

A large sunburst graphic with multiple rays emanating from a central point, filling the upper half of the page.

Golden Days

On

The Open Road

A large triangular graphic with a vertical line down the center and two diagonal lines forming the sides, filling the lower half of the page.

Ahmad Thomson

Golden Days
on the
Open Road



Ahmad Thomson

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the Name of Allah
the Merciful the Compassionate

Acknowledgements

THE OPEN ROAD

My thanks are due especially to *sayyedina Shaykh* ‘Abd al-Qadir as-Sufi ad-Darqawi al-Murabit for guiding me on the open road, and to the *fuqara* for their company on it, and to everyone who has helped or hindered me on my journey, and to my parents who looked after me until I was old enough to undertake it. Thank you.



GOLDEN DAYS

This is dedicated to the memory of my English teacher, Philip ‘Jock’ LeBrocq, whose best lesson was: ‘The experience in life which is unique to everyone is that each one of us can fall in love.’



Al-hamdulillahi wa shukrulillahi
Wa la howla wa la quwata illa bi’llah



We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot

The Open Road

You could say that the journey began the day I met *sayedina Shaykh* and ‘Abd al-Ghaffur for lunch at Cranks, although of course I had already been on many journeys across continents and over oceans before this meeting, and my own particular journey through life had already lasted some twenty-three years since the early evening I was gently pulled into the world somewhere in the heart of Africa with a pair of forceps and given the kiss of life by an obliging nurse.

I had only recently arrived in London after having completed my law degree at Exeter University and deciding not to make the legal profession my career. It had seemed to me that the laws I had studied were not always synonymous with justice, and indeed I still remember the head of the law faculty stating in his introductory speech to the new batch of first year students of which I was one: ‘After the rock and roll business, the legal profession is one of the best ways of making money quickly if you are good at it. I can only conclude, therefore, that you are all here either because you want to get rich quick, or else because you have come to study your enemy.’ Pause for polite laughter all round, the kind of laughter which is usually triggered off in western society whenever drink, or money, or sex is mentioned.

Personally speaking, I had not come to the university with either of these intentions, but simply because it was expected of me by my family, and partly because I genuinely believed that I would find knowledge there. I had chosen Exeter not because of its reputation for academic excellence, but because the campus is set in beautiful gardens, and the city is set in beautiful countryside, near the sea and in about the warmest part of England, and I looked forward to having a beautiful time there.

I had soon made good friends at the university, especially amongst those who were doing different courses to myself, and we enjoyed life to the full as best as we knew how, while doing enough academic work to ensure that we had at least a fighting chance of obtaining that piece of paper with our name at the top in impressive italics, the mighty degree certificate, when our time at university was up. After the constrictions and limitations of home and school, we all considered ourselves

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free at last to explore life as we wished, and in so doing we had a good time. Real knowledge and life experience was outside the lecture theatre and the library.

Although I found memorising the details of the various branches of the law sometimes tedious and even pointless, I did nevertheless find some of its aspects interesting, especially its largely historical and philosophical foundations and origins, and its largely theoretical criteria, which, although often out-dated, unsound or just plain irrelevant, helped to sharpen my mind and critical awareness. The law reports were often a source of amazement and amusement, for fact is often stranger than fiction, but when I reflected on the manner in which the legal system regulated human behaviour in society, then it seemed ungainly and unwieldy to me and ill-equipped to maintain a just balance between people in present-day society.

Furthermore, I was not inspired by any of my teachers, although they were helpful and pleasant and interesting people. I would sometimes look at them during lectures or tutorials as I doodled discreetly around the essential information I was recording on my note paper – essential, that is, for the purpose of passing my exams – and the words of a song of Stephen Stills would play through my mind:

‘... Are you thinking
Of managers and telephones
And where you’ve got to be at noon?

You are living a reality
I left years ago,
It quite nearly killed me.

In the long run
It will make you cry,
Make you crazy and old before your time ...’

Well, I was determined that this was not going to happen to me. There was not one of my teachers that I wished to emulate and imitate and be like. I had no desire to end up like them. They passed on information, often at a break-neck speed, that was considered valuable or necessary for the regulation and control of human society, but their existential reality was not something to be desired or envied, or at least not by me. They seemed to be trapped by their so-called knowledge, even if they

were relatively comfortable with it, and were often awkward and ill at ease in the company of people when outside their lecture-tutorial-seminar environment. They did not seem to be enjoying life to the full. They had become trapped, and I did not want to follow in their footsteps. I wanted to be free, whatever that is.

The three years at university passed swiftly and eventfully, and having somehow satisfied the examiners, I was granted one of society's passports to success, a Bachelor of Laws Degree with Honours, and at last I was free to steer my own course through life. I did not, however, feel particularly honoured or successful, and posing in my imposing academic garb of gown, mortar-board and important looking scroll of parchment in one hand for the photographer on the memorable day of the degree awards, I felt a complete fraud. I knew only too well that this mile-stone of academic achievement meant nothing to me. I had spent the last fifteen years receiving what many people would regard as a high standard of education, and yet it seemed to me that I really did not know anything about life, other than what I had directly experienced outside the class-room and the lecture theatre. This feeling had been confirmed by the words of the main speaker at the degree award ceremony held in the Great Hall, a retired judge, who, looking a trifle perplexed, had the honesty to say that after a life-time on both sides of the bench, he had to admit that he really didn't know anything. It was clear to me that there was no false humility in his words, and that he meant what he said. I had no desire to follow in his footsteps, no matter how successful a distinguished career such as his would be regarded by others. One way or another I was going to find out what life was really about. I received my degree in the morning and obtained a job as a bus-conductor in the afternoon, with the intention of immersing myself in non-academic ordinary life for a while. Many of my university friends had suddenly dropped their carefree university days image – cutting their hair and donning their suits – and predictably submitted to their destinies of becoming responsible members of society. I bid them farewell before they dispersed into the world, some probably never to be seen again, and went their different ways. We had had a good time together, and it was sad to see that this particular party was now over. Such is life, and so it goes.

I soon mastered the various arts of bus-conducting, having received my on the spot training from a friendly smiling man who was always able to make his passengers laugh and enjoy their ride. 'I'm a man who believes in doing a simple job well,' he said, and that is what he taught me to do. The driver with whom I was teamed up was young and wild and daring, and there was never a dull moment as we sped all over the city, taking people as we found them, and often giving them more than they had bargained for. After the intensity of last-minute revision and determined concentration in the final examinations, life on the buses turned out to be the best way of relaxing that I could have imagined.

After riding the buses for a year, revelling in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, and the constant contact with people of all kinds and ages which was forever changing in a kaleidoscope of colourful situations, I felt suitably refreshed and far removed from the groves of academe. But I was not particularly contented or at peace with my self. I was able to enjoy life from one situation to another, but somehow my existence seemed to be a fragmented one, and I still had no unified view of what life was all about and what my part in it was. It was easy to adopt a certain role in any given situation, or for any particular period of time, but there always came a moment when it seemed insignificant or unnecessary or even false, and I would lose interest in it and try to shed it like a worn-out piece of clothing. And so every so often I would find myself sitting alone in my small bed-sitter, thinking, 'What do I do now?'

In these moments of stillness and reflection, when I was not caught up in any action or the immediate demands of any situation, I would consider my life calmly: It seemed that I was like a swimmer in the ocean being buffeted by the waves, aware of the treasures that lay in its depths, but unable to dive in deep and discover them. I could spend a life-time swimming on the surface and meeting all sorts of different waves and weather conditions, but in the end I would tire myself out, having only met a minute fraction of all of them, and never having dived into the depths below. I knew that there must be treasure down there, but how did one go about reaching it, especially when the waves on the surface took up so much of one's time? I was free to do whatever I wanted, and yet whatever I did, I seemed to end up in some routine or other, following increasingly recognisable habits and behaviour patterns, which I was unable to change or relinquish. My heart longed for knowl-

edge and freedom, and my self seemed to prevent me from discovering them. It was very frustrating, whenever I stopped and thought about it.

One thing was certain: I couldn't be a bus-conductor all my life, even though I had enjoyed a year of it, and I was never going to save enough money to travel the world if I remained an employee of the Devon General Omnibus Company. It was clear that the wage I received had been calculated to provide a standard of living only just sufficiently high enough to enable one to keep working in order to earn the wage to enjoy that standard of living and be able to keep working. It was definitely not intended for anyone planning an early retirement. Of course the job and the wage would provide a reasonably comfortable and interesting way of life for someone who did not want to do anything else in life, but it was a prison for anyone who did. Besides which, in the tradition of all the various adventurers about whom I had read, or met, I wanted to taste many different ways of life during the uncertain amount of time which had been allotted to me.

I decided to go to London, work long hours as a labourer on building the new underground to Heathrow for a year or so, save enough money to be able to live without having to work for at least six months, and then spend that six months discovering what life was really about, perhaps by travelling round the world or else by retiring to the seclusion of a remote country cottage, where I could improve my guitar playing, paint pictures, write poems and hopefully fall deeply in love with a beautiful and free-spirited woman.

I handed in my notice, said goodbye to the people whom I had come to know, hired a car and drove up to London with my few possessions and fresh optimism. An old school friend who specialised in collecting tooth-paste tubes – now safely lodged for posterity in the Victoria and Albert Museum – and who is the epitome of generosity had a small terraced house near Parson's Green, and had said that I could stay there, along with all his other guests whom he also seemed to collect, until I had sorted out my life. I arrived safely, and had soon secured a labourer's job on the new underground, which had by then reached as far as Hounslow, after telling the boss that I had once built dirt roads in Africa. This was true up to a point – but they had been very small roads, for my dinky toys, when I was about four years old. 'Just try me out,' I said. 'Keep me if I can do the job, and get rid of me if I can't.' I was

hired on this basis, but before the first day was over I had given myself the sack. I did not have either the physical strength or the temperament to cope with shifting earth and steel and concrete in the midst of heavy noisy machines and equipment. I beat a hasty retreat from the lonely room which I had rented in Hounslow and returned, a little shamefacedly, to the warmth of Parson's Green. If I was going to get rich quick, it would have to be in a manner which I enjoyed.

When one door closes, another opens. Within a few days I was working as an assistant accountant at Luzac's Oriental Bookshop, situated directly opposite the British Museum, largely thanks to the helpful suggestion of my sister who happened to be working there herself. The large metal sign hanging outside the shop showed a ship steering a course between two rocky headlands in heavy seas. Above and below this scene were the words: '*Nec sinistrorsum ... nec dextrorsum*' – 'Neither to the left ... nor to the right'. Just straight ahead. The middle way.

Although the idea of working in an office had always been anathema to me, I found that I enjoyed dealing with the mountain of paper-work which the also recently appointed chief accountant, an Indian called Basu, and myself had to demolish. There were interesting books in the shop, my employers were friendly, and we were in the heart of London. It was good fun. Perhaps having a university degree did have its advantages after all, although again, as with the buses, I could not see myself working at Luzac's for any great length of time. However it was all new experience, time was on my side, I was with good friends and life was still swinging, even though the sixties were now definitely and noticeably over. When the time came, I would move on. This sentiment was voiced by Basu himself, who in his spare time was already busy looking for another more challenging and better paid job. 'I always change jobs when I want,' he said to me one day. 'People say I'm crazy; that I won't find another job; but there is always another job waiting; and no-one is indispensable or irreplaceable. If Basu leaves this job, there will be another Basu to take his place.' Basu handed in his notice shortly afterwards, and since I had by now mastered the simple accounting system – VAT had not yet been invented – I became the chief accountant. I was the new Basu.

Gradually I found myself settling into a routine which was no longer new, and gradually the same old recognisable patterns of behaviour be-

gan to re-emerge. I might be wearing different clothes, in a different job, in a different setting, but it seemed that I was still no nearer to the secret treasure which lay somewhere in the depths of the ocean of existence. I still had to admit to my self that I hadn't discovered what life was all about, whenever I stopped and thought about it, which, in the action-packed hurry-along life-style I was leading outside working hours, was not very often.

I had been working at Luzac's for several months when my sister, who from time to time had told me that there was a group of people whom I really ought to meet, informed me that she had arranged a meeting for me with a man called 'Abd al-Qadir, on Monday at lunch time. I had always found it interesting to meet new people, once the uncertainties and upheavals of adolescence were well behind me, and agreed to the arrangement without thinking very much about it. I knew that 'Abd al-Qadir was a muslim, and since I knew very little about Islam, other than what I had been told at school – that in the past the muslims had conquered much of the world by the sword, that they ill-treated their women, that they had a book called the *Qur'an* which was worse than the *Bible*, and that they wiped their bottoms with their left hands – it would be interesting to learn a bit more about it first-hand, as long as he didn't think that he was going to convert me. I had already had enough of 'religion' at school, and was not in the least bit interested in replacing one form of Christianity with another one disguised in a different name.



'Abd al-Qadir, or *sayedina Shaykh*, as I later came to call him, and 'Abd al-Ghaffur picked me up outside Luzac's Bookshop on time, exactly as it had been arranged, and as we threaded our way through the London traffic in their battered car, *sayedina Shaykh* half-turned to where I was sitting in the back and gave me a penetrating look with eyes that already seemed to know exactly what was in my heart:

'Well then, what do you want?'

'I'd like to be a really good flamenco guitarist.'

'No, what do you really want?'

'Well, I'd like to know what's behind everything.'

'Ah, that's much more interesting.'

It looked like it was going to be an interesting meeting. We parked the car, and made our way to Cranks. It was the first time I had been there, for although I did not eat a lot of meat, I was not a vegetarian. We chose our food at the self-service, and then settled ourselves at a table by the window. Although I did not realise it at the time, the journey had just begun.

During the meal, which he had generously paid for, *sayedina Shaykh* did most of the talking. I was impressed by his clarity of expression and perception and his general awareness. He was wide awake, and nothing that he said was clichéd or predictable, although as soon as it was uttered it seemed so obviously self-evident and true that one wondered why one hadn't realised it before. At last, someone who knew what he was talking about.

'Abd al-Ghaffur hardly said a word, but although he remained silent, he was listening closely, nodding his head from time to time in agreement. It was as if he did not really have anything to say to me, and was only there to listen to *sayedina Shaykh*. Once, when he was asked what it was like to sit in the company of a man in Morocco called Moulay Hassan al-Majdhoub, he simply smiled and said, 'It's like being drunk.'

I knew that both men were muslims, and yet they hardly mentioned Islam at all, a refreshing reprieve from the Jehovah's Witnesses' style sermon which I had been half-expecting. If anything, it seemed that they considered me not receptive enough to talk about something so precious to them. Instead we talked about this and that and life in general, and in passing *sayedina Shaykh* remarked that it would be useful for me to read his book, *The Book of Strangers*, by Ian Dallas. The conversation covered a lot of ground, and I was constantly startled by the depth of experience and perception contained in *sayedina Shaykh's* words. Whereas it seemed that I could only talk about myself and my past, neither of which appeared to be very impressive in the company I was now in, *sayedina Shaykh* talked about existence and life, without drawing attention to his own adventures and exploits, and without apparently seeking to establish what a wonderful person he was. He spoke with authority, but not as if he was an authority, in the academic or official sense of the word. I began to grow almost uncomfortably aware that I didn't really seem to know anything about anything, and gradu-

ally I said less and less and listened more and more. All the pearls of knowledge which I had gathered and treasured up to this point, suddenly seemed to be no more than worthless imitations, rather than the real thing. In the presence of *sayedina Shaykh* and ‘Abd al-Ghaffur, they appeared irrelevant and hardly worth a moment’s attention. I began to sense that these men not only knew about diving into the depths of the ocean, but also that they were already both deep in the depths and present with the waves on the surface at the same time. In fact it was impossible to categorise them within the limited dimensions of the world as my mind pictured it, and this was confusing to say the least, since although I knew that I didn’t know everything, I had thought that I did have a fairly good idea about life in general.

At one point during the meal, *sayedina Shaykh* started talking about the man who used to do the lights for the Pink Floyd: ‘He was like a magician with lights. He could do whatever he wanted with them. He was in control of them, and created whatever illusion or special effect the moment and the music required at the time. One night, at a live concert in France, he was controlling the light show from the top of a tall scaffolding tower while tripping on LSD. He fell, breaking several bones in his body, and landing at the feet of a beautiful Swedish lady who subsequently looked after him and nursed him back to health. They married and had a child. Several years later, he was in a ‘plane flying over France. There was a mid-air collision with another ‘plane, and everyone was killed. The collision took place exactly over the spot where he had fallen from the scaffolding tower several years earlier.’ *Sayedina Shaykh* paused, as his words sank in. ‘Do you see? Do you understand? He didn’t understand what it’s all about. He didn’t learn from his mistakes. Life is short. You have to find out before you die. You can die at any time.’ *Sayedina Shaykh* nodded towards the trendy people on the pavement outside, foot-loose and fancy-free, the new uninhibited liberated generation with far-out clothes and hip talk, poking fun at the people with old-fashioned clothes and old-fashioned ideas and morals, sexually repressed and afraid to dive in at the deep end of life. ‘All this isn’t what it seems. It’s very unhealthy, fragmented, unbalanced.’ And I knew that he was right.

Towards the end of the meal, *sayedina Shaykh* turned to ‘Abd al-Ghaffur: ‘Well, what do you think? Shall we invite Martin to a *laylat*-

al-fuqara? ‘Abd al-Ghaffur seemed to hesitate, but nodded in assent. And so I was invited to come to a gathering of *dhikr*, of invocation of *Allah*, at their centre, which they called the *zawiyya*, the next Thursday evening. I wrote down the address and memorised their directions, and having finished the meal, we made our way back to the car.

As we drove back to Luzac’s, *sayedina Shaykh* enquired whether I knew of a Zen Buddhist who could give a talk on the nature of matter. I didn’t. In fact I had been wondering what the manager would have to say when I arrived back, as I had been gone nearly two hours, instead of the statutory one. The contrast was striking. The two men in the front were entirely unpreoccupied with the mundane matters which were demanding my attention. I seemed to be living a reality which they had already left years ago.

We arrived back outside Luzac’s, and I jumped out of the car. We shook hands, and as I said good-bye and thank you, *sayedina Shaykh* placed his right hand over his heart and said, ‘*As-salaamu-alaikum*’, which I already knew meant ‘Peace on you’.

‘I like the way you put your hand on your heart,’ I said.

‘We do that because that’s where it all happens,’ *sayedina Shaykh* replied, with a smile which lit up not only his extraordinary eyes, but also his whole face. Clearly ‘the heart’ was something more than just a lump of flesh that miraculously pumps blood around the body.



Thursday evening soon arrived, and I found my way to the *zawiyya* without difficulty. I knocked on the door, which was soon opened by a man wearing a *djelaba* and turban and a string of large wooden beads round his neck. I took my shoes off in the front hall-way, and placed them next to the other neatly placed shoes. We went down a short passage-way and I was shown into a clean, carpeted room which was bare except for a few cushions. The room was devoid of any decoration except for a geometric design, painted in green, gold, blue and white, which covered the whole of one wall. In the centre of the pattern was a photograph of the face of an old, wise, compassionate man with lowered eyes, framed in a white turban and the hood of a white *djelaba*, with wooden beads round his neck. There was some writing in Arabic above and below the photograph.

It was a peaceful room, but I felt strangely naked in it. There were none of the usual accessories which help one to escape from one's immediate situation, or in which one can take cover, if one feels the need to do so: No books or magazines to flip through, no music system to fill the ears with instant sound at the touch of a button, no television in which to become totally absorbed, not even a work of art or a poster to admire and comment on: Just four walls with a floor and a ceiling and a couple of large windows that looked out onto an enclosed garden with tall trees.

There was a small group of young men in the room, all dressed in *djelabas* and turbans and wooden beads, and all, as I was introduced to them one by one, with foreign sounding names, in spite of their being English or American. One of them explained that they were just about to do the prayer, and, if I wanted, I could join in. Since I had always been prepared to try anything at least once, as long as there did not seem to be any harm in it, I agreed to do so, and was immediately taken to a clean bathroom and shown how to do *wudu*, the simple washing which is a necessary prerequisite for the prayer.

As I returned to the room, a loud call to prayer in Arabic, the *adhan*, echoed through the building. Some more young men, including *sayedina Shaykh* and 'Abd al-Ghaffur, appeared, and as soon as the *adhan* ended, we all lined up in rows behind 'Issa, with the wall with the geometric pattern behind us, and followed him in the movements of the prayer, which involved standing and bowing and prostrating and sitting, with the recitation of *Qur'an* at certain points. I did not know the meaning of any of the words, but copied the movements of the men on either side of me, experiencing a curious kind of pleasure whenever we went into prostration, with our foreheads and hands and knees and toes on the ground. It was a position which I had seldom experienced since the days of my early childhood, when I often used to adopt that position if I could not go to sleep at night, rocking backwards and forwards and singing for what seemed hours.

When the prayer was over, and everyone else had done some more shorter prayers individually – still following the same pattern of movement as in the prayer which we had just done together – we all formed a large circle, sitting cross-legged on the floor, towards one end of the room. No-one talked. A group of ladies in long dresses, and with their

hair covered, entered the room discreetly and formed a separate circle at the other end of the room. Then the singing began. It was simple and melodious and unaccompanied by any musical instrument, even a drum. I was later told that they were singing from the *Diwan* of *Shaykh Muhammad Ibn al-Habib*, whose photograph it was on the wall, and who was the teacher of *sayedina Shaykh*.

The combination of the men's and ladies' voices made a sound that reminded me of the humming of bees. I looked around at this intriguing spectacle with interest. I had visited a cheerful group of people who did Transcendental Meditation during the time I had worked as a bus conductor – and had even tried out their form of meditation for several months – and I had attended a bright-eyed expectant meeting of some of the followers of the Guru Maharaj – who didn't show up – after arriving in London, and of course I had been a regular church-goer as a school-boy at boarding school, because it was compulsory, but this gathering was quite different to all of these. I didn't understand a word of what was being sung, and yet I could feel my heart responding to it, and the effect was very peaceful.

There was a depth and gravity present in the gathering which I had never experienced in any other gathering of people before. No-one drew attention to themselves. No-one displayed any visible sign of emotion. No-one was trying to impress anyone else with their knowledge or spiritual stature or depth of inward ecstasy. How different it was to the flashing lights and wild music and energetic dancing at a live rock-group performance, where everyone was on show and out to make an impact. How different it was to the consciously controlled formality of a classical concert, where the players seemed to be constantly concerned with their display of precision and virtuosity, and the listeners with the concentration needed to appreciate such refined music. How different it was from the pious ritualised worship I had observed in church, where everyone seemed to be obliged to adopt a special voice and facial expression, as they self-consciously reminded themselves of their unworthiness in the eyes of the God they imagined, and the need to repent for all their short-comings. How different indeed it was from even sitting in the comfort of one's own home, drinking coffee and chatting with close friends in a relaxed atmosphere with a favourite LP playing in the background. Whatever was happening here was a completely new reality for me to taste and enjoy.

I tried to imitate the people around me who appeared to be completely absorbed in what they were doing, to sit still and keep my eyes lowered, but time after time I could not help but look around me and study the faces of the singers, including the ladies whom I could glimpse over to my right if I turned my head around. They were all interesting faces, of people who clearly hadn't just stayed at home, especially that of *sayedina Shaykh* who sat with his eyes completely lowered, apparently totally unaware of who or what was around him.

After the singing had been going on for perhaps half an hour or forty minutes, two of the men left the circle and made some tea in one corner of the room. It was poured into small glasses which the tea-maker's assistant then carried over to each singer in turn, one at a time. His movements were calm and unhurried as he walked quietly back and forth between the brass tray and the singers, blending in with the singing which continued uninterrupted, each person merely taking his glass as it was offered to him, without any word of acknowledgement or thanks. The tea, which was sweet and perfumed with jasmine, was only in order to facilitate the singing without making a break in its continuity or causing a distraction.

After everyone had finished their tea, taking quick sips in between phrases of the *Diwan*, and the empty glasses had been unobtrusively collected and returned to the tray in the corner, a patterned brass sphere attached to a short stem on a circular base was produced from somewhere, with sweet aromatic smoke pouring out from the holes which had been patiently hammered and chiselled out by its maker. Aloes' wood. It was taken round from person to person, each one bending over it and waving the smoke with his hand so that it swirled around his face, permeating his robe and turban. When it came to me, I followed suit, and breathed in the perfume. It was both relaxing and refreshing at the same time.

After everyone had sampled the aloes' wood, one of the men went from person to person, sprinkling them with rosewater from a finely shaped brass container with a long spout. Again, the perfume was both relaxing and refreshing, enabling one to enjoy the *Diwan* without losing attention. Everything that was happening was new to me. I found myself in a world which up until then I had never even heard of or imagined. And I liked it.

After what seemed to have been a long time, the singers still showed no signs of stopping, and although I was accustomed to sitting cross-legged on the ground, since I disliked either perching or lounging in a chair, I found that my joints were beginning to complain, and that the carpet was rather thin, and the boards beneath it rather hard. I grew increasingly fidgety and uncomfortable, constantly uncrossing and recrossing my legs, and wondering how much longer this was going to continue. Looking around me, no-one else seemed to be suffering as I was, and the singing continued. No-one seemed to be aware of my discomfort, and no-one seemed to take any notice, either of me or anyone else.

Suddenly, when I had given up waiting for the end to come, and had come to accept that it might still be a long time away, everyone stood up, and I eased myself to my feet with great relief. We all joined hands, still in a circle, and began swaying gently and rhythmically backwards and forwards, as we repeated the invocation of *Allah*, ‘*Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah*’, taking a quick breath after each ‘*Allah*’. Still no-one looked at anyone else. If anything the people in the room were concentrating more on what they were doing now than they had been when they were singing the *Diwan*: ‘*Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah*.’

I tried to get the movements right and chant in time with everyone else. I noticed that three of the men were now standing outside the circle, singing more *Diwan* in time to the dance, which, I was later told, is called the *Hadra*, meaning the Presence – of *Allah* – for it is during the *Hadra* that one is often most aware of the all-pervading Presence of *Allah* who is closer to us than our jugular vein. The total effect of the movement, the invocation, and the singing, was very beautiful and majestic. So simple and uncomplicated and noble.

Sayedina Shaykh moved into the centre of the circle and directed the *Hadra*, moving from person to person and re-focusing the awareness of anyone whose attention had wandered. Everyone moved as he moved and chanted as he chanted, so that our movements were unified, and the invocation sounded like one great voice, invoking *Allah*, Who is Greater than anything: ‘*Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah, Hayy-Allah*.’ Gradually the tempo increased and became more rapid, the swaying and the invocation both in time together – ‘*Hayy-Allah -Hayy-*

Allah-Hayy-Allah-Hayy-Allah-Hayy-Allah – until, with a sharp clap from *sayedina Shaykh's* hands, both movement and invocation changed. Instead of swaying backwards and forwards, we were now moving up and down like pistons, chanting 'Hayy' as we bent our knees, and taking in a deep breath as we straightened them: 'Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy.' It sounded like a giant hand-saw, inexorably cutting through some mighty tree. I felt a surge of energy through my body, passing through my hands whose fingers were lightly but firmly interlocked with the fingers of the adjoining hands of the men on either side of me. My arms and then my whole body tingled. The interested yet detached observer in me suddenly had to let go. I began to smile and feel light-headed. This was great!

Immediately *sayedina Shaykh* was in front of me, clapping his hands sharply and bringing me back to the present moment with a piercing, serious, steady look, very different from the expression his eyes had when he was smiling or laughing. He wasn't playing at party games. He meant business. This was no laughing matter. It wasn't a good night out at the local disco. It wasn't an outing to the local pub to while away the time and get a little tipsy, although by now I was feeling drunk. But it wasn't the kind of drunkenness that makes you incoherent and clumsy and noisy. It was a kind of drunkenness that I had not experienced before, a drunkenness in which one's awareness is heightened, and one's sense of balance becomes more refined. And certainly there was none of the loose talk and laughter that flows with wine – only the concentrated invocation of one of *Allah's* Names, *al-Hayyu*, the Living: 'Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy.'

I re-concentrated my attention on the invocation and my movements, trying to do exactly the same as the men on either side of me, and watching *sayedina Shaykh* as he directed the *Hadra*: 'Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy, Hayy.' The sound was overpowering and overwhelming and seemed to become louder. Everyone was sweating. The small group of men outside the circle were still singing *Diwan* in time with the invocation, speeding up their singing as the *Hadra* increased in tempo. Another surge of energy swept through me, and, try as I might to ride it, I felt my legs begin to wobble, as if I was about to faint and be wiped out of existence. Immediately *sayedina Shaykh* was in front of me again, and with the assistance of another man I was swiftly

helped over to the edge of the room, where I sank down in bewilderment, propped up by the wall.

The *Hadra* continued, as I lay there, feeling like a feather in the wind, completely unaware of the true nature of what was happening, and yet completely at peace. Although everything that had taken place this evening was strange and new to me, I did not feel in the least bit threatened or insecure. It was like floating in the sea on a sunny day. The air was filled with the sound of the rhythmical invocation and the voices of the *Diwan* singers and the scents of aloes' wood and roses. The moving, dancing, figures whose feet never left the ground for a moment seemed to be bathed in light, as if the intensity of the lights had been turned up brighter with the aid of a dimmer control. It was both peaceful and exhilarating, and for all I knew everything outside this room had ceased to exist. And still no-one made a spectacle of themselves, by leaping about, or crying out in ecstasy. They were all completely submerged in the *Hadra*, even *sayedina Shaykh* at its centre, each figure contained within the precise, simple movements of the dance and the precise, clear sound of the invocation, with their eyes almost closed and their attention directed wholly inwards towards their hearts, not outwards towards phenomenal existence.

I had no idea of how long the *Hadra* had lasted, but gradually the breathing, for that is what the invocation had become, became quieter, and swifter, and then ended, as *sayedina Shaykh* said, '*Ash-shadu an Muhammad ar-Rasulu'llah.*' Everyone sat down. The room was silent, but vibrant with energy. Into this silence poured the voice of 'Issa, reciting some verses from the *Qur'an*, part of whose meaning I later came to understand:

'Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The likeness of His Light is as if there were a niche and in the niche is a lamp and in the lamp is a glass and the glass as it were a brilliant star lit from a blessed tree, an olive, whose oil is well nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it. Light upon Light. Allah guides whom He wants to His Light. And Allah sets up likenesses for man. And Allah knows all things.'

The sound of the *Qur'an* vibrated directly in my heart, which seemed to have been completely emptied of everything as a result of the *dhikr* and

the *Hadra*. I did not know what the words meant, but I was aware that they were having an effect on me, and it was not like the effect of listening to a pop song, or a hymn, or even a *mantra*. There was no emotion involved. It was simply an effect that I had never experienced before: It was as if my heart was expanding and glowing and tingling all at the same time. It was amazing, and tremendous.

The recitation of *Qur'an* came to an end, and *sayedina Shaykh* began to speak: 'A'oudhu bi'llahi min ash-shaytan ir-rajim. Bismi'llah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim. Ash-shadu an la ilaha il'Allah. Ash-shadu an Muhammad ar-Rasulu'llah. La howla wa la quwata illa bi'llah.' He paused, and then began to speak about the restlessness of the self whose attention is directed outwards and not inwards, how it is preoccupied with everything that is going on around it, but is unaware of the real meaning of what it sees, let alone its own meaning, of how it is blinded by itself and its desires. It seemed that every word was directed at me. All the inquisitiveness and restlessness that I had exhibited during the gathering of *dhikr* were described and explained, even though I had not seen *sayedina Shaykh* look up once during the whole evening, except when he had re-centred my attention during the *Hadra*. I listened intently. I had never heard anyone speak like this before in my whole life, and with such authority.

Many of the words which he used were strange to my ears, and there were statements that *sayedina Shaykh* made which I did not understand. He seemed to be using a terminology and a frame of reference with which I was totally unfamiliar, and which somehow cut through or transcended the limitations of the usual thought-patterns and mental constructs to which my mind was accustomed and habituated. He seemed to be speaking about a dimension of existence of which I did not know, although it was obviously very clear to him, and probably to the other people in the room, because he was speaking from within that dimension. Certainly there must have been meaning in his words for each person who was present, although probably each person received a meaning which was connected directly to their own personal individual reality. Certainly everyone listened closely, without moving, and despite my ignorance, I seemed to understand what he was talking about as far as my capacity to understand would allow. *Sayedina Shaykh* spoke clearly and concisely, without emotion, or empty rhetoric, or contrived

eloquence, or patronising condescension. He was simply transmitting knowledge with certainty and humility in such a way that he was like a mirror in which people could see their selves.

Sayedina Shaykh's discourse concluded with the following description: 'It's as if you are in a hotel room in a town on the edge of the desert. It is comfortable, and you have all you need, but it's not enough, and you are aware that you are in a prison. It's comfortable, but it's a prison. You know you want something more, but you don't know what it is. Then suddenly you hear the sounds of movement and commotion and the voices of people outside. You go over to the window and look out. A caravan is just leaving town. There is excitement in the air. Where will the journey across the desert lead? What will it be like? Then suddenly the leader of the caravan looks up, directly at you, and he shouts, 'The caravan is leaving. Are you coming, or not?' His unexpected words awaken a longing in your heart. This is what you want. But are you prepared to leave the comfort and security of your hotel prison room? It's a difficult decision. Will you stay? Or will you go with the caravan? Already it is on the outskirts of town, and soon it will disappear into the desert. You have to make up your mind quickly. You have to choose before it's too late. The decision is yours.'

And in the silence that followed these words, I knew that this was exactly my situation. *Sayedina Shaykh* was the caravan leader, and he had just invited me to join the caravan on an amazing journey into the unknown, and I had to decide whether to accept that invitation, or remain in the illusory security of a world with which I thought I was more or less familiar, with which I was not content, and in which I knew I was imprisoned. This was my chance to escape from the world in which I was thinking of managers and telephones and where I had to be at noon. I had only recently finished reading Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*, and at the time I had wished that I could be part of such a journey, and in such a company. Suddenly and unexpectedly I was now being presented with my heart's desire. My heart cried 'Yes!' and my mind said 'Wait!' I put off the decision for the moment.

Shortly after *sayedina Shaykh* had finished speaking, all the ladies rose to their feet and left the room and went downstairs. Minutes later a large plate full of rice and meat and vegetables, accompanied by a large bowl of salad, was brought in and laid on a low table which had been

moved into one end of the room. After having washed our hands under warm water poured from an ornate brass kettle over a large ornate brass basin, a group of us gathered round the meal, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Another group, including *sayedina Shaykh*, gathered round more food placed on a table-cloth spread on the floor at the other end of the room, after having also washed their hands. ‘*Bismillah*,’ said *sayedina Shaykh*. ‘*Bismillah*,’ said everyone else, and we all started eating, using our right hands. Presumably the ladies were eating together in another room downstairs.

I was thankful for the distraction of the food, and busied myself with the meal. After what I had just experienced, I wasn’t quite sure what to say. Gradually my feelings of awkwardness and self-consciousness diminished. The food tasted good and everyone at the table was relaxed and unthreatening. I was impressed by the courtesy and lack of unnecessary formality which they displayed. They were friendly without being too friendly, and I was relieved to discover that they weren’t out to convert me and persuade me to join their group on the spot and become one of them because theirs was the best in the world and everyone else had got it wrong. It was very peaceful, and I couldn’t help thinking that if they did not feel the need to try and convert me, then they must be really content and satisfied with whatever it was that they were doing, and equally content and satisfied to let the rest of the world continue with whatever it was doing.

So I tried to find out a little bit more about what they did do, without committing my self, like a newspaper reporter who attempts to elicit essential facts without becoming personally involved in whatever he or she is investigating. Whatever I asked, however, seemed stiff and stupid and irrelevant as soon as the words left my mouth: ‘Do you believe in a heaven and a hell like the Christians do?’ I asked. Amin looked at me with amusement, and smiled. ‘It’s not like that,’ he said. End of theological debate in comparative religion.

Although I hated insincerity, it seemed that my questions were not truly sincere, probably because I was hiding behind them, in order not to appear ignorant or vulnerable. For some strange reason, which I could not identify, I felt the need to protect my self, and so I found myself asking the sort of questions that people usually ask when making polite conversation in order to avoid awkward silences, or to evade making

actual contact with people whom they do not know very well. Although I usually abhorred either asking such questions, or having to answer them, inexplicably I found myself taking refuge in them. After asking a few more unnecessary questions, I gave up, irritated with my self, but at a loss as to how to ask the right questions. It was clearly pointless reducing the transaction between us to polite enquiries for information in which I wasn't really interested anyway. I wasn't going to be allowed to play the nervous school-boy sitting at top-table with the head-master for that one dreaded meal of the term, trying to pretend that I was a sort of grown-up like him. It was equally pointless trying to impress the others about myself, what I had done, or was going to do, or knew, because no-one else was talking in this manner. Instead I relaxed, and listened to what everyone else had to say. I had never been part of such a peaceful gathering before, in which the prime objective appeared to be the sharing of knowledge while sharing food, rather than merely seeking to be amusing and interesting or impressive at the meal table, although in fact the conversation was both amusing and interesting, and impressive.

After the first course, glasses of cool water were handed round for anyone who was thirsty, and then large plates of fresh fruit, including the tangerines and bananas which I had brought with me as a gift in lieu of the traditional bottle of wine which I usually took along when invited out to supper, were placed before us. When this had been eaten, the man with the hand-washing set went round from person to person again, pouring the water over the hands as and when it was needed. All the people who did the serving, did so without drawing attention to themselves, almost making thanks unnecessary. Tea and *halwa* followed. It was the first time I had tasted *halwa*, and the first time I had tasted anything so sweet, just like the whole evening in fact. It was so peaceful, so far removed from the hustle and bustle of the London life-style to which I had become accustomed.

I had more than half-expected to become the object of *sayedina Shaykh's* attention either during or after the meal, but it seemed that he was not the kind of man who played the paternalistic host. Instead he had been talking animatedly to and with the other group of men at the far end of the room, leaving us to get on with our conversation where we were.

The moment came when I felt it was time to go. I thanked everyone around me, rose to my feet, and walked over to where *sayedina Shaykh* was sitting, stroking a beautiful Siamese cat relaxed and purring on his lap. I cannot remember what he said to me, but he seemed very different to the casually dressed friendly man who had chatted about this and that and life in general over a simple meal in Cranks less than a week ago. Robed in a dark maroon red *djelaba* and wearing a white and gold-yellow turban, he sat cross-legged with his back straight, on a thin mattress, looking like a desert king surveying his kingdom, like a caravan leader who had dispensed with the small talk and recently given a direct invitation, to which only a direct answer, in the form of action, would be acceptable.

I was not ready to give a direct answer. There was a part of me that had always held back from diving into the unknown, that had always been reluctant to take the next step, that was always unsure of who could be trusted, even when my heart told me that there was nothing to fear and that there was no other choice to make. It was an aspect of my self that I disliked intensely, because it was often destructive and negative, robbing one of spontaneity and enjoyment, and allowing golden opportunities to slip through my fingers, so that I often spent many hours afterwards regretting my hesitancy and being angry at my own cowardice. Nevertheless there had often been occasions when I had perceived that this tendency to hold back before deciding what to do was a positive feature of my self, since from time to time it had helped me to avoid actions or situations which, in retrospect, would clearly have been disastrous or harmful in their outcome if followed through. The difficulty lay in being able to recognise whether one was sabotaging one's own best interests, or whether one was exercising valuable foresight, which is half of wisdom.

At any rate, it had become my custom not to trust strangers until I had come to know them, and not to make immediate decisions which were important ones without prior consideration and sustained analysis. So I looked into the eyes that still seemed to know exactly what was in my heart, and thanked *sayedina Shaykh* a little too politely for a lovely evening, as if it had been no more than a conventional Sunday dinner shared with distant relations whom one seldom ever saw. It was clear to me yet again as I spoke that one couldn't hide behind conventional

formalities in the *zawiyya*. There was no room for pretence in this room. *Sayedina Shaykh* smiled, as if he knew exactly what lay behind my politeness, and bid me good night warmly and gracefully, like a king: ‘Do come and visit us again,’ he said, ‘whenever you feel like it.’ I was shown to the front door, and having put on my shoes, said goodbye for the last time, before stepping out into the night.

Outside the *zawiyya*, I paused and looked up at the sky. It was early spring. The air was clear and cool and the stars shone. My heart felt exactly the same, as if it had been renewed and refreshed and prepared for the start of something new. Over on the other side of the road was a pub, full of music and people and laughter. I walked down the middle of the road in the direction of the nearest tube-station, keenly aware that there was more than one kind of drunkenness, but undecided as to which of the two taverns I belonged.



Several months passed, and I settled back into the way of life with which I had become familiar. I grew accustomed to the usual routine of travelling the crowded rush-hour tube to work, and doing the work, and travelling the crowded rush-hour tube back from work, to spend the evening with my usual friends, chatting about this and that and life in general and listening to music, or watching TV, or dropping in at the local to have a few pints and a laugh, or, when the week-end arrived, going out to a film, or a concert, or a disco, or a party. On the whole, life was good fun. It just seemed a pity to have to spend so much of it at work, especially when so much of the work was routine, the repetition of the same actions over and over again.

As I became more adapted to life in London – so different to that of a cheerful bus-conductor in sunny Devon – and less distracted by everything that was going on around me, the memory of the *laylat-al-fuqara* re-surfaced in my awareness, and the as yet unanswered invitation still echoed clearly in my mind, nagging at the restlessness in my heart. It was intriguing. I went out on a sortie down Charing Cross Road, and eventually managed to track down a copy of *The Book of Strangers* in one of its many bookshops.

Once I had started reading the book, I could not put it down. It seemed to have been written especially for me. It was one of the few of the

many books I had read that made my skin tingle with excitement. It not only seemed to begin by putting my own situation and perceptions of life into words which up until now I had only been vaguely aware of but unable to consciously express, but also then continued to outline the journey which I knew I had always wanted to make, even though up until then I had only vaguely sensed that such a journey existed. For the main body of the book described not so much an outward journey, to places and people, as an inward journey, leading to a knowledge of the self which is direct and experiential, and altogether far beyond and deeper than the thought-bound writings of 'modern' psychologists and most western novelists. It was also clear to me that the caravan journey on which I had sensed I had been invited at the *laylat-al-fuqara* was the journey described in this book. I was very excited. I told all my friends to read the book immediately, eager to share my discovery and good fortune with them. Without one exception they were totally unimpressed by the book, and could not understand what all the fuss was about.

Doubts entered my mind. Perhaps I was reading too much into the book, and into the *laylat-al-fuqara*. Perhaps it was no more than a very well-written story, and not a clear description which indicates what it is possible for a human being to know. Perhaps it was just fiction. But then I had met *sayedina Shaykh* twice, and on both occasions he had impressed me as being a man who did not play games, and who did have knowledge, one could even say wisdom. For several weeks I continued to see-saw between doubt and certainty. It was like the situation in which one falls in love with a woman, but nevertheless attempts to talk one's self out of any commitment, just in case that love may meet with rejection and pain, or die young. My heart and my mind each battled against each other for the upper hand, and my thoughts swung between positive acceptance and negative rejection. The more I thought about it, the more confused I became. It was impossible to decide for sure, to make a decision that was both right and safe, because I knew that if I trusted and followed my heart, then it would mean having to enter completely new and unknown territory, with the possibility of there being no return.

I read and re-read the book, knowing that I was at an important cross-roads in my life's journey, sensing that I would soon have to make an important decision, and hoping that the book would somehow help me

to decide which way to go. Finally, my attention zeroed in, to one particular passage in the book:

‘The arrival of the Master was something that moved me more each time I was privileged to see it. The love that flowed between him and his murids was something that revealed itself richer at every meeting. He sat cross-legged in the corner, his white burnoose wrapped about him, his hands folded in front of him or touching fingertips to fingertips, like the Holy Prophet. The murids moved forward without fuss and kissed his hand. He would greet them by name, always investing that moment with a special quality of beauty and love that went directly to the disciple’s heart. Soon the little mosque was filled with the folk of Wisal, and nowhere were poorer people to be found, and at the same time, richer. The gathering was suffused with love. It shone out of every face, and as the night wore on and the singing of the Diwan gave way to songs praising the Messenger, the gathering seemed so unified that it was almost as if one voice sang.

We were approaching the climax of the evening. Everyone stood while Sayedina Shaykh declared the litany of praise and glory and prayer upon the blessed Messenger and Slave of Allah. After each four lines, we joined in with our unified song of supplication asking the Lord’s benediction upon the Prophet, and then, the Blessing over, we performed the Hadra. The imam moved into the centre of the circle, and the sacred dance began. The spiritual energy was tremendous and vibrant with love. The fuqara swayed forward and back to the Divine Name, while a line of singers wove a filigree of chanted Qur’an that filled the heart with awe. The imam, as always, conducted the Hadra with great sobriety, but with depth and concentration, as he had been taught by the Master.

There was no doubt that, within a very short time, Lights had manifested inwardly to certain members of the fuqara, and the air was lit with the Divine Presence. It was at that crucial moment, when concentration should be purest, and when thought should cease and the worshipper become no more than the breath of the Name that issues from him, that I felt compelled to turn my head. There, just behind the row of singers, alone, cross-legged on the straw mattress, sat our Master. His eyes were shut, and his head moved almost imperceptibly to the rhythm of the Hadra. Light poured from him and filled the mosque. Everything

moved, and he was still; everything vanished, and he remained. We were mere specks of dust in the burning radiance of his light. At that moment, I knew that he was directing the whole affair, that from some supreme state he gazed into our hearts and poured light where he was told from on high. Then, even as I felt the awesome splendour of his state, I grasped that he was nothing. If we were dust, he could not even be that, for what remained of him? He was consumed in divine power, but when the coal blazes, what is fuel and what is fire? A voice in my heart, in the very depths of my being, but a voice, said, '*Wa lam yakun lahu kufuwan Ahad*' – 'And like unto Him is not anything.' Thus, at the very moment that I glimpsed a fragment of our Shaykh's majesty, I was shown that he was naught and that there is only Allah. *Ahad. Samad. One. Eternal.*'

If this description was accurate and true, I said to myself, if it was real, then it was all true, and I had no choice but to join the caravan. If this description was false, or imagined, or an exaggeration of the fleeting euphoria which is sometimes experienced at religious gatherings and places of worship, then I was simply not interested.

And of course the only sure way to know if it was true or not was to join the community at the *zawiyya*, at least on a trial basis, which would mean changing my life style rather drastically. I would have to give up drinking and smoking, for example, which seemed perfectly acceptable forms of enjoyment to me, provided of course that they were taken in moderation, and it would probably mean that I would not be seeing as much of my friends as usual. Of course I did not really know what day to day life in the *zawiyya* was like at all. I had experienced one extraordinary evening there, but perhaps everyday existence was very different, a bit like going to a memorable rock concert one night, and spending the rest of the week working away at some routine job. There was only one way to find out. I decided to accept *sayedina Shaykh's* invitation to drop in at the *zawiyya* whenever I felt like it.

During the next month I visited the *zawiyya* several times in the afternoons. It seemed emptier than it had been at the *laylat-al-fuqara*, and I learned that *sayedina Shaykh* was visiting the *zawiyya* in America, but there was always someone there, and on each occasion I was welcomed in and given some tea and something to eat. Any questions I had

were answered, and no-one tried to persuade me to do anything that I did not want to do. It was clear that whoever was at the *zawiyya* was there because they wanted to be there. Anyone who wanted to be elsewhere was elsewhere.

I liked all the people whom I met at the *zawiyya*. They were courteous and knowledgeable, and all their eyes were clear and direct and untroubled. They laughed, and, I noticed on one occasion, they cried. They did not pretend to be perfect or to know everything about everything. They were human, and fallible, and yet it seemed that they were more able to live in relative harmony with each other, without tearing each other to pieces, either directly or behind each others' backs, than many of the other social groups with whom I had been in contact. They did not always agree with each other, but at least they seemed to accept that there were differences between them. Some of the men and women were married to each other, and had children, and they appeared to have found a just balance somewhere between the two extremes of the sterility of a convent or monastery and the sexual anarchy of a hippy commune. They were not just doing their own thing or experimenting with life while seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. They were following a way of life based on the *Qur'an* and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, may the blessings and peace of *Allah* be on him, and of his community, and they seemed to know a great deal more about how he and his followers had lived than, for example, the Christians know about Jesus and his followers, peace be on him. I liked the way they lived.

There was nothing to indicate that keeping their company would not be beneficial, and yet I still held back. I had been educated not to trust anyone or any teaching or any philosophy completely, because no-one is perfect, and the deep-rooted influence of my social conditioning could not easily be jettisoned. It was very difficult to just let go, and say 'Yes!' and take the plunge. During my visits to the *zawiyya*, I had found out a little more about Islam, but I knew that, as with most things in life, how I imagined it would be like, and how it would be if I did it, would be quite different – like the difference between imagining what it would be like to swim in the ocean, and actually diving into the ocean, for the very first time. I had, however, experienced enough by now to know that the Muslims whose company I was now keeping were very different to any Christians I had met, both in the way they lived and in the

way they viewed existence, and that there appeared to be no danger of my having to submit to the kind of stifling religion which I had experienced at school, if I decided to join the *fuqara*. If *The Book of Strangers* was all true, then this would certainly be the case.

At last I glimpsed an enjoyable way out of my self-imposed dilemma, a way out which would also enable me to postpone my final decision just a little while longer: I had learned from the people at the *zawiyya* that much of what is described in *The Book of Strangers* had actually taken place in Morocco, and was based on *sayedina Shaykh's* own experiences there. I decided to go to Morocco myself. If the same wonderful events and meetings happened to me there as are described in *The Book of Strangers*, then I would know for certain that it was true and I would join the *fuqara* – and if they did not happen, then I would know for certain that it was not true and I would not join the *fuqara*. And whatever did happen, the journey was bound to be an interesting one. It was summer time and time to escape from the office!

Having arranged to have an indefinite period off work, and having raised as much money as I could, which was not very much, I packed my rucksack, bid farewell to my friends, and, clutching my favourite guitar, hitch-hiked down to Plymouth and the ferry to Bilbao, determined to have a good time, whatever happened: I was young and strong and healthy and free and on the open road on the open sea. Gazing at the vast dome of the sky and the vast expanse of water that stretched to the encircling horizon, I was filled with wonder as the ferry headed unerringly for northern Spain. Life is great.



The journey to Morocco was slow but sure as I hitch-hiked south, going where the lifts took me, meeting all kinds of people leading all kinds of lives, and staying in all kinds of places, ranging from open fields and leafy forests to camping sites and inexpensive pensions. It was good to camp out one night after a day in the wind and sun by an open fire beneath the stars, and to spend another night on a comfortable bed after a good hot shower and a well-cooked meal. I was in no particular hurry, and in fact rather lost sight of my objective, as I became absorbed in Spain itself. It was only the second time that I had been there, and I

loved its tasty food and rough red wine and passionate music and people, and life on the open road.

As I moved further south, however, I kept on meeting people who had just been to Morocco and were on their way back home. Each one had a different story to tell, and each story was nothing like what is described in *The Book of Strangers*. It was as if Morocco was a mirror in which each person encountered their own individual reflection of their own reality. They thought they were describing the country and its people, but really they were describing the reality of their own selves. My interest in Morocco and the desire to arrive there were renewed, and I pushed on without delay, no longer attracted by the lights and delights of Madrid – and Mercedes, the dancing laughing singing landlady who ran the small home from home pension at which I had temporarily come to rest after arriving in Madrid.

After a long hot walk from the centre of Madrid to its outskirts and beyond, I eventually found myself in the middle of the countryside with no water and nightfall just round the corner. I could play it safe and retrace my steps to a house I had noticed a couple of miles back, or I could go forward trusting that all would be well. I continued straight ahead, down the open road, sucking a small smooth pebble under my tongue to alleviate my growing thirst, and tapping out a marching rhythm with my fingers on the dusty plastic cover of my guitar which hung at my side. There was very little traffic and the fields of olive groves were quiet and peaceful. Soon after the full moon had risen, a dented but jaunty van pulled up ahead of me, and in no time at all I was speeding up into the mountains, chatting away with its dented but jaunty driver in my best pigeon Spanish. After stopping off at a road-side cafe for a couple of cold beers, we continued our climb up into the mountains whose harshness was softened by the gentle moonlight, and eventually, after going over the top, we coasted down to the plain once more and into a fiesta at Badajoz.

Although I had walked many miles that day and stayed awake for twenty of its hours, the excitement in the air pushed my tiredness away, and after having had a bite to eat and a drop to drink, watching the laughing people drift in and out of my world, through a haze of lively flamenco guitar sound and song accompanying the tapping feet and clapping hands and clicking fingers, I again shouldered my ruck-sack and

guitar and strode through the crowds and out of the city beneath the full moon so high in the sky, until, suddenly feeling very tired indeed, I turned off the road and made for a small rocky outcrop behind which I rolled out my sleeping-bag, lay down and fell fast asleep.

The next day I pressed on south, and after two days I was really in Andalucia for the first time, delighting in its sparkle and softness and a certain charm that had not been evident further north. Cold north, warm south – this seemed to be the way of the world. After spending one night in the mountains north of Malaga, meeting a startled rabbit-hunter in the early dawn as I made my way back to the main road, I was picked up by a school-bus full of laughing children and their good-natured teacher, as I rested by a natural spring of cool fresh water which gushed out near the road-side. They were on their way to the Canary Islands and had to catch their boat at Algeciras. They could take me all the way there. We wound our way down to the coast, stopped off for a feast of sardines freshly grilled over an open fire on the beach, had a swim in the cool sea and hot sunshine, continued our drive through hotel country, and eventually arrived in Algeciras.

I decided to rest a few days in the leafy camp site on the edge of town. What had been welcomed as the golden age of flower-power was already withering fast, but there were still groups of young and adventurous people passing through with flowers in their hair and stars in their eyes, and at times anger and restlessness in their hearts, enjoying life to the full as best as they knew how, with the sounds of the sixties drifting in the air and through their opened minds. I sat and talked with fellow travellers in the warm sunlight and the welcome shade and the cool evenings, talking about this and that and life in general as we shared our food and wine, and playing away on my guitar to appreciative listeners whenever I felt like it. It was early summer, in the time of year, and in my life, and it was great.

When the time seemed right, I walked down to the ferry-port and caught the next ferry to Tangiers, relaxing in the sun and breathing the sea-air in deep, as dolphins dived gracefully and playfully around the bows of the ship. Eventually the ship docked, and the passengers disembarked and passed through the passport control.



As I shouldered my ruck-sack and guitar and strolled, a little hesitantly, into Tangiers for the first time, Europe suddenly seemed very far away. It was a very different world here. The people not only looked different – they were different, and it was impossible to make a quick assessment of a person merely by studying the face. This was a different kettle of fish altogether. I paused uncertainly, and then dived in.

During the following weeks I met an almost bewildering variety of people as I hitched and walked my way down to Meknes and across to Fes, stopping off on the way at the Roman ruins of Volubilis to reflect briefly on the ineluctable evanescence of life. Many of the people I met were from Europe and America, seeking enlightenment or enjoyment from hashish, but I noticed that most of the Moroccans whom I met did not rely on any form of drug to help them achieve the peace and equanimity which they appeared to possess. They were different. They knew something about life that I did not know, and it showed in their eyes and in the way that they behaved.

Of course there were those who, after a century of colonisation by the French and the Spanish and the Tourists, were trying rather unsuccessfully to be like the Europeans, but, more significantly, there were many people who continued to live as it seemed they had always lived, and whom some of the younger Europeans were trying rather unsuccessfully to imitate. On one particular afternoon I found myself walking through dusty streets in blinding sun, feeling hot and sweaty and furious. Nothing important seemed to be happening. I was just a stranger in a strange land. No-one else was about. Suddenly a small smiling boy appeared:

‘Hello,’ he said, in perfect English, ‘what do you want?’ I looked at him in exasperation.

‘Peace,’ I said angrily.

‘Oh,’ he replied, ‘you mean this kind of peace?’ And he raised his right hand in the hippy victory peace salute, with a broad grin all over his face.

‘No,’ I said, ‘not that kind of peace,’ and strode off. It was all very well talking about peace, and wanting peace, but how did one actually acquire it, a heart that was at peace and at rest?

That particular afternoon passed, and other days followed, and rough was followed by smooth, and difficulty was followed by ease. The jour-

ney continued to unfold, and each new day brought new encounters with different people in different situations. After several weeks of interesting meetings, I began to realise that all the people who seemed to know what they were doing, and who welcomed me with warmth and hospitality, were muslims; and that all the people who were wandering about rather aimlessly, or who were mainly preoccupied with self-gratification, and who were not particularly good company, were not muslims. It was as simple as that. The best of the non-muslims were not in the same league as the best of the muslims. And this was among ordinary people leading ordinary lives, not among those who had been particularly gifted with charisma or excellence or wisdom. One of my hosts in Meknes, for example, was a man who simply came up to me out of the crowd and invited me to join his family for supper. He looked after donkeys that had been ill-treated or were too old to work. He was clearly a poor man, and yet his wife prepared a feast for us. I had never encountered such hospitality before in my life. When I tried to thank them, he just smiled, and said, '*Al-hamdulillahi wa shukrulillahi!*' – 'Praise is for *Allah* and thanks is to *Allah!*'

On another day, I was wandering through the streets of Meknes when a small child took me by the hand with one hand, pointing at his mouth with the other, and led me to a small dwelling inhabited by a family of five. Their youngest son had just been circumcised, and they were celebrating the event with mint tea and sweet-meats. I was shown where to sit, on a cushion in one corner, and the father, dressed in a rough white *djelaba* and turban, solemnly prepared the mint tea using a charcoal brazier to boil the water. Once it was ready, he poured it out, and handed everyone a glass. '*Bismillah,*' he said. '*Bismillah,*' we all said, and tucked in to the simple array of biscuits and pastries, coaxing the tearful boy to forget his pain and enjoy them. Since the family knew no English or French, and I knew no Arabic, we conversed in sign language. When we had finished eating and drinking, the father nodded and smiled, and I departed in wonder. In England the children were taught not to accept sweets from strangers, while here strangers were invited to accept sweets by children.

Nothing like any of the events or meetings described in *The Book of Strangers* had happened to me, but the events and meetings that had occurred during my time in Morocco forced me to realise that whatever

Islam is – and really I did not know anything about it at all – it has a profound effect on those human beings who follow it with sincerity. This was especially true of and apparent in the old people whom I met. Their lives on earth were coming to an end and they were nearing death, and yet they were still alert and alive and smiling, with eyes that shone and seemed to gaze beyond the confines of this world to a better world that lay beyond. They seemed to repose peacefully in the present moment, displaying anticipation rather than nostalgia. How different to the rows of old people I had seen during the last of my schooldays sitting in the sun on the seafront at Eastbourne at the height of summer.

Wherever I went, it was the muslims who especially welcomed me, and fed me, and invited me to stay as their guest, most of them bursting into laughter whenever I ventured to play my guitar. How very disconcerting for the would-be maestro, and how different to the appreciation I had experienced at the various camp sites where I had sometimes stayed. And yet I couldn't help laughing too. My dramatic and amateurish brand of flamenco and the few self-indulgent love songs that I knew did seem ridiculous and shallow in the company of the people with whom I was now spending more of my time. I could not help but see clearly that the instrument, however badly or well it might be played, was more of a distraction and a means of diversion than a means to enjoying and understanding one's experience of life more fully.

Since I had started keeping the company of muslims, I also noticed that I no longer had any desire to drink alcohol. I could not help but perceive that it was merely a social habit to which I had become accustomed and habituated simply because it was so prevalent in the society into which I had been born and brought up, and that life could in fact go on without it without causing any great loss of enjoyment. It was never offered to me by my various hosts, and I felt no need to go and search it out. It simply did not belong to the reality in which I was now living.

From time to time I would meet people who reminded me of *sayedina Shaykh* and the *fuqara* at the *zawiyya* in London, both in their outward appearance and inward demeanour, but because my French was limited and my Arabic non-existent, I was unable to communicate with them or ask them any of the questions which bubbled up in my consciousness from time to time, other than to exchange a simple greeting and a smile, and place my right hand over my heart. The only people who could answer my questions were back in London.

Even if the caravan journey and the invitation to join it were the figments of my imagination, it was becoming increasingly clear to me that the existential way of life of the Muslims was infinitely superior to the one which had formed the basis of my own upbringing, and which continued to dictate, to an almost surprising degree, the manner in which I considered it socially acceptable to behave. True, the people here were much poorer and less 'civilised', in the technological sense of the word, but their basic humanity was intact and I always felt not only safe in their company, but also completely at ease. The only Moroccans who gave me any trouble were the ones who had evidently abandoned their Islam, or who had never had access to it in the first place, and who accordingly belonged to neither one world nor the other. And even the ones who did not do the prayer were still often friendly and considerate people. There was one young man whom I had met briefly in Tangiers, for example, who was determined to go to Europe and become a karate expert. I noticed that he did not respond to the call to prayer when it echoed out across the city, and asked him why.

'I don't know,' he replied. 'Perhaps it is because I am only interested in karate at the moment.'

'What is the point of doing the prayer anyway?' I asked.

'We do it because we are commanded to do it by *Allah*,' he answered, looking at me seriously. 'First we wash with water, our hands, our mouths, our noses, our faces, our forearms, our heads, our ears and our feet, because you have to be clean when you pray to the God. Then you stand ready, facing Makka, and you remember that you are in the Presence of God – you are all the time, but especially when you pray – and then you raise your hands up by your ears like this, and you say '*Allahu Akbar*' as you bring your hands down to your side again. '*Allahu Akbar*' means that *Allah* is Greater – greater than anything else in existence. That is why you worship Him and nothing else.'

I understood his words perfectly, and yet, like him, I did not do the prayer. My increasing awareness of the reality of Islam, however, not as a dogmatic religion but as a way of life, and the realisation that if it was a better way of life than the one to which I was accustomed, then I should follow it, was strengthened considerably by my encounters in Fes:

After having spent several days there, mostly spent wandering through the narrow streets of the old *madina*, and wondering what it was like inside the mosques, into which I was never allowed to enter, I found myself invited to a meal in a large comfortable house. One of my host's daughters, who must have been about nine years old, knew some English and acted as interpreter without any apparent shyness. After the meal she took me up onto the flat roof to show me the view. As I was gazing out over the ordered yet unpredictable patchwork of roof-tops which surrounded us on all sides, she asked me a question which no nine-year old girl had ever asked me, before or since:

'Do you believe in God?' she asked.

'Yes, I do.'

'Where do you think He is?'

I gestured around me: 'He is everywhere, in everything, but we can't see Him.'

She smiled triumphantly: 'Then you are a Muslim!'

I shrugged my shoulders: 'Maybe.'

A couple of days later I was walking through the *souk*, when a group of young men invited me to have some mint tea with them. After chatting for a while, one of them said abruptly, 'You are a Muslim. Why don't you embrace Islam?'

I hedged: 'I don't know. Is it easy?' 'Of course it's easy. Just repeat these words after me.' And he slowly spoke some meaningless – to me at least – sentences in Arabic which I obligingly repeated after him. As soon as we had finished, he clapped his hands in delight and laughed. 'Good,' he said. 'Now you are a Muslim!'

'No I'm not,' I replied. 'It's no good just saying words that I don't understand. I have to know what I'm doing.' Some of the others nodded their heads in agreement, and after a few minutes I bid them goodbye and continued my exploration of the *souk*.

As I wandered about, I had by now realised that nothing like what had happened in *The Book of Strangers* was going to happen to me, or at least not on this particular journey. However it was beginning to look like I was going to have to accept Islam. There didn't seem to be anything better to do, and it was no longer possible to sustain the misconception that Islam is only for foreigners. But clearly there was no point in accepting Islam here in Morocco. If I was going to embrace Islam, I

needed to learn it from people who not only knew it well but who also spoke the same language as me – and the only muslims I knew who had impressed me with their knowledge and behaviour, and who could speak English well, were back in England.

I was interested to observe that at this point the question which was uppermost in my mind was not so much whether or not to join *sayedina Shaykh's* caravan, as whether or not I should embrace Islam, although I was aware that there was a strong link between the two questions. Although it seemed that the caravan journey was essentially concerned with inward self-knowledge, whereas the way of Islam was essentially concerned with outward behaviour, it was clear that in fact one could not have one without the other. From what I had seen of life at the *zawiyya*, the *fuqara* followed the outward pattern of behaviour of Islam whilst simultaneously being committed to purifying the self and understanding it. From what I had seen of life in Morocco, if you followed the way of Islam, you were given knowledge. It was just a question of degree. One could accept Islam and not undertake the caravan journey it seemed, but one could not embark on the caravan journey without first accepting Islam. Anyway, whatever the truth of the matter was, it was at least clear that whether or not I was to embark on the caravan journey, the people from whom I could learn most about Islam were *sayedina Shaykh* and the *fuqara*.

I still, however, held back from actually committing myself, and decided to make one last break for 'freedom', although by now I was beginning to realise that freedom is an inward state, and that wherever you go, you take your self with you in whatever state it happens to be. Perhaps, my mind argued, I was turning to Islam and the *zawiyya* simply as a refuge from the arrows and slings of outrageous fortune, and because I was afraid to take up arms against a sea of troubles and face the future. Perhaps I should really put my self to the test and travel up into the Atlas mountains and then across and down through Africa, visiting my birth-place and childhood haunts in Zambia on the way. Perhaps it would be far more exciting than life in the *zawiyya*. There were sure to be many adventures on the way, and maybe I would find the woman I had been looking for without success, and whatever did happen, I was bound to emerge from the experience a richer and wiser man.





I packed up my rucksack early the next morning and strode purposefully eastwards out of Fes in the direction of the mountains. I found a good hitching spot and waited expectantly for the lift that was sure to come. It didn't. Hours passed. Still no car stopped for me. The number of cigarette butts around me increased. And then quite clearly, almost audibly it seemed, my heart said, 'Go to London and join 'Abd al-Qadir and the *fuqara*.' I was startled out of my dreams. Decision time had arrived. I lit another cigarette, and faced my self.

Sitting there, in the late morning sun, by the side of the empty open road, perched on my ruck-sack, with my trusty guitar close to hand, completely isolated from all my usual haunts and habits and friends, I considered which way was forwards and which way was backwards, which way was straight ahead and which way was running away or turning aside. And I considered which company I wished to keep. I did not want to travel all over Africa. I could not stay in Morocco indefinitely. If I returned to England, I could either continue my usual life with my usual friends, or I could join the *fuqara*. My usual friends were more concerned with earning their living than discovering the meaning of life. I had never been able to figure out why I existed in the first place, or why my life had unfolded the way it had, or what there would be if nothing existed at all. I did want to know what was behind everything, and I did want to know what the meaning of my life was, before it came to an end, and perhaps the *zawiyya* would be the place where such knowledge could be found. As with everything in life, there was only one sure way to find out: Try it. I had no choice in the matter: The best place and company for me at this particular point in my life was in the *zawiyya* with 'Abd al-Qadir and his community. This was the message that came from the depths of my being.

'Alright then,' I said to myself. 'I will.' I stood up, picked up my guitar and rucksack, and walked calmly over to the other side of the empty open road, trembling slightly. Almost immediately a scooter stopped, and gave me a lift back to the camping site. I decided to spend the night there, and to start back for London the next morning.



Early the next morning I again strode purposefully out of Fes, only this time I was heading westwards, back towards Meknes. Having reached the outskirts of town, I sat under a shady gum tree, and waited for a lift. After a short while I was joined by a gaunt figure wearing an old colonial sun helmet whom I had seen at the camp site during the previous week but not actually met. Christopher was young but worn out, and hardly recognisable when compared to the fresh young face pictured in his passport. He had just spent the last two years travelling up the length of Africa. He had experienced many adventures on the way, and fallen in love with a wonderful woman on the Gold Coast, but he had also caught several illnesses, including malaria, from which he was still suffering. He was interesting company, although a trifle unbalanced and feverish. All he wanted to do was to go home, which was in New Zealand, and he kept on imagining how it would be, as he walked up the path to the front door in the cool rain and knocked ... and then again ... and then again ... Nobody there any more.

‘What were you in New Zealand?’ I asked, meaning what was his profession.

‘I’ll tell you what I was in New Zealand,’ he said. ‘I was young and I was fit.’ He laughed in disbelief as he looked down at his wasted body. ‘I used to play rugby ... and now I’m a wreck. But I’ll get better again, and I’ll tell you something else. Before I started travelling, I went to see my doctor, and he said, ‘What do you want?’ And I said, ‘I want to see the world, and I don’t want to be shy with women.’ And he said, ‘Don’t you worry. You’ll travel everywhere, and after a while you’ll never be shy with women again.’ And d’you know something, he was perfectly right. But right now I just want to get back home while I’m still alive, and get well again.’

Christopher slumped against the tree and slid down onto his back, covering his face with his battered sun helmet, as another bout of malaria hit him. I quickly brewed some fresh gum-tree leaf tea for him, and some curious, friendly children who had been watching us from a distance now came up to us and gave us some prickly pear fruits to eat, for which we were very thankful. After this strange combination of food and drink, my new companion seemed better, and since no-one had stopped to give us a lift, we decided to walk on a bit. After a while we reached a small roadside watering place, for both animals and people,

and again Christopher collapsed into the ditch with fever. I could not very well leave him there in that condition, so I stayed. Towards late afternoon a relaxed but alert man in a *djelaba* and turban rode up and watered his mule. Once they had both quenched their thirst, he remounted his animal, and as they turned to leave, he looked over at us with concern, and then simply pointed with his right fore-finger towards the high blue sky, before riding off.

‘What’s he doing?’ mumbled Christopher.

‘He’s saying that *Allah* will help us,’ I said with a conviction that I had never felt before.

‘Well as long as somebody helps us,’ he groaned, ‘I don’t care if it’s *Allah* or Tom or Dick or Harry.’

I was still chuckling when a car miraculously appeared and drew up. The two men in it were going all the way to Rabat. We were welcome to come along. We drove off into the sunset, and after it had been dark for a while, pulled off the road into a peaceful gum-tree grove, where we cooked a simple meal and chatted about this and that and life in general, until it was time to roll out our sleeping bags and fall asleep under a brilliantly starry sky. We were up early with the dawn, and after some coffee and a bite to eat, we sped through the morning fresh countryside to Rabat, where we thanked our benefactors and bid them goodbye.

After a delicious meal of cous-cous and camel meat, followed by fresh water-melon and mint tea, in a small back-street restaurant which the Moroccans used, we walked to the edge of the city, and waited for the next lift. As we sweated away in the noon-day sun and watched the cars go by, I reflected on the present situation: Although our immediate objective was the same – to hitch to London, our long-term objectives were very different. Christopher wanted to go home, and I wanted to join *sayedina Shaykh’s* community. My gaunt companion, who, it seemed, had been conjured up in order to confirm my decision not to travel the length and breadth of Africa, but to return to London, now seemed to be much better, and did not need my company. I pointed out to Christopher that we were on the same road, but with different intentions, and that we would both stand a better chance of catching a lift if we were hitching singly. He nodded in agreement, and we decided to part company and go our different ways. We shook hands and smiled and wished each other all the best, before I strode off into the heat and

further along the open road, leaving the gaunt sun-helmeted figure behind me. It was not long before I was bouncing along in a dusty CV-6, driven by a bouncy ebullient French couple, and munching gratefully on a large slice of dripping red thirst-quenching water-melon.

After this point the lifts came swiftly, and suddenly I was on the ferry again, with the white walls of Tangiers fading in the distance as the call to prayer echoed faintly across the water, and all the fresh memories of the people I had met and the scenes that I had seen in the last few weeks beginning to recede in my mind's eye as the present took on a different form and different people and scenes continued to appear and unfold all around me in life's picture show, moment by moment. 'Was it a vision or a waking dream?' – Keats.

Again, I rested briefly at the camping site on the edge of Algeciras, but it no longer had the same appeal as it had had on my outward journey. I was not the same person as I had been. My experience had changed me inwardly, and even outwardly, for I now had a beard, like so many of the other Muslim men whom I had seen and admired for their noble appearance. Whenever fellow travellers heading south asked me what Morocco was like, I just smiled and said, 'It's great, but you have to see it for yourself. It's different for each person. You'll get what you expect. What do you want?'

After a couple of days in Algeciras, I headed north, following a different route to the one I had taken when heading south, but ending up in Badajoz once more, this time with the sun high in the sky and everyone enjoying their siesta. Once more I was tempted to make a detour. Why not branch off and take in Portugal while I was in this neck of the woods? Why not indeed. I crossed over the border and waited expectantly. It was as if I was back where I had been outside Fes, waiting to explore the Atlas mountains. No lifts. This time, when my heart told me to stop prevaricating and travel direct to London, I did not even hesitate. I walked back into Spain, and in no time at all I was in a car speeding northwards, driven by a quietly determined German couple.

By now I had very little money left, and no return ticket for the Bilbao-Plymouth ferry. Accordingly I decided to hitch up to Calais or Dieppe where the crossing to England was shorter and cheaper. Again, the lifts came swiftly, and I smiled: All my other attempts to hitch through France on other journeys in the past had always been long drawn out

with many delays. I arrived in Calais with just enough money to pay for the ferry to Dover, and having donated my battered Maltese travelling straw-hat to the relaxed and peaceful Dutch couple who had driven me there and shared their lunch with me in the sun, I caught the next ferry to cross the Channel. Soon I was back in London with the good friends with whom I had been staying at Parson's Green, before my sudden departure to Morocco.



My friends were unable to understand my decision to embrace Islam, just as they had been unable to understand *The Book of Strangers*. There was, however, a young man from New Zealand staying at my friend's house. He had just travelled overland to England, and had somehow ended up in the same house as myself. He understood. He had been out on the open road too. 'I'll never forget this day,' he said, after we had been talking about our travels for a while, 'Saturday, the 11th of August 1973.'

It was on that day that I made my way to the *zawiyya* and knocked on the door. 'I'd like to join your community,' I said, once I was inside.

'You realise that means you'll have to embrace Islam?' said 'Abd al-Aziz.

'I decided to embrace Islam while I was in Morocco,' I replied. Everyone smiled, and after a short discussion, everything was arranged. *Sayedina Shaykh* was still in America, but the Director of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Regents Park, the Raja of Mahmoudebad, would come round on Monday evening to accept me into Islam. There was an empty room in the *zawiyya* in which I could stay once I had joined the community. I was as excited and nervous as the others were serious.

I returned to my friend's house and waited for the next forty-eight hours to pass, listening to my favourite music for perhaps the last time. I enjoyed the company of my friends, for they were good friends, but I had already left. Monday came, and we spent the morning talking and listening to music. Lunchtime arrived, and with the feeling of impending irrevocable change in the air, I suddenly said, 'Well then, aren't you going to invite me down to the pub for my last pint of bitter?' We trooped down to one of our old favourite haunts in Chelsea, but somehow it had lost its appeal. 'I think I'll just have a half,' I said. I didn't even enjoy it.

Having returned to the house, I packed my few belongings, said not fare well but fare forward to my friends for the time being, and, along with my two guitars – which, as it turned out, were never really to be played again – I ventured out into the London Underground, and into the unknown. I emerged at the Tube Station nearest the *zawiyya* and smoked my last cigarette for the time being, before leaving my half-finished pack of cigarettes on a convenient garden wall for some fortunate fellow addict to discover before the next rain fell. I had tried to stop smoking in this manner several times before, but always without success. This time I would do it, *insh'Allah*, God willing.

I arrived at the *zawiyya* and was greeted by 'Issa, smiling broadly. The Raja should be arriving shortly, but in the meantime I should have a complete bath using just water. 'When you embrace Islam,' I was told, 'you leave all that has ever happened to you before then behind you. You start again, from zero point, like the moment you first came into the world.' I was shown to the bathroom, given a towel, and left to get on with it. Ten minutes later, I was down in the *minza*, as it was called, the room in which I had experienced my first *laylat-al-fuqara*, and in which I was to be present for many many more.

Tea was made, and the other *fuqara* began to appear. Then the Raja arrived and was shown in. I was impressed by the affection and respect with which the *fuqara* treated him. He had no sooner started his tea than he asked for an ash-tray. 'Issa looked surprised, but left the room swiftly, and returned with a saucer. The Raja lit up a small cigar, puffing away with obvious enjoyment, and began to talk about his student days at Oxford. 'I had so many pairs of shoes,' he said, 'I didn't know what to do with them all! And of course I had all the right clothes for Ascot. Very elegant!' As he continued to talk about those distant days, I found myself both surprised and relieved. I had just given up smoking, and yet here was a man who had been a Muslim all his life smoking in the *zawiyya* itself – although in fact, as it turned out, this was the only time I ever saw anyone smoke in the building. I had just prepared myself for a life of poverty, and yet here was a man talking about riches – but in a manner which indicated that he was completely unattached to them. It was only later on that I was to hear about the humble and simple way in which he now lived, of how, whenever he was invited to a grand function at the Pakistan Embassy, he would turn up an hour early and join

the cooks and the servants in the kitchen for a chat and a snack, before departing just as all the very important people were arriving.

This was to be the first of many surprises in *zawiyya* life, as all my misconceptions and preconceptions – in fact all my conceptions – and general ignorance about life were gradually shattered and polished away by the *baraka* of *sayedina Shaykh*, by the grace of *Allah*, sometimes sweetly and sometimes harshly, in the days and weeks and months and years that were to follow.

We had finished drinking our tea, and as the tea-things were cleared away, the Raja became serious: ‘Well then, let’s get down to business,’ he said. We moved over to the thin mattress on which *sayedina Shaykh* had been sitting after my first meal at the *zawiyya*, and I sat cross-legged next to the Raja. The men gathered round. The women, including my sister, entered the room quietly and sat behind them. This was it. The point of no return. I felt like Papillon about to make his final leap for freedom from the cliffs into the ocean.

Now the Raja was a different man. The small talk was over, and we were making a serious contract, not between ourselves, but between myself and *Allah*. And I did not really know very much about what that contract involved or the One with Whom I was making it. Silently I reassured myself. ‘If it turns out not to be true,’ I said to myself, ‘then I’ll leave it.’ The room was silent. Everyone was listening and watching. The Raja turned his kind face to me and looked me in the eye:

‘Do you realise that once you accept Islam, you have to worship *Allah* as if you see Him, and although you do not see Him, you know that He sees you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you accept the existence of *Allah*, and His Angels, and His Messengers, and His Books, and the Garden and the Fire, and the fact that all Good and Evil are by *Allah*’s Decree?’

I hesitated. I had thought that I had dispensed with angels and heaven and hell when I gave up Christianity as a lost cause as soon as I left school and it was no longer compulsory. Well, I didn’t know for sure that they didn’t exist, and perhaps now I would find out the truth about them and the reality of the matter.

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know that as a Muslim it is obligatory to affirm that there is no god except *Allah* and that Muhammad is His Messenger, may the blessings and peace of *Allah* be on him; and to do the prayer five times each day; and to fast during the month of *Ramadan*; and to pay the *Zakat*; and to make the pilgrimage to Makka at least once in your life if you are able to do so; and to avoid what *Allah* has forbidden and to accept what *Allah* has permitted?’

Again, I paused. I did not yet know how to do any of these things. But I would find out. I was in good company. There was nothing to fear.

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Then I want you to repeat the *Shahada* in Arabic after me.’ The Raja slowly repeated the *Shahada*, three syllables at a time: ‘*Ash-shadu an la ilaha il’ Allah, wa ash-shadu an Muhammad ar-Rasulu’ llah.*’ The Raja repeated the *Shahada* three times, and I repeated it after him three times. Then the Raja smiled at me: ‘Now you are a Muslim. No-one can bring you to Islam, and no-one can take you away from Islam. Now I will give you your Muslim name.’ The Raja opened up a *Qur’an* at random and looked in it. He seemed surprised, and looked quickly at me. He shut the *Qur’an*, and again opened it at random and looked in it. Then he nodded his head and smiled: ‘Your name is Ahmad. It is one of the Prophet’s names, may the blessings and peace of *Allah* be on him. It means ‘the most worthy of praise’ and ‘the one who comforts’ and ‘the one who distinguishes between right and wrong’.’

There was a breath of delight in the room, and the *fuqara* burst into song, singing from the *Diwan* of *Shaykh* Muhammad Ibn al-Habib. It was a practice with which I was to become very familiar, but never tired. I felt dazzled and bewildered as the sound enveloped me. As in the *laylat-al-fuqara*, it seemed as if the lights had been turned up. There was no past and no future. Only now. Everything that had happened up to this point in my life was already finished and over. Everything that was going to happen could not even be imagined. It was as if I did not really exist at all.

The singing of the *Diwan* ended with a prayer of blessing on the Prophet and his family and his companions and all his followers. The Raja leaned forward and embraced me: ‘I have a *Qur’an* for you in my office at the Islamic Cultural Centre; you must visit me soon so that I can give it to you.’ I felt very bewildered and light-hearted. All the men

rose to their feet and embraced me, one by one. I didn't know what to do. Suddenly I was back at zero point again, and as helpless as a baby. I had thought that my arrival at the *zawiyya* to embrace Islam was the culmination of an epic journey. In a way it was. But it was also the beginning of another journey, with *sayedina Shaykh's* caravan, and I didn't know anything. The words of the Raja echoed in my heart: 'No-one can bring you to Islam, and no-one can take you away from Islam.' I suddenly realised what he meant. It was up to me to become a Muslim. No-one could do it for me. And if I did it, no-one could undo it. Except my self. It was easy enough to make a verbal profession of acceptance of Islam before others, but to take on the reality of actually *being* a Muslim was something else altogether. It was like marrying for the first time: The ceremony and the exchange of vows are one thing – the outward expression of an inward intention and commitment in front of witnesses – but the realities of married life are something else, only to be experienced and learned and hopefully accepted with either gratitude or patience, and above all understanding, as they unfold from moment to moment, from beginning to end. I had left one reality behind me, and entered another one, with which I was almost entirely unfamiliar. I had a great deal to learn.

At that moment my first of many lessons as a Muslim began: The call to prayer for the sun-set prayer, *Maghrib*, was given. I was again shown how to do *wudu*. I joined the prayer line. When everyone behind the *Imam* said '*Allahu Akbar*', I said it with them. When the prayer ended and everyone said '*As-salaamu-alaikum*', I said it with them. At least I already knew these two phrases, as well as the basic movements within the prayer, none of which I had known the first time I entered the *zawiyya*. The rest would follow, *insh'Allah*. I would learn how to be a Muslim in time, or rather, I hoped that I would *be* Muslim in time: someone who is at peace inwardly with the self and outwardly with existence, someone who does submit willingly to whatever *Allah* decrees, someone from whose hand and tongue other people are safe, someone who is safe and sound, someone who is deeply sane, someone who is destined for the Garden, and not the Fire, on the other side of death and the Last Day.

After the prayer, the ladies, who had done the prayer standing in a line parallel to and behind the men, formed a circle at one end of the

room, and the men formed a circle at the other end of the room, and they recited the *Wird* of *Shaykh* Muhammad Ibn al-Habib, a powerful litany containing passages from the *Qur'an* and prayers asking for blessings on the Prophet and his family and his companions and followers, and for guidance and knowledge and gnosis, which lasts about fifteen minutes. After the *Wird* was over, the ladies left the room to go to their own meeting room, and a simple meal followed. After the meal, the Raja took his leave amidst smiles and respect, never to be seen by me again. Before I had managed to visit him at the Islamic Cultural Centre, he had died, may the Mercy of *Allah* be on him, after a heart attack. I was told that he was resuscitated three times in the hospital, and after the third attempt to save his life, he looked at the doctor and said, 'Look, can't you see that I'm on a journey? Please don't try and prevent me from continuing it anymore.' And then his spirit left his body and continued its journey.

And so the journey with the caravan began. I relaxed. Somehow I knew that the want which I had expressed to *sayedina Shaykh* during our first meeting, on the way to Cranks – to find out what is behind everything – was going to be fulfilled. To the astonishment of my friends and the dismay of my parents, who all thought that I had just joined some obscure lunatic religious sect, I was at last truly on the open road – the way of Islam – and I was in the best of company. For I had not only embraced Islam, but also joined the caravan that takes the path that leads to self-knowledge. And what a journey it would turn out to be! I already sensed that it was not all going to be as easy and as sweet as my first evening in the *zawiyya*, for what journey does not have hardship as well as ease, and bitterness as well as sweetness, and tears as well as laughter? Indeed I was already aware of the first stirring of rebellion within my heart, no doubt heightened by my growing withdrawal symptoms from lack of nicotine, as I began to see my own faults and shortcomings mirrored back to me in the people I was now with. Until it is purified through the *dhikr* of *Allah* and the guidance of a Master, your self is your greatest enemy and idol.

That night my thoughts were confirmed by 'Abd al-Ghaffur, just as I was about to retire to my new room to sleep. As we passed on the stairs, he stopped me and smiled kindly, but very firmly, and with a very direct glance, he said, 'May you weep much, Ahmad. The path to *Allah*

is stained with the tears of the lovers of *Allah*. When we laugh, we don't really know why, but when we cry, we know why. Knowledge and tears go together.' I smiled uncertainly, for he spoke from experience. In time I would come to understand the meaning of his words, but right now it was time to sleep for a few hours until it was time to do my first dawn prayer, called *Subh*. At last my real education had begun.



Several weeks later, *sayedina Shaykh* arrived back from America, and it was I who answered his knock at the *zawiyya* door. 'Ah! Ahmad!' he exclaimed, as he entered with his dancing serious smiling eyes that still seemed to know exactly what was in my heart, 'Welcome! Don't expect anything from anyone!' The leader of the caravan had already begun to teach me, and in the days and weeks and months and years that followed, *sayedina Shaykh* and the *fuqara* taught me many things, including and beyond what is behind everything. I always remember these words of *sayedina Shaykh* 'Abd al-Qadir al-Murabit especially:

'If *Allah* favours you, He drives you into a corner so that you have no choice but to accept Islam, and if *Allah* loves you, He drives you into another corner, a *zawiyya*, so that you have no choice but to learn about your self, and as the Prophet said, may the blessings and peace of *Allah* be on him and his family and his companions and his followers, 'Whoever knows their self, truly they know their Lord.'



*Surely we come from Allah
And surely to Him we return*



You are a refugee
From a wealthy family
You left all your golden factories
 To see
Who in the world you might be.

Joni Mitchell



Golden Days

Every one has their golden days,
It's more than just a phrase, or phase,
We've all tasted love in some way or other,
More or less, from time to time.

Perhaps they only linger in our memories now,
Those golden days that disappeared somehow,
Only sometimes sharply reappearing
In the open vistas of our minds.

Or maybe golden days are here right now,
Swimming without effort with the *tao*,
As we live our lives from moment
To moment, from time to time.

And sitting in the stillness of the night
I see our life in its true light:
There are so many ways to be in love,
As you live your golden days.

And as our days go gliding past
We gently come to realise at last
That as they left this world behind,
We lived and loved and finally, let go

Only to live on, in a different way,
Beyond our deaths and judgement day,
Some in the Garden, some in the Fire,
Our ever lasting, dark or shining, timeless

Golden Days



Ya Wadud Ya Wadud Ya Wadud Ya Allah

