s terrace. Then I went home to deal with reality.

It was definitely time to make a decision. First I called an old friend in Barcelona to figure out if I could arrive there with all the glory of my painting shipment, but his reply was a ‘no’, due to lack of space. I tried a few others in vain. As a last resort I called Maria and Wilhelm, my adoptive parents.

“I knew your Tunisian gig would turn into another disaster,” said Wilhelm in his usual critical Virgo-ways. “But of course you are always welcome to come back here.”

“I won’t stay long, just a while to figure out what I ought to do next. And half of the time I will probably stay with Hans and Bernd in Hamburg.”

“When are you coming?”

“Give me some days to clear out here. I will call when I know the exact arrival time.”

Then I called Hans and Bernd. It was no problem for them if I was to spend time with them, and I began to pack.

“The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on,” I thought.

In the following days Ali helped me to deal with the Custom’s Office to have my paintings shipped to Hamburg.

“Once I’m gone you can have all the things I bought for the house in case you can use them. If not, give them to a needy person.”

“*Shukran*. Thanks.”

I called Mahmud for a final meeting to say good-bye and wondered if perhaps his relatives had already scheduled his marriage.

“I wish you all the very best, it was nice meeting you.”

“I’ll miss you. Will you ever come back to Tunis?”

“Somehow I doubt that. But perhaps we’ll meet again somewhere else?”

“Insh’Allah!”

I hung up the phone and went for a walk through the city, feeling uncomfortable. In each man behind me I suspected the secret police. I was turning very paranoid and I didn’t like it.

I passed by at Rosa’s office to thank her and her boss for their attempts to help me and to say good-bye.

“Muchas gracias por todo y adios.”

Taking zigzag routes and waiting around to make sure nobody had followed me I returned to the *hammad* in the *medina*. It was packed with men. Therefore I waited around to see if things would calm down and if I would have a final fling with someone. I had seen a few interesting candidates. In order to wait things out I entered the hottest room. Here only one other man and I were sweating away. He gave me an intense look. Somehow I did not like his vibe one bit.

All of a sudden he pulled his enormous hard-on from underneath the towel wrapped around his hips and began to masturbate while indicating I should come over and do the same.

“No, thank you,” I politely declined his invitation, “the secret police could come in any minute, you better be more discrete here.”

The man began to laugh loudly. “I am the secret police!”

Like a jinn escaping out of an opened bottle I got up and ran for my life. Within seconds I grabbed my clothes and got dressed and dashed out into the *medina*. I kept running all the way to my house, always turning around if anyone was following me. Once inside I locked the door and went to bed. Needless to say I had nightmares all night.

In the morning I bought my plane ticket and wrote a letter to Hussein, informing him about my next temporary address. Later that afternoon I boarded my flight. I felt quite bad about my Tunisian gig and my flight to the free Occident was somewhat clouded with fears about running into Neo-Nazis in Germany. In short, I had very mixed feelings about my up-coming *Tour de Force...*

It seemed as if I were a Ping-Pong ball going back and forth between the Orient and the Occident – but right now at this moment it looked more like a ball in free fall, I felt lost and scared. Was there a higher meaning of my meandering across this planet? I wondered and tried to surrender to God’s secret plan. At this point in time it didn’t make any sense to me.

About the Author

Rahal Eks is the author of KHALIL & MAJNUN and HUSSEIN & THE NOMAD, both memoirs. He was a long time columnist for Huriyah magazine, writing about his travels. Currently, he teaches the Sufi Tradition on his website:

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