

Chapter 4

The Marrakech Express

When making a career choice, conventional wisdom suggests choosing a career for which you have some affinity and some aptitude. Selecting a career so that you can make a lot of money without working too hard is not generally a prescription for career satisfaction, as I learned when I began my clinical rotations at Columbia University Dental School. Within the first week of seeing patients and looking in their mouths, I knew that dentistry was not for me. I'm glad I didn't decide to become a physician. After sticking my finger into that first asshole, I would have jumped out a window.

I did my first clinical rotation at the beginning of my third year at Columbia. I was assigned to the Outpatient Reception Department, through which all patients coming to Columbia must pass to decide the treatment they needed. It was basically triage for the Dental School. If a patient had bad breath and swollen gums, they were sent to Periodontics. If they had a mouth full of rotten teeth, they went to Oral Surgery. If they were nasty brat kids with crooked smiles, they went to Orthodontics.

On my first day I saw 20 patients. Fortunately, I didn't have to do anything for these patients. I just examined them and referred them on. But I had an important revelation that day – I hated seeing patients. The doctor/patient relationship was anathema to a selfish, narcissistic, rascal like Larry Cashman. First of all, I had to be nice to every patient, even if they were jerks. Second, I had to listen to their senseless drivel, even though it bored me to tears. I had no patience for patients, and my instincts told me loud and clear that patients would definitely try my patience.

On the final day of this rotation, I had a cantankerous middle-aged female patient with gnarled teeth and an enormous derriere who disliked me immediately. When I entered the exam room, she said "Who are you? I didn't know they allowed dip-shit hippies to be dentists."

I ignored this remark, suppressing the barrage of epithets and insults that would constitute my customary rejoinder. But she was a patient and I had to be nice. "How are you today, Ma'am?"

"How would you feel if you were overweight and had ugly teeth like mine?"

"Maybe we can do something about that." I tried to be as nice and accommodating as possible.

"You don't look like you can do anything for anyone. I want to see a real dentist."

This was fine by me. I was finished with this old witch. I went to find my instructor. He told me that I had to learn to deal with recalcitrant patients like her, and this would be a good learning experience. I had learned enough for one week, mainly that I hated seeing patients like this one. It was 4 PM on a Friday afternoon, I had seen more than 100 patients that week, I had a monumental headache, and I wanted to go home.

My instructor would not relent, so I went back to see the old biddy. My patience was wearing thin. "Ma'am, we can send you to oral surgery to have your remaining teeth removed, and then make you a nice denture. Would you like that?"

"What I would like is to see the back of your head, fool. Now go find me a real dentist."

That was it. I couldn't deal with this lady any longer. "Fine," I said with a snarl. "Let me get the real dentist. His name is Dr. Kiss My Ass." And I walked out.

The old bat went ballistic. I could hear her screaming obscenities as I calmly walked out of the clinic. I wanted to go home, see Sabrina, and smoke a joint. There was hell to pay when I got to the clinic the following Monday, but I had a great weekend.

My clinical years at Columbia University were two years of torture for me. Between my shenanigans in the Pathology course and my obvious distaste for anything related to patient care, not to mention the long hair, thick black beard, bell bottom pants, and cowboy boots I wore into the clinic every day, I had not endeared myself to the clinical faculty at Columbia.

Nor, for that matter, had the other members of the Back of the Room Gang. Stan Robertson had a big, bushy Afro hairdo. One day he was working in the lab with a Bunsen burner on. He leaned over to get something and his hair lit on fire. Stan didn't even know it, his hair was so high, and went right on working. He finally woke up when someone sprayed his head with a fire extinguisher. Pablo Teitelbaum was incoherent most of the time from his excessive drug intake, whether in the clinic or not. Ian Spader walked out of an Oral Surgery exam he hadn't studied for, told the Professor to piss off when challenged, and got six months academic probation for his antics. Mike Laverne would listen to the Grateful Dead on his earphones and not even speak to his patients. As for me, I hated going into the clinic, I hated my patients, and I hated the instructors. It was a long two years.

That we were not particularly adept at the clinical practice of dentistry and disdained their authority annoyed the faculty even more. The clinical faculty at Columbia University was staffed primarily by escaped Nazi war criminals masquerading as dentists. They were abusive, derisive, coercive, psychotic, right-wing conservative sadists whose greatest pleasure derived from humiliating unsuspecting dental students in front of their patients. One instructor, Fritz Pandopo, decided to exact his revenge on the Back of the Room Gang in general, and me in particular. Pandopo was an individual of diminutive physical, moral, and intellectual stature who hated nonconformists. If he was my instructor in a clinic session, Pandopo would not let me anesthetize the patient, he would denigrate my admittedly nascent clinical skills in front of my patients, and criticize everything I did.

I had one patient, an attractive French woman named Liselle, who suspected my clinical acumen from the beginning. I had to take an impression of several drilled and prepared teeth with this red, gooey, colloidal material that was placed on the teeth hot then cooled with cold water in an impression tray to set. Exposed dentin is extremely sensitive to heat, cold, and air. Normally, the patient is given a local anesthetic injection for this procedure.

But Pandopo would not let me anesthetize Liselle. "Take the impression without anesthesia. You're careless and sloppy, Cashman. If your patient is not anesthetized, perhaps you will be more careful."

Liselle was not happy about this, and demanded I confront Pandopo. “You talk ze beeg show, but you are afraid of zees leetle imp Pandopo.” I loved her French accent. She was right, though. Pandopo was holding all the cards and my remonstrance would stiffen his resolve. I begged Liselle to let me try. She reluctantly agreed, tossing a few choice profanities in my direction first.

As I removed the temporary filling and exposed the dentin to the air, Liselle fidgeted uncomfortably. As I prepared the hot colloidal material to take the impression, she glared at me and said, “Zees better not hurt.” I assured her it wouldn’t, having no confidence in my assurance. Then I placed the hot, viscous impression material on her teeth. Immediately her eyes started rolling in her head. Then she gave me the finger. Then she pointed to the tray holding the red goo. She wanted it out. I wanted to get this impression done, so I ignored her plea and turned on the cold water to harden the impression.

You can imagine the shock as this hot, colloidal material was cooled by ice cold water. Liselle grabbed the impression tray, wrenched it out of her mouth, and threw it at me. “You preek! You preek!” she screamed. “You are inept and you are ze coward. I hate you.” I didn’t realize she was such an astute judge of character.

Pandopo had a field day with this incident. He berated me for carelessness, bad judgment, poor patient management, insensitivity, incompetence, and ignorance. I tried to defend myself to no avail. After he was finished, I said, “What you say may be true. But how many students manage to get an attractive French woman to call them a ‘preek’ right in the clinic. I deserve some credit for that.” Pandopo didn’t find this amusing. I didn’t think he would. It was a long two years.

In the three months since we were married, while I was laboring in the clinic at Columbia, Sabrina was working full time and making money. She was also planning our first overseas trip. She needed to convert her newly minted husband into an experienced traveler who would accompany her on her overseas adventures. What she didn’t realize was the colossal challenge this would be. In addition to being a provincial bumpkin who had never ventured beyond the northeastern states, I was also a terminal wimp and whiner who couldn’t exist without his creature comforts. Sabrina labeled me a sissy pants. I took umbrage at this characterization. I preferred being called a candy ass.

Sabrina chose the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago located just off the southern coast of Morocco, as the destination for our first overseas trip. Because it supposedly had a sub-tropical climate, the Canary Islands would satisfy our urge to see a tropical paradise. Because it was a Spanish protectorate, it would be civilized. And it was only a seven hour flight from New York. Since I had never been on a plane, she thought seven hours was the limit for my first trip.

We left for the Canary Islands in December 1972 for a three week trip. Because we were traveling on a shoestring budget, we had no hotel reservations when we arrived, nor had Sabrina made any plans for our itinerary. She just followed her instincts. That’s how world travelers roll. We took the red eye from New York and arrived in the capitol city, Las Palmas, at 9 AM the next day. I was so jet-lagged I couldn’t walk a straight line. Sabrina got us into a cab that took us downtown. From there, we

walked around, laden with backpacks, looking for a hotel. Not just any hotel, mind you. This one had to be less than \$3 per night. That's also how world travelers roll. We ended up in this run-down, flea bitten hotel that had skimpy mattresses, dirty sheets, no hot water, and no glass in the windows. And it was bloody cold. The Canary Islands may have a sub-tropical climate, but the winters were still cold.

I was horrified by this whole scene, and exhausted from jet lag. When we arrived in our room, two humongous red cockroaches were perched on the pillows of our flea-bag bed. I am deathly afraid of insects of all kinds – would you expect anything else from a candy ass? So I did what any self-respecting candy ass would do – I freaked out. Sabrina calmed me down with several well-placed slaps to the face. “We’ll rest here for the night to recover from our jet lag,” she assured me. “Tomorrow we’ll venture out to see the island and its tropical beaches.”



The barren coast of Gran Canaria

The next day we found a public bus that circumnavigated the island. Las Palmas was essentially a dump. The buildings were run down, there was trash in the streets, and it smelled like chilies. As we left the city, we scanned the horizon with anticipation for the tropical beaches. Instead, all we saw was barren desert with no vegetation and a cragged, rocky coastline where big waves crashed on the rocks. There were no beaches, no palm trees, and no tropical paradise. As it turned out, the island of Tenerife had the sub-tropical climate. The island of Gran Canaria, where we had landed, was a rocky desert with a cold climate. By the time we realized this, we were eight hours away from Las Palmas and it was getting dark. We exited the bus and walked for two more hours before we found a hotel that made our previous accommodations seem palatial. We bedded down for the night.

By this time I was disoriented, miserable, dirty, and cold. If this was what traveling was like, I wanted none of it. The next morning we packed our bags and made our way back to Las Palmas by bus. About two hours outside the city, Sabrina saw a huge stadium where a bull fight was about to commence. “Let’s go see the bull fight,” she screamed. Sabrina is impulsive like that. When there is something she wants, she goes for it.

“But how will we get back to Las Palmas?” I inquired. That fleabag hotel in Las Palmas was looking pretty good to me.

“Stop worrying, you sissy pants. There will be another bus.” I reminded her once again that I took umbrage at this characterization. “OK candy ass. Stop worrying.”

When we emerged from the bull fight, it was getting dark and quite cold. Then it started to rain. The stadium was in the middle of nowhere. There was no station to get a bus. And there was no place to get shelter from the rain. We did the only thing we could – we started walking toward Las Palmas in the cold rain. At this point I had lost any resolve to resist. I had resigned myself to my fate. Carrying a

huge backpack, in the pouring rain, soaked to the bone, shivering from the cold, and walking towards Las Palmas, I prepared to die.

After an hour of this, a pickup truck stopped on the side of the road, curious at the sight of two gringos with backpacks walking aimlessly in the cold rain. “Donde vas?” he called to us. I had taken Spanish in high school and responded “Vamos a Las Palmas.” We are going to Las Palmas. Moved by our plight, he motioned us to get in the back of the pickup. Although it was exposed to the elements and we shared it with various farm animals and sacks of potatoes, the back of that pickup felt like a first class sleeper by that time. At least we wouldn’t have to walk to Las Palmas.

Our Good Samaritan dropped us right in front of the Gran Hotel Las Palmas, a stately old, colonial hotel with a granite façade and semilunar arches supported by Grecian pillars. It was done in the grand old style, similar to what I would eventually see in the Raffles Hotel in Singapore and Strand Hotel in Rangoon. As Sabrina motioned me to follow her on the trek to find another cheap hotel with fleas and no hot water, I took my backpack off, laid it on the pavement, and said, “I’ve had enough. I’m not going anywhere. I’m cold, I’m wet, and I’m tired. I want to stay at the Gran Hotel Las Palmas.” Normally Sabrina would hit me upside the head when I lost it like this, but she could see that her candy ass, wimp of a husband had reached the end of his rope. We checked into the Gran Hotel Las Palmas.

Our room had a queen sized bed with an ornately carved bed post, embroidered lace sheets, a down comforter, and goose feather pillows. It had heat, hot water, and an immaculately clean bathroom. There were no cockroaches on the pillows or fleas in the sheets. It cost \$35 per night, way beyond our budget and what any respectable world traveler would pay. I felt like I had been snatched from the precipice of hell and delivered to the gates of heaven.

After luxuriating in a hot bath, Sabrina and I went down to the Gran Hotel Las Palmas restaurant for dinner. The food in the Canary Islands didn’t appeal to me – my palate was not accustomed to any exotic foods beyond macaroni and cheese, hamburgers, and pasta – and I was famished. The restaurant was spectacular. It had high ceilings dotted with strategically placed chandeliers; and mahogany tables draped with lavishly adorned tablecloths upon which sat exquisitely glazed crockery, silver cutlery, and crystal glasses. What I liked best were the three waiters assigned to our table to fulfill every whim. I ordered them around like they were pledges in a fraternity. There was an item on the menu called Paella Valenciana, something I never heard of. But it had rice, seafood, chicken, and sausages, so we tried it. It was served in a huge round pan right from the oven. It was the most delicious meal I had ever eaten. That night in the Gran Hotel Las Palmas was one of the most memorable and pleasant evenings of my life. And it only cost \$35.



The Gran Hotel Las Palmas

I had just experienced a feature of traveling that would occur over and over again for the next 45 years. After being in the most distasteful places, under often sketchy conditions, when things looked bleakest, I would be miraculously delivered to some incredibly beautiful and comfortable situation usually associated with a good meal. Or at least it seemed that way. Unfortunately, this adventure wasn't over. During breakfast the next morning, Sabrina spotted a cheap flight to Casablanca, an exotic-sounding city in Morocco. "The Canary Islands suck", she announced. "Let's go to Morocco."

Compared to the Canary Islands, Morocco in 1972 was wild. There were more camels, horses, donkeys, sheep and human drawn vehicles in the streets than cars. The people appeared to be Arabs, and wore clothing that resembled nothing I had ever seen before. The men wore all kinds and shapes of adornments on their heads – skullcaps, turbans, conical fez, and draped headscarves that looked like rags placed haphazardly on their cranium. It was the women's apparel that left me speechless. For the most part you couldn't see their faces. Some wore long black burkas that covered their entire bodies with only a black screen over their eyes. Some wore stylish veils that covered their faces. The most affluent women wore brightly colored outfits that covered their faces except for their eyes, but had bikini tops that exposed their midriffs, most of which were unappetizingly chunky. This whole scene was right out of the Arabian Nights. But it had a certain mystique that appealed to me. I felt like I was in another world. I never saw anything like this in Queens.



The Marrakech Express

Casablanca, a large bustling city, was moderately civilized. Our hotel room even had a bathroom en suite, although it was just a hole in the ground that one had to squat over to take care of business. Then Sabrina had another impulsive idea. We would take the Marrakech Express to Marrakech, just like they did in the Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young song. The train to Marrakech was an antiquated clap-trap that came into service in 1920. It could barely make it over the mountains we had to traverse to get there. This entire scene,

from the minute we arrived in Las Palmas until we got off the Marrakech Express was so foreign to anything I had ever experienced. The people, the food, and the environment were so different from anything I had ever seen. I was essentially operating in a trance for the past five days.

When we arrived in Marrakech and started to get our bearings, I noticed that there were no honkies here. Marrakech was too far off the tourist or even the world traveler's trail. One of the local Arab's spotted us as an easy mark, and accosted us as soon as we exited the train station. He was ugly, with mangled crooked teeth, a scraggly beard, and a pock-marked face. He was also drunk and had a knife. And then I did something that was so uncharacteristic that it spooks me to this day. I confronted the assailant, stood between him and Sabrina, and told her to run. The fact that he was only about five

feet tall and I had 50 pounds on him may have emboldened me. With my backpack in front of me, I rushed him and knocked him down. And then I ran. I was good at running. Sabrina had, in the meantime, hailed a cab, which I jumped into as it sped off.

Sabrina was so proud of me. “I can’t call you a sissy pants anymore, Cashman. You are now a seasoned traveler,” she gushed. I reminded her again that I preferred candy ass, but it didn’t seem to matter anymore. Sabrina, who had traveled overland through Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and had seen it all, pronounced me a seasoned traveler, and that was good enough for me.

And then, as it had in the past and as it would time and time again in the future, hubris got the best of me. I got cocky and overconfident. My arrogance runneth over. I was a seasoned traveler now and I would act like it. Marrakech was the most exotic place in Morocco, maybe in all of North Africa at the time. It had an intricate, labyrinthine souk that was an amalgam of color, energy, and vibrancy. Everything was sold in the souk – perfumes, spices, ceramics, antiques, carpets, baskets, shawls, glassware, essential oils, shoes, woodcarvings. You could explore it for days and never reach its inner chambers.

What caught my fancy was the large central square that bordered the souk. During the day it



The Night Bazaar in Marrakech

was empty, like a big parking lot. As the sun set, however, it became a bazaar, with a mélange of gypsies, snake-charmers, wandering minstrels, magicians, and folk-singers; there were henna artists, palm readers, ventriloquists, story tellers, and food stalls. Most of these performers were itinerants who traveled throughout North Africa. Story tellers from Mali were surrounded by a circumscribed crowd that marveled at their theatrics in the performing circle, and then contributed a few dirham, the local currency, when they passed the hat. Algerian magicians pulled chickens from their turbans and swallowed swords. There was even a “witch” dentist who pulled out molars in the middle of the square. I wished Pandopo could have seen this.

As I surveyed all of this, I was no longer in a trance. I was a seasoned traveler now so I pressed deeper into the souk to find even more exotic fare. I would be at the front of the circle to watch the magicians charm snakes, and observe the story tellers’ histrionics. I wanted to take it all in. What I did mostly was sample the exotic delicacies in the food stalls. There were kebabs seasoned with delicate spices. There was couscous covered in vegetable stews. I was trying it all. Sabrina watched all of this with a jaundiced eye. She had seen me succumb to hubris before. “You should be more careful about what you’re eating,” she warned. “Demonstrate a bit more caution and a bit less arrogance.”

I wouldn't listen, of course. I was a seasoned traveler, and I felt invincible. This was hubris in extremis. One night I came upon a stall selling snails in a dense black broth served over couscous. The Moroccans were sucking those snails out of the shells and inhaling the broth with such gusto. I decided to try some. When the Moroccans saw that I was game, they egged me on. By the time Sabrina caught up with me, I had eaten the snails and was finishing off the broth. "Slow down, cowboy," she warned. "Those things could be toxic."

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

And I was fine. I awoke the next morning brimming with confidence and ready to explore. We walked into the souk and browsed the shops. All of a sudden, the inevitable happened. One moment I was walking along taking in the sights. The next moment, my body became weak, feverish, and wracked with abdominal cramps. I had Montezuma's Revenge, traveler's diarrhea, only here they called it The Marrakech Express, because you had to take the express train to the bathroom when your bowels contracted. Sabrina caught me as I fell to the ground. "You had to eat those snails. Now you are going to pay for it."

I was immobilized for the next seven days. Our hotel in Marrakech had no bathroom in the room. There was only a communal bathroom 40 paces down the hall. No sooner had I returned to our room after the first diarrheal episode than my bowels started rumbling again, and I had to run back to the bathroom. Then the same thing happened again and again and again for the next three days. For the second time on this adventure, I prepared to die. On the fifth day, I was finally regaining some strength. "Let's go outside. You need to get some fresh air and food," Sabrina advised. When I got to the street, I vomited as soon as I saw the first Arab picking his nose and spitting a big loogie on to the sidewalk. Then it was back to bed for two more days.

We left Marrakech on Christmas day 1972. I was exhausted, emaciated, incapacitated, and miserable when we got back to Casablanca. Sabrina implored me to venture out to find a western restaurant where I could get something I could eat. By chance we stumbled upon a quaint little Italian restaurant that was serving special Christmas dinners. After seven days of vomiting, diarrhea, and no food, I was sitting in a heated Italian restaurant with a big plate of pasta in front of me. After the Paella Valenciana in Las Palmas, this was the best meal I ever had.

I had one revelation in Marrakech that bears recounting. Sabrina and I were sitting in a small outdoor square during my recuperation. Across the street were what seemed to me like palatial mansions behind high cement walls. A Mercedes pulled up to one of those mansions and turned to pull in. A driver jumped out to open the gate. Then a distinguished gentleman emerged from the Mercedes. He was an expatriate honky like me, only instead of traveling on a shoestring budget, staying in flea bag hotels, and eating in the souk, he was living in this mansion with a Mercedes, servants, and a driver. In my delirious and febrile state, my first thought was "Someday I want to be like that guy in the Mercedes, living in a third world country with a driver and a mansion like that." At the time it was a pipe dream. But at least I could dream.

My little bout with the Marrakech Express, which turned out to be Salmonella food poisoning, had dampened my bravado. The seasoned traveler had been vanquished. All I wanted to do now was go home. But Sabrina, the intrepid traveler, wanted to push on. Since my shenanigans in Marrakech, I had been relegated to sissy pants status in her eyes, although she relented and called me a candy ass. I had no choice but to push on.

The plan was to travel overland to Rabat, Morocco's capital city, then on to the ancient city of Fes. From there we would get a train to Tangier on the Mediterranean coast, and from there continue across the Straits of Gibraltar to Malaga, Spain, where we would catch a flight back to New York. All went well until we reached Fes, a medieval city that had once been the capitol of Morocco. It had a sprawling, labyrinthine souk or medina where one could wander for days, just like Marrakech. By the time we reached Fes, I had recovered some of my strength and could see the light at the end of the tunnel. One more train ride to Tangier, then Spain and home.



The Souk in Fes

The train was a red eye, overnight from Fes through the Atlas Mountains, to Tangier on the Mediterranean coast. We bought the cheapest ticket possible, 3rd Class seats in steerage. After what I had experienced so far, you would think I had learned my lesson and demanded a first class ticket. But Sabrina was losing patience with my bitching and moaning and pissing and groaning, so I dared not suggest it. Larry Cashman, the consummate wimp and pansy, must suffer multiple indignities before learning any lessons. I was about to suffer one more.

We boarded the train at 9 PM, and it was scheduled to arrive in Tangier the next morning. The 3rd class "salon" had no seats, just benches against the wall. As we left Fes, our salon was empty. At subsequent stops we began picking up our salon-mates. These were grizzled Moroccans with their chickens, goats, and sheep. One guy got on with a donkey. After two hours the place was packed like a barn. It was a bloody cattle car. There were no bathrooms for humans, so you can only imagine what the animals did when they had to take a shit. I was sickened by the sight and smell of the 3rd class "salon." It would be our universe for the next 10 hours.

At midnight we entered the Atlas Mountains and it started getting cold. Within one hour there was snow on the ground and our "salon" was freezing. I hate cold weather. I cannot tolerate it. Now I was stuck in a cattle car in the middle of the Atlas Mountains at 2 AM freezing to death. Sabrina and I put on every piece of clothing we had in our backpacks, but it didn't help.

A short time later, the ticket master came by to punch our tickets. When he saw them, he began gesticulating wildly and pointing to the door. We had no idea what he was saying, as we spoke neither Arabic nor French. One of our salomates came by to help. It turned out that the train we boarded was not the direct train to Tangier. We should have gotten off two hours earlier and connected to another train to Tangier. The ticket master told us to get off at the next stop because this train was going nowhere near Tangier.



Cashman's travels through the Canary Islands and Morocco

It was 4 AM when we got off at the next stop. Sabrina was still functional – she had been through incidents like this before. But I was aghast at our situation, dying of hypothermia, and semi-comatose from the shock this had all been to my candy ass. It was 4 AM, freezing cold, and we had no idea where we were, and no idea where to find a place to sleep. For the third time on this trip, I resigned myself to die.

There was only one road from the train station, so we started walking. Miraculously, after no more than 10 minutes, we stumbled on a little guest house. We roused the proprietor, a kindly Moroccan woman, who perchance had an available room. Not only was this a room, but it had secure glass windows, clean sheets, and a heavy comforter to keep us warm. When we awoke the next morning, the proprietor had prepared warm tea with eggs, biscuits and jam for a welcome repast. As luck would have it, there was a train to Tangier at 10 AM. We were in Tangier by 2 PM, in Malaga, by 5 PM, and on a plane back to New York two days later.

Once again we had been delivered from the precipice of disaster. After our nightmare on the train from Fes, the room in that little guest house was like being in the Gran Hotel Las Palmas. The tea, eggs, and biscuits were like the Paella Valenciana in Las Palmas and that big plate of pasta in Casablanca. Sabrina provided me with this assurance: "Don't worry, sissy pants. When you're traveling on the road, things will always work out." I asked her to call me a candy ass. I hated being called a sissy pants.