

PASSING CUSTOMS

by Jim Ruland

Every time I hear football on the radio, my thoughts drift to a dark apartment in North Africa where Said, his eyes heavy-lidded with hashish, looked up from the spliff he was rolling to consider the news erupting from the television in the next room.

"Gooooooooooooooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaalllllllllllllllllllllllllllll!"

I thought I'd scored, too. At the train station in Asilah, a seaside village on the Moroccan coast, a hustler named Mohammed talked me out of the tourist hotel the guide book recommended, and lured me to a "bohemian art house." Here, he promised, I'd find *everything* I needed for a good time.

What Mohammed didn't tell me was the house was owned by drug dealers and inhabited by wealthy playboys who urged me over and over again to accompany them to the bathhouse. Each time I said no, they gave me more hashish, and I spent my days on the terrace that overlooked the whitewashed walls of the crumbling medina, getting high, drinking tea, and slipping into a fog of paranoia.

“Was it a good goal?” Said wanted to know. As Mohammed described the goal, I was struck by Said's earnestness, how the question left his face unguarded, with none of the fake friendliness the playboys had been feeding me. Every time they tried to hustle me to the bathhouse, they acted as if it was their cultural duty to take me there, like it was a monument or museum I had to see, as if their drug-fueled lust had nothing to do with it. And I collaborated with this ruse by pretending to be ignorant of their true desires. It was exhausting, but the hash was excellent.

I was almost broke, a starving student with \$30 bucks and a plane ticket in my pocket, on a poorly considered drug adventure. I wasn't there to smuggle or steal; I just wanted a little taste of the mind-blowing hash harvested from the Atlas Mountains. Said understood. The playboys were planning a major deal, and he was brought in for extra security. I liked Said because he was more interested in football than bathhouses. It's all he talked about, going on and on

about the goal he didn't even see. He needed to be reassured the goal was indeed good, as if a bad goal could negate the win or disqualify the team. On and on he went, like an Eskimo rhapsodizing about snow.

To change the subject, I asked him what he did, and nearly choked on my spliff when he told me he was a member of the national police.

"Off-duty?" I asked hopefully.

"No" "he shook his head. "Always on duty."

As much as I tried to reassure myself that everything would be fine, that we were just a couple of guys talking about sports, I was in awe of the ease with which Said could drop a ten-ton shithammer on my suburban, middle class, and altogether outstanding American life that I'd never really bothered to reflect upon or feel grateful for until the prospect of doing time in a Moroccan prison entered the realm of the possible. Suddenly, the bathhouse was the least of my worries.

The deal went down. The buyers--an attractive Italian couple--left with their shipment. The celebration began in earnest. Before the playboys could start with their tiresome litany of the benefits of the bathhouse, I retreated to the terrace. I smoked one last spliff and imagined my parents on the other side of the ocean, waiting at the airport to meet me. I could see my father eating peanuts, tossing the shells on the high-traffic carpet, while my mother's tea grew cold as the realization that I wasn't on the plane took hold.

But the goal was good. I was released from the drug dealer's den the next morning. The cop even shook my hand, wished me a safe flight.

At the airport, I dismantled my luggage, went through each pocket, examined every seam for contraband the Moroccans might have stashed in my gear to complicate my re-entry to America. Passing through customs, I felt as if my lungs were filled with smoke. One wrong move and all the drugs I'd done would start leaking out of my body. When the official scrutinized the stamp on my passport and said "Morocco?" I was as good as done for. I

regretted not playing along with the playboys and going to bathhouse because either way I was screwed.

The customs officer waved me through, and I shuffled into the terminal where my parents were waiting. "How was the trip?" my mother asked while my father dusted off his shirt, goobers stuck in his teeth. "Good," I said, not quite believing my luck. As I offered crisp hugs and clammy handshakes, I felt like a football that had dropped out of the sky, took a crazy bounce off the pitch, bungled clumsily through the goalkeeper's hands, and landed safely in the net.

