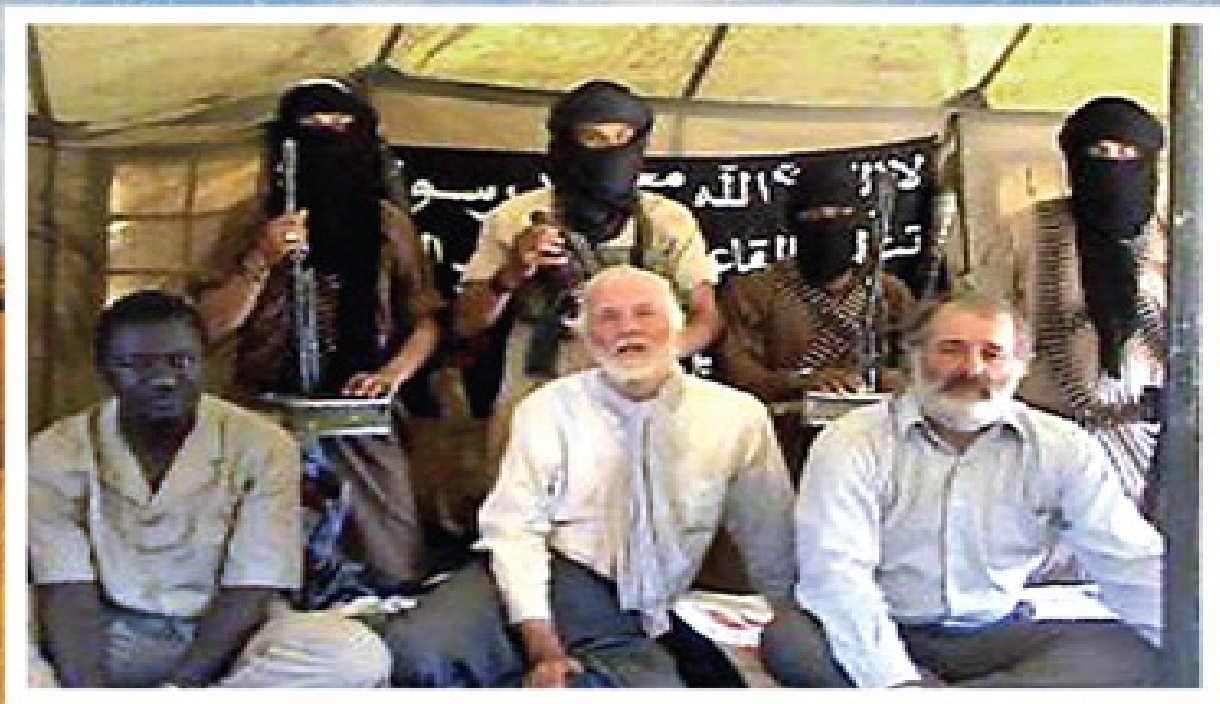


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A SEASON IN HELL



MY 130 DAYS IN THE
SAHARA WITH AL QAEDA

ROBERT R. FOWLER

A SEASON IN HELL

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HarperPerennial

For Mary, whose love, drive, and spirit brought me back

*For my wonderful girls, Linton, Ruth, Antonia, and Justine,
and their families, who made coming home so important*

For Louis, without whom I would likely not have come through

*For Presidents Touré and Compaoré, their brave negotiators,
and all those in the Canadian government who worked tirelessly
and effectively to make it possible*

For all those who can't go home

*It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.*
“By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp’st thou me?”

*The Bridegroom’s doors are open’d wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May’st hear the merry din.”*

*He holds him with his skinny hand,
“There was a ship,” quoth he.
“Hold off! Unhand me, grey-beard loon!”
Eftsoons his hand dropt he.*

*He holds him with his glittering eye—
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years’ child:
The Mariner hath his will.*

*The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”

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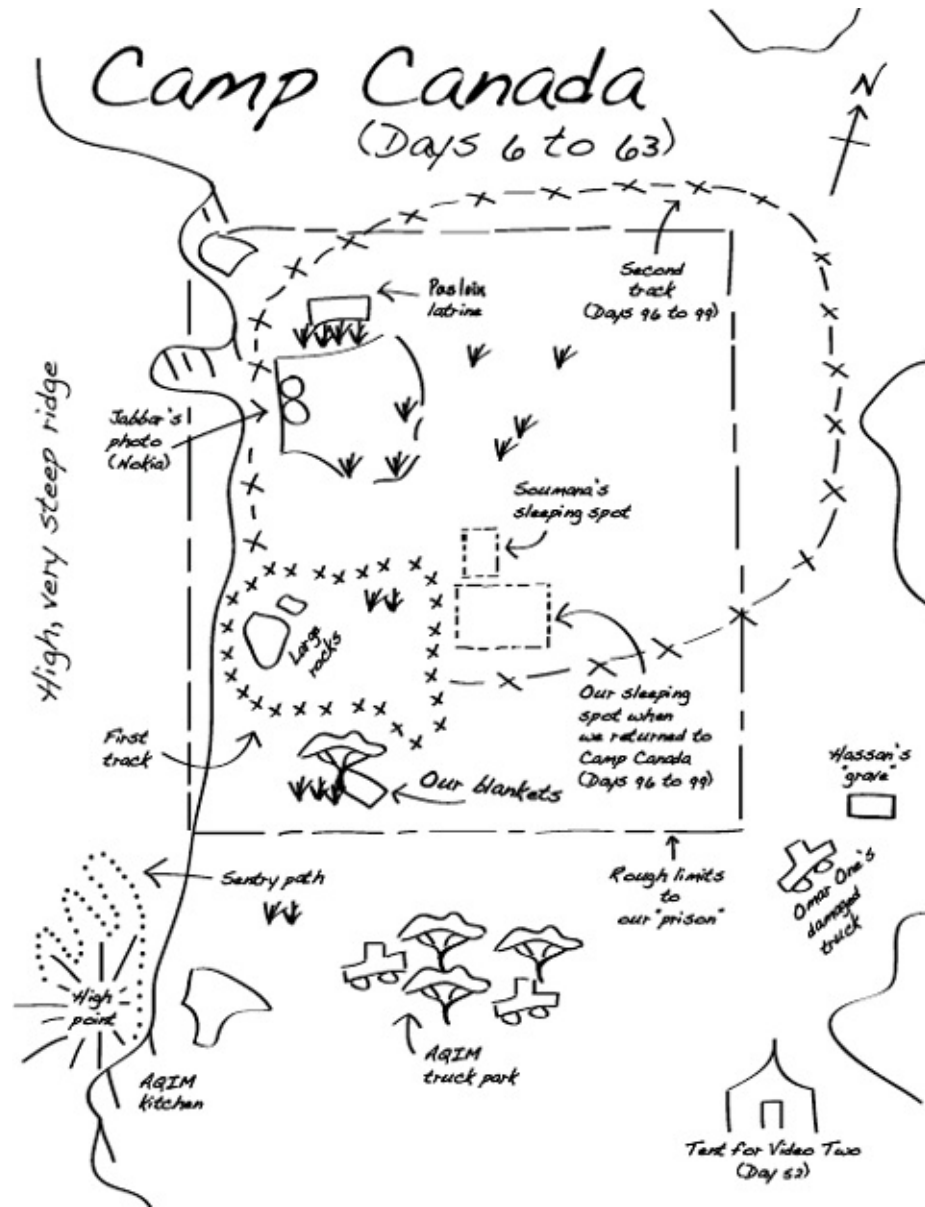
praise for **A SEASON IN HELL**

Credits

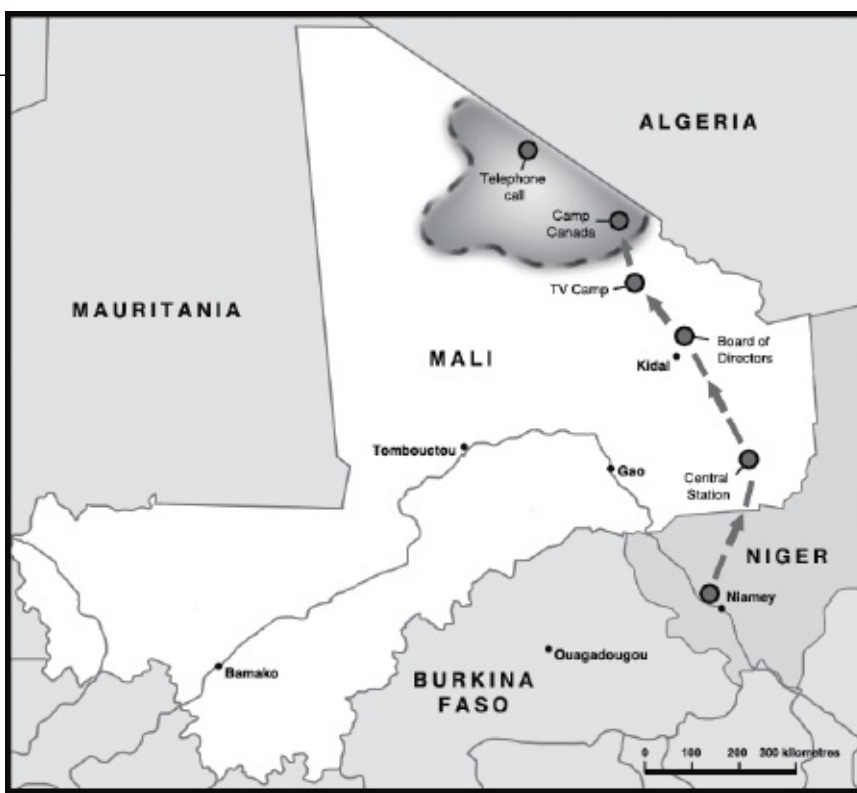
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About the Publisher

Illustrations and Maps



Our Descent into Hell



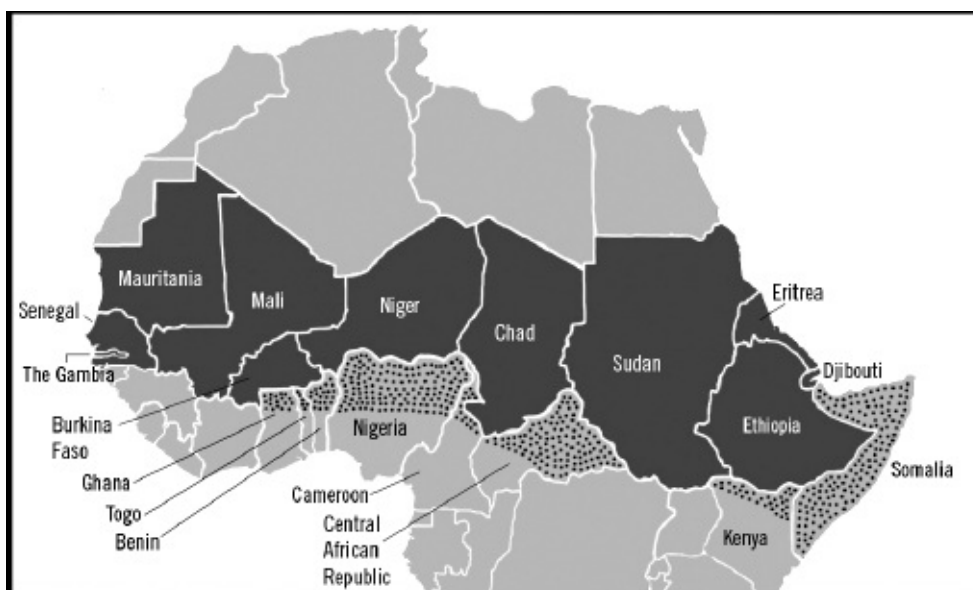
Key Dates and Locations

- 15 December 2008: Central Station
- 16 December 2008: Board of Directors
- 17 December 2008: TV Camp
- 19 December 2008 to 14 February 2009: Camp Canada
- 10 March 2009: Presumed site of telephone call

Legend

- ➔ our presumed route
- approximate area of confinement

Countries of the Sahel



The Sahel (shown in dark grey) is a 7,000-kilometre band of instability that Al Qaeda considers ferti

ground for further expansion. It stretches across the widest part of Africa, from Mauritania on the Atlantic to Djibouti on the Indian Ocean. A number of surrounding countries (such as Somalia and Nigeria) have been similarly beset by climate change, desertification, and ethnic or religious confrontation. The dotted areas denote those regions most affected.

PREFACE

This is a personal story of a dramatic 130-day period in my life and despite my persistent use of the first person plural, I trust the reader will understand that at no point am I purporting to speak for my friend and fellow hostage, Louis Guay.

Louis decided not to play a role in producing this account. As I submitted this manuscript, he was still a public servant in the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) and he continued to be governed by the obligations that bound him in that capacity. I must make clear, therefore, that all the reflections and opinions in this memoir, indeed all the recollections, are mine alone. I have sought to limit the extent to which my narrative encroaches on Louis' privacy and that of his warm and supportive family. I apologize to all the Guays for any transgressions in this regard. They will understand that half of this story is necessarily Louis' and, therefore, telling it without regular and repeated reference to him, his steadfastness, stalwart support, and fine friendship would simply be impossible.

This account of extreme camping in the desert in dramatically life-threatening circumstances will describe what it was like and perhaps allow readers to come to their own conclusions regarding the issue that often seems to be on their minds: how would I fare in such circumstances? Most people, I suspect, would do a lot better than they assume.

This book is not, though, an academic treatise on Al Qaeda or Islamic fundamentalism and the catalytic role in causing what is ever more clearly a clash of civilizations. Nor will it be a primer on how Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) can become better kidnapers. As a result I will refrain from offering detailed comments on what the *jihadists* did or did not do well, on how they might have done better or, more generally, provide information that could permit them to prosecute their *jihad* (holy war) more effectively. Some aspects of this narrative may indeed seem to offer such guidance but have been included only where I know that they already possess such understanding. In the same vein, I have sought to avoid writing anything that might cause a future hostage to spend a moment longer in captivity than would otherwise be the case.

With these caveats, and while it is still reasonably fresh in my mind, I hope the reader will find this an informative account of a very particular though by no means unique experience. Many hostages have endured far longer and tougher trials than our four and a half months as Al Qaeda captives. Indeed, as we lay day after day under the unrelenting Sahara sun I recalled—trepidation quickly becoming naked terror—the long, harsh ordeals of Terry Anderson, Terry Waite, Marc Gonsalves and his colleagues, Ingrid Betancourt, the staff of the American Embassy in Iran, and so very many others. And, of course, I was well aware that many had been killed or died in captivity.

A couple of months before our capture, Louis and I discussed with Isabelle Roy (then Canada's Ambassador to Mali) the eight-month long nightmare that Andrea Kloiber and Wolfgang Ebner, two Austrian tourists captured in Tunisia, lived as prisoners of AQIM. They were released just before our abduction by the same *jihadi* organization in late 2008. As we wondered whether there could be a happy ending to our saga, we were also well aware that other Canadians held hostage in other parts of the world were suffering a similar or worse fate.

We knew that the BBC's Alan Johnston had been held for 114 days in Gaza, two years previously.

by the Army of Islam, but we did not yet know of the wrenching tale of David Rohde, the *New York Times* reporter who escaped from the clutches of the Taliban just after our release and made his way to freedom after more than seven months in the mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas, a story he and his wife tell so compellingly in their book *A Rope and a Prayer*. Ever-present in my mind, however, was the execution of Daniel Pearl, another brave reporter, held in similar circumstances by Al Qaeda in Pakistan.

A word on language: the languages spoken by the thirty-one members of the AQIM group that held us were predominantly Arabic and Berber, in what we took to be a variety of dialects, including Tamasheq, the language of the Sahara and of the Tuareg. Neither Louis nor I speak Arabic beyond a few stock phrases and words, and our captors had, for obvious reasons, no interest in having us learn their languages. Thus we spoke with our kidnappers in French. In this account, I have translated almost everything into English, using words and expressions that best convey both the meaning and what I took to be the intent of the speaker.

With regard to the English spelling of Arabic words, names, and phrases, pragmatism, common usage, and, I hope, consistency have been my guides; thus, Qur'an rather than Quran or Koran; Abu over Abu; Mohammed rather than Muhammad or the many other variations of the spelling of the name of the Prophet. I have used *mujahideen*, rather than *mujahadeen* or *mujahedin*, and Al Qaeda opposed to al-Qaida or al-Qa'ida. The English spelling is that arbitrary amalgam of British and American we like to believe is Canadian. In this account, I have used the French spelling of place names—Tombouctou, not Timbuktu—in deference to the fact that this story takes place entirely in the former French West Africa. When quoting others, I have used their spelling.

Time after time as I stewed in the sand, I thought of Samuel Coleridge's marvellous poem "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and was surprised by how much I could recall of this epic work. I was also struck by how startlingly those passages seemed to reflect our horrendous situation and speak to my inner turmoil. I took strength from and found succour in those stirring words, written two centuries ago, and in my head I began to sketch this account around them.

I have never been accused of being taciturn and when the excellent Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) doctors at the Landstuhl Regional Medical Centre in Germany urged me to share the story rather than keeping it bottled up inside, I had all the encouragement I needed. So, in keeping with my Ancient Mariner-like fixation with telling my tale, this book has already helped to exorcise my remaining Al Qaeda demons.

The epigraph sets the scene and you, my wedding guests, have generously elected to subject yourselves to the account of this grey-beard loon and thereby helped to leave me free. The stanzas at the opening of each chapter are not always in Coleridge's sequence but, as I am confident he would understand, have been selected for their relevance to the progression of my tale.

As will be blindingly obvious, *A Season in Hell* is not intended to be any kind of scholarly work. The bibliography is simply a list of works I consulted, in some part—often in all too cursory a fashion—and I am indebted to their authors, whether or not I agreed with or was influenced by their analyses, conclusions, or objectives.

At the moment of our release, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said very clearly that Canada paid no ransom and released no prisoners, and I have no reason to doubt his assertion. It does seem obvious, though, at least to me, that Al Qaeda did not release me *pour mes beaux yeux bleus*. Canada has many wonderful friends in this troubled world, and perhaps some of them were also my friends. The

certainly are now. To the extent that such friends may have facilitated our release I cannot be anything but deeply in their debt. Had this not occurred, Louis and I would be dead. It is that simple. The executions by AQIM of Edwin Dyer on 31 May 2009 and Michel Germaneau on 24 July 2010 offer an appalling testimony to that reality.

I agreed to take on the job of the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Niger because I am a deep believer in the promise of an effective and engaged United Nations. My ordeal as a captive of Al Qaeda has in no way diminished that belief. Indeed, it has significantly reinforced it.

In writing this book I received no help or advice from the Canadian government—of which I am no longer an employee—and nothing in it has been vetted or approved by, or in any way represents the views of, that government. Of course I have been debriefed by various organizations, but at no point has anybody told me what really went on from the perspective of any government department or agency or asked me to refrain from discussing any aspect of Louis' and my ordeal.

PART ONE

THE DESCENT INTO HELL

CHAPTER 1

THE GRAB

*Forthwith this frame of mine was wrench'd
With a woful agony,
Which forced me to begin my tale;
And then it left me free.*

As we waited for the ferry our driver, Soumana Moukaila, oversaw a gaggle of nearly naked young boys as they competed for the privilege—and a few coins—of washing his careful, well-maintained white Land Cruiser, which proudly sported a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) logo in pale blue on each front door.

We were surrounded by makeshift stalls that sold small items: tiny bars of soap, a few razor blades, shoelaces, packets of Kleenex, and thin plastic bags of purportedly potable water. With loud voices and good humour, hawkers proclaimed the virtues of a variety of dishes to attract hungry travellers before they crossed the great river. The whole scene was suffused with that wonderful concoction of smells—wood smoke, sweat, rich earth, spices, animals, and just a hint of latrine—so redolent of the essential Africa, a scent that had become embedded in my soul almost half a century earlier when I first set foot on the continent as a nineteen-year-old teacher.

Much of the business of this short trip to Niger had, after only a day of meetings in Niamey, been accomplished. The rest was largely ceremony and making nice. I was relaxed and musing about joining my wife, Mary, in Florida for Christmas.

My colleague, Louis Guay, and I were taking advantage of a quiet Sunday to do a little research into how resource revenues might be used to grease the wheels of a possible peace accord to end the two-year-old Tuareg rebellion in Niger that was further crippling this, the third-poorest country in the world. For such was my mission as the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Niger: get the government and the rebels to the negotiating table.

We had not learned a great deal during our visit to the Canadian-owned gold mine near the border with Burkina Faso. Our visit, on a previous trip, to the vast uranium operation around Arlit, 1,250 kilometres to the north, which the French nuclear energy giant Areva had been exploiting for more than forty years, had been far more instructive. Nevertheless, we left the Samira Hill mine site somewhat later than we had intended, at around four o'clock. Following a pleasant forty-minute drive we joined the large and relaxed pedestrian crowd and handful of vehicles at the ferry terminal on the southwest side of the Niger River.

The people around us joked and teased, flirted, laughed, and shouted as children darted through the throng, staring with unabashed curiosity at the two old white guys standing out so incongruously among them. It was a friendly crowd, bursting with life.

The inhabitants of Niger have not been dealt a generous hand by fate, but all around us they were

getting by with energy and enthusiasm—a far cry from the dour doggedness with which we tend to claw through life in the West. Indeed, as I chronicled the bustle, I recalled a letter our youngest daughter, Justine, had written a couple of years previously when she spent a summer mapping the prevalence of hunger among young children in southern Rwanda. She had observed that she spent her days surrounded by nearly starving people who had nothing at all, yet they always smiled as they extended to her a pleasant, courteous greeting. How that contrasted, she ruefully noted, with people back home who so studiously avoided eye contact as they brushed past each other in the street wearing cold, preoccupied expressions.

The massively overloaded and ancient ferry slowly manoeuvred its way across to our side, crabbing against the strong and tricky current. Once it let down its ramp, there was a good-natured jostling of people, vehicles, and animals vying to get off and on simultaneously. As we set off, Louis, an ardent sailor, chatted with the captain as I continued to indulge my passion for photography in this target-rich environment. We reached the northeast side as the fierce heat of the day was dissipating. The glorious African evening light had allowed me to take some decent people shots on the ferry, and life seemed very much as it ought to be.

Leaving the ferry, we climbed the steep escarpment, and Soumana turned right toward the capital Niamey, and floored it. The surface was excellent: one of the few paved roads in the country. Soumana was a fine driver and proud of what his nearly new Land Cruiser could do. The traffic was light and there were few pedestrians and domestic animals along the sides of the road. We passed half a dozen cars and trucks that had been ahead of us on the ferry. A van surmounted by a large, fence-like rack holding a number of understandably forlorn sheep was leading the pack. I had seen the van on the ferry and taken a picture of the hapless sheep. After zipping by them all, we found the road clear ahead.

Ten minutes later we crested a hill, and a long empty valley stretched into the far distance. The view was lovely and peaceful. I was looking forward to a pleasant dinner in Niamey with Guy Villeneuve, the head of the Canadian Office, a dependency of the embassy located in faraway Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Louis was on his BlackBerry, arranging the details with Guy. I heard him say, "Okay, we are about thirty-five kilometres from town, so let's meet at 7:30 at the Gallery Restaurant."

I interrupted, a little impatiently, "Louis, we'll never make it. It's 6:30 now and we've at least thirty minutes before we reach the hotel. It will take us more than half an hour to shower, change, and get to the restaurant." Waving his wrist, he gently suggested I consult my watch, and sure enough I had misread the time. It was 5:30, not 6:30. In fact it was 5:35, on 14 December, and we had no need to hurry.

At this point a pick-up truck appeared out of nowhere and was quickly overtaking us. Its speed seemed out of place, as we were doing about 120 kilometres per hour. As soon as it passed us, it slewed across our front, forcing Soumana to brake. "What the hell!" I exclaimed, woken out of my reverie with some surprise and annoyance, but by then Soumana was swinging out to pass the truck that had just cut us off. As soon as we moved left, so too did the truck, right off our front bumper again blocking our progress and still slowing hard, forcing Soumana to brake to avoid plowing into it. As we pulled back into the right lane, so too did the truck, which now occupied the centre of the road, clearly positioning itself to block the possibility we might still try to pass either to the right or left.

With gut-wrenching dread, I understood that this was no crazy driver or road rage incident but rather the overture to a hideous nightmare.

Both vehicles were in emergency stopping mode. Soumana was standing on the brakes and it was all he could do to control our SUV. Before we came to a complete stop, I saw two African figures in the bed of the truck in front leap into action. One knelt, raising a Kalashnikov assault rifle, or AK-47, and aimed from about four metres away through the windshield into our driver's face. The other, one hand on the tailgate, vaulted onto the road with his AK in the other hand. They were shouting. Soumana was frozen. I hadn't yet looked at Louis, seated in the back to my left, but I was overcome with the hackneyed yet inescapable thought, "This cannot be happening to me!"

Time does slow in such circumstances, and I thought, "No—not here, not now. I know Africa. I have survived over forty-five years on many of Africa's meanest streets: the three Darfuri states in eastern Chad, the Inturi and Kivu provinces in eastern Congo, the anarchy of Mogadishu, northern Uganda ravaged by the Lord's Resistance Army, central Angola during the civil war, and two widely separated episodes of genocide in Rwanda. Now here it comes, in the 8 percent of Niger that everyone agrees is completely safe, where Guy's staff picnics on the weekends. Not this appalling cliché!"

By then, Soumana's door had been wrenched open and hands were dragging him out by the scruff of his neck toward the truck in front. I don't recall exchanging a word with Louis. Few friends will be surprised that my first instinct was to protect my dearest possession, an expensive camera and its valuable lens. I was placing it gently at my feet in the right rear seat-well when Louis' door on the left was torn open and he too was being hauled out.

Through the windshield I saw Louis being frogmarched toward the back of the truck in front. Soumana was boosted, none too gently, over the tailgate. I looked out my window to the right, assessing the possibility of escape. There was a wide, cleared strip on my side of the highway—a line of scrubby bushes, down a slight slope, perhaps forty metres distant. Could I get the door open and run for and hide in that scrub? Would they shoot—how well? Would they linger long enough to come after me? Could I abandon Louis and Soumana to whatever fate awaited them? How much use could I be to them, anyway?

But before I had even fully exited my side, still undecided, the taller of the AK-waving young men had me by the upper arm. He shoved me toward the truck, shouting, "Dépêchez-vous," then pushed and lifted me into the arms of his colleague. Once in the truck bed, I saw that he was standing over Louis and Soumana, who were lying prostrate with horrified looks on their faces. I was thrown on top of them.

The truck then performed a squealing, 180-degree turn and began to speed back in the direction from which we had just come. As my head was being forced below the side, I caught a glimpse of another vehicle across the highway, doors open and deserted. I was certain, however, that a fourth man, whom we had not yet seen (perhaps a passenger in the cab or in a following blocking vehicle) was about to drive it away. I knew that such a high-performance vehicle was probably the single most desirable commodity in Africa. It made sense that our kidnappers would take it straight into the inventory of one or other of the bands of smugglers, bandits, or rebels that frequent the largely lawless northern Sahel region, or at least to a chop shop.

I therefore assumed that my camera bag was now in the hands of my captors. Inside it was a US passport key containing many of the documents relevant to my mission, something I had not trusted to the safe in my room. Some of these reports were sensitive, particularly those relating to my views on the border confides of the government of President Mamadou Tandja. Also in that bag, I thought, was my Amazon Kindle—an electronic book containing about fifty titles, among them *Kill Bin Laden: A Delta Force*

Commander's Account of the Hunt for the World's Most Wanted Man; The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned into a War on American Ideals; and *Sniper One: On Scope and under Siege with a Sniper Team in Iraq*. There was also a series of books by Daniel Silva, whose protagonist is a Mossad agent in the business of eliminating the enemies of Israel. I didn't know what they had taken us, but I didn't relish the prospect of any kidnapers in that part of the world discovering my reading preferences.

From my what-the-hell realization that something was seriously amiss to our being slung aboard our kidnapers' truck and driven off in the opposite direction, no more than forty seconds had elapsed. It had been, I regretted to conclude, a slick, violent, well-coordinated, and impeccably executed grab.

Much later it occurred to me that it was odd there had been no traffic moving in that long valley in either direction over this admittedly short period. While not impossible, the odds of that occurring so conveniently were low. It seemed likely, therefore, that our kidnapers had had collaborators blocking the traffic. I suspected the sheep-laden van might have had that assignment, but of course that was mere speculation.

As soon as I had been flung down on top of Soumana and Louis, our abductors shouted at us in French to remain absolutely silent and still, while speaking to each other in a language I could not recognize. They threw a foul, stinking, oily blanket on top of us, on which they then sat. My face, pressed against the suffocating darkness, was a couple of centimetres from Soumana's. In a whisper, I asked him if he could recognize the language they were speaking. When I received no answer, I asked again and again in an ever-louder whisper, which earned me a haphazard but forceful thump from above and a further admonition to remain quiet. I thought that the language might provide a clue to who had grabbed us, so I persisted. Soumana was almost literally petrified. Eventually I received a whimpered "I don't know, I don't know." I took this to mean either he really didn't know or he didn't want to risk the further ire of our captors. I decided to shut up, and listened for sounds from Louis below and behind me. Hearing nothing, I whispered his name and heard a grunt to signify he was at least still with us.

After ten or fifteen minutes of smooth, fast driving on blacktop, we braked sharply and, though we could see nothing, it seemed as if we had turned right, northeast, off the highway. Now we were clearly running off-road as the bumps and smacks were horrendous, the three of us rising, it seemed nearly a metre before being slammed back onto the metal truck bed. This merciless pounding continued for maybe another thirty minutes. As we continued to be smashed about in this manner, I heard groans from both Louis and Soumana—and from a third person, whom I eventually recognized as myself.

Suddenly, we stopped in an area of thick brush and the three of us were hauled over the tailgate to join our abductors behind the vehicle. There were three of them: the two twenty-something Africans who had grabbed us and an older, light brown, Arab-featured man of medium stature in his middle forties, who subsequently identified himself as Omar. He was clearly in charge.

Omar demanded our papers, and Louis produced his UN *laissez-passer* (a travel document that looks like a passport and contains essentially the same information, in addition to a description of the bearer's UN mission). I had a fair quantity of cash in U.S. dollars and local currency but no identification documents, a fact that irritated our kidnapers no end. First they couldn't understand how I could be so irresponsible as to go forth into the African hinterland without papers, and then they began to believe that I had somehow disposed of my documents in the course of the kidnapping. They asked again and again, who I was and what was I doing in Niger. While my answers were congruent with the

information in Louis' UN *laissez-passer*, my captors were frustrated that they couldn't objectively confirm whom they had taken, or as I was soon to surmise, that they had indeed lifted the guy they had been sent to grab.

We then had to empty our pockets. Aside from our cash, which they pocketed, there wasn't really much to take. They took Louis' watch (an anniversary gift from his wife, Mai) and his *laissez-passer* along with his late edition, government-issue BlackBerry, which attracted a lot of interest. The captor demanded that he immediately turn it off and remove the battery. Still perplexed by my lack of documentation, they withdrew into a huddle some metres away. I used these moments to say to Louis, "No matter what happens, tell the truth; even if it's not the whole truth. If you don't, you will inevitably be caught in a web of lies, which, at best, will lose their confidence and can only cause problems for us, whatever awaits us." This was also, of course, advice to myself and I hoped that such a guideline might marginally ease Louis' stress level, just as it had eased my own.

I don't recall where Soumana was at the time; perhaps they were questioning him. As Louis and I stood alone together, sore and terrified, I noticed a gash across Louis' left eyebrow, eyelid, and upper cheekbone, which had bled onto his shirt collar. It didn't look deep, but nor did it bode well. I insisted that it wasn't serious and did not hurt much. He said that the son of a bitch we subsequently came to know as Hassan had raked him, quite gratuitously, across the face with the foresight of his assault rifle while Louis was being loaded into the back of the truck. We spoke briefly about who our captors might be but had drawn no conclusions by the time they returned.

When they did return, Hassan, the shorter and stockier of the two Africans, was tightly masked ninja like: very different from the turbans worn by virtually every male in the region and different again from the Tuareg-type turbans, which hid everything save a narrow slit for the eyes in carefully prepared folds of material covering the head, face, and neck. Hassan's covering was tightly wound around his head and across his face, so that the outline of his skull, cheekbones, nose, and lips were visible through the material. From that point onward, we never saw him unmasked and, given the stresses and strains of the previous forty minutes, neither Louis nor I retained the least idea of what "Ninja Boy" actually looked like.

As soon as they returned from their caucus, I urged them to let Louis and Soumana go free, insisting that to keep all three of us was a burden they didn't need to assume. I explained that I was the prisoner (something for which they would clearly have liked to have had documentary evidence) and that by the time the other two found their way back to the highway, the rest of us could be long gone in another direction. When this was dismissively rejected, Louis tried to get them to agree at least to release Soumana, who had nothing to offer them. But that too got no useful response.

Louis and I were then instructed to stand face to face about a metre apart, with our forearms stretched out toward each other. They used packing tape to bind (happily, over our long-sleeved shirts) my right wrist to his left, and his right to my left. With words that I did not understand and gestures that I did, Omar instructed Hassan and the tall, thin African, referred to as "le Sénégalais," to load us into the back of the truck with Soumana, who had not been bound but seemed utterly traumatized.

As the two young, pumped-up kidnappers moved to carry out this instruction, I pointed out rather matter-of-factly to Omar that we would not survive long being bounced around in the back of the truck. Surely, I continued, dead hostages were not in his interest, and on the basis of the pounding we had received since leaving the highway only thirty minutes earlier, there was no way we could take much more—particularly if we could not use our arms and hands to mitigate the punishment we would

be receiving over any additional cross-country travel.

Omar gave me a long, appraising look. Unlike me, he knew the full extent and nature of the journey we would be undertaking. He could see that we were old (I am about twenty-five years older than the life expectancy of the average Sahel resident) and—compared to them—relatively frail. His eyes told me that he realized that indeed these ancient, soft, Western white guys would be terribly damaged by such circumstances. Soumana was clearly suffering the effects of being repeatedly smashed hard on the metal truck bed. He was cradling his left arm and seemed to be experiencing some kind of stomach pain. Louis' bloodstained shirt added force to my argument. Further, I had lost my regular glasses as well as my prescription sunglasses in the initial grab and was staring myopically at anyone who spoke.

So, rather pompously noting that his instructions had been specific regarding the fact that we were to be bound as well as blindfolded and placed in the back of the truck, Omar allowed that, as "mission commander," he could modify such instructions to meet operational requirements. After a moment of further reflection, he told his boys to cut the tape binding my left wrist to Louis' right, leave the other binding in place, and get us into the cab. I went first, hoisting myself into the relatively high cab with my free left hand, and then half dragging Louis in after me with our bound wrists. Once inside, we tried to settle, one cheek each, into the single passenger bucket seat. As "le Sénégalais" slammed the cab door, he noted casually through the window, "If the government helicopters find us before dark we are all dead." I was rather encouraged by the prospect that there might be even a chance of government helicopters looking for us, but I considered this a very remote possibility.

Their truck was the pick-up version of our Toyota Land Cruiser, and was the ubiquitous vehicle of choice for all those who roamed the Sahel. This band of desert and semi-desert stretches from Mauritania's Atlantic coast across Mali, Niger, Chad, and Sudan to the Red Sea, and, effectively, on through the Horn of Africa to the Indian Ocean.

Because our wrists had been bound while we were facing each other, rather than side by side, it was extremely difficult for either of us to protect ourselves in the cab against the brutal buffeting we suffered over the next three days. The way we tried to brace against the dramatic bumps and twists was for Louis, with his window wide open, to hold tightly to the roof with his free right hand, as I reached behind the driver and grabbed the far side of his seat back with my free left hand. We would then twist our bound hands into an X to allow his left and my right to grasp the handle mounted above the glove compartment. Doing this tightened the tape around our wrists, however, and every three or four minutes we had to let go, point our hands in the direction they were in when they were bound, and flex our fingers until circulation had been restored. All in all, it was not a perfect solution to the challenges of the fifty-six hours of hard driving between the moment we were taken and our arrival within the Al Qaeda area of operations in the far north of Mali. Nevertheless, it was an awful lot better than being slammed around in the truck bed, as was Soumana's fate, albeit unbound.

While we crossed two or three open, relatively smooth stretches of desert, in the main the going was rough. In the beginning, we crashed across hand-plowed fields, along *wadis* (dry, boulder-strewn seasonal stream or river beds, which could be anything from slight indentations in the desert floor to deep canyons), and up and down the sides of impossibly steep ravines, weaving among mesa-like outcroppings. When we reached the Sahara proper, we forced our way over and through massive vehicle-gobbling sand dunes.

A measure of what this journey was like would be to calculate that about every ten seconds we would bounce in such a manner that, when we had not been able to brace properly, we smashed on

heads on the roof of the cab or slammed our faces into the dashboard. This tended to occur when we let go of the handle above the glove compartment in order to restore circulation to our fingers. As a result I suffered a damaged coccyx and a significant compression fracture of my L5 vertebra. In the weeks following this descent into hell, sitting upright was impossible, lying down and getting up were painful, and turning over at night was excruciating.

Omar was a traditionalist. He navigated by the sun and stars. Even I can find Polaris, so I was able to watch him follow the North Star hour after hour, sometimes stopping and walking around to get his bearings but always finding the track or direction he was seeking. Sometimes that meant doubling back for twenty minutes to find an obscure turn-off on a route he had obviously travelled before but that I could not make out.

We bumped across maize fields, the dead stalks whipping against the windshield, and crashed straight through collections of huts but generally avoided inhabited areas—something that became ever easier as we proceeded north. Omar used the headlights rarely and we travelled on a road on just one occasion that first night, and even then for only twenty minutes. From time to time we would see a light from a cooking fire or hut far in the distance and I would try to mark its position and then calculate the distance from that point in the ever more forlorn hope that somewhere ahead we could escape and then make our way back to that beacon of freedom. My calculations were far from scientific and certainly inaccurate. The one constant was our heading: due north.

In addition to the fifty-six hours in the trucks were four or five periods of rest, lasting one to three hours each—perhaps ten hours of rest in total.

These were psychologically tough times as we blasted into what promised to be a bleak future. When would we be missed, and when we were, what would happen? We took some comfort in the fact that Guy Villeneuve would be waiting for us to join him for dinner at 7:30. How long, then, before he knew something was amiss, an hour—two at most? How long after that before he sought police and government assistance?

No matter how we framed it, things didn't look good. I didn't think the Niger armed forces were capable of flying search and rescue missions at night, if indeed they could get their helicopters in the air at all. Our captors were obviously avoiding any chance of running into a police roadblock by the simple expedient of avoiding all roads. Further, every passing minute extended the radius of the search area. Despite the fact that Niger is one of the larger countries in the world, the region from which we were taken in the extreme southwestern part of the country was only 100 kilometres from Burkina Faso to the west (although that would entail re-crossing the river, something they were unlikely to risk), about 160 kilometres from Benin to the south, and about the same distance from the border of Mali, due north. I knew, of course, that we were heading north, but anybody who might be looking for us could not be sure. Every hour, even as we crunched along off-road at only twenty to thirty kilometres per hour, would add thousands of square kilometres to the search area. Dredging up high school math, I applied r^2 to our laborious progress and determined that at the end of six hours as we approached the Mali border to the north, the search area would be over 70,000 square kilometres. I did not expect to be rescued soon.

So, when would our families learn what had happened?

This was a particularly acute issue in my case. It was Sunday evening in Niger, Sunday noon in Ottawa. Mary was leaving, unless her plans had changed, very early on Monday morning for Florida where I was to meet her in six days' time. Would she get the news before she left?

How would she and our girls handle the news? In short—would they be okay? Would the Canadian government apparatus be as supportive as I hoped? Would friends immediately rally round? How would Canada and the United Nations work out responsibility for any negotiations with our abductors and for getting us home? Would Mary and the girls forgive me for putting them through such torment? All these hugely important, very fraught issues and the attendant uncertainty gnawed at my fragile composure. I was terrified, sad, and desperate, and in no little discomfort. What further unpleasant surprises did the immediate future hold? I am sure that similar thoughts were also churning through Louis' mind.

Mostly just to break the tension, we tried to make desultory conversation with Omar. I asked him to teach us his language, which turned out to be Tamasheq, the language spoken by the Tuareg, although none of our captors seemed to me to be Tuareg. We started with numbers, but I was so discombobulated that I could not remember the word for four by the time he got to six.

From time to time, Louis would say something softly to me in English, something he clearly did not want Omar, seated maybe seventy centimetres from him, to hear. The trouble, of course, was that this sounded sneaky and secretive, like my parents whispering to each other *pas devant les enfants* over Sunday lunch, and I tried to discourage him from doing so.

At one point, though, Louis asked, "Do you think we're going to Geneva?" which even in my state of confused dread I could figure out meant did I believe we had been taken by rebels from the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la justice (the MNJ, or Movement of Nigeriens for Justice). The reference to Geneva related to the fact that we had arranged to return to that city in early January to hold a second series of meetings with the MNJ rebels, likely including their leader, Aghali Alambane. Thus, if our kidnapers were from the MNJ, not only would we be saved a trip to see them in Switzerland but we might also be on a roundabout way to freedom relatively soon.

Since conversation proved difficult and possibly dangerous, we gave our dark thoughts far too much rein as we defended ourselves as best we could against the torturous ride. Sometime near midnight, we approached an isolated collection of ramshackle buildings beside a roaring open fire. Omar stopped the truck a good distance away and left us in the hands of le Sénégalais and Hassan. As he approached the shadowy figures around the fire, one detached himself from the rest and he and Omar paced back and forth, silhouettes in front of the fire, deep in conversation. It wasn't long before the dark figure briskly turned back to his colleagues and Omar returned to the truck. Without a word or glance in one direction, he threw it into gear and we were off again. I wondered if a death sentence had been pronounced and whether we would live another ten minutes.

A couple of hours later we stopped by a small, dark collection of low mud huts and a furtive figure materialized out of one of them. Omar consulted him briefly and we were off again. Some hours later we drove through another group of dark huts, which this time was not a way station of sympathizers but rather some kind of family compound. Once we had blundered among those huts, there seemed no way out. Omar turned on the headlights. Figures appeared, first two or three, then many more. African men, women, and children in various stages of undress flitted through the shifting, dusty glare of the truck's headlights. Omar—clearly unsettled—charged about, cranking through the gears, looking for an escape route. He shouted something to the boys in the back, which I assumed to be an admonition to remain calm and keep their weapons out of sight.

The growing crowd was not overtly hostile but they were evidently curious about who we might be and, by their facial expressions, seemed to resent the abrupt and aggressive intrusion. These people

did not seem to be aligned with our captors, and I yearned to call to them for help as we flashed past just a few metres away. Perhaps, I briefly considered, Louis could open his door so we could hug ourselves at the feet of these simple villagers. I was certain, though, that our abductors would never allow such a ploy to succeed. The villagers were unarmed and I cringed to imagine what a couple AKs, or “Kalashes” as our captors invariably called them, would do to this small crowd of innocent and defenceless onlookers so close at hand.

Omar spun the truck in a new direction and we smashed through a little shed made of sticks and thatch and out into a maize field. I wondered if the people we left in our wake, whose peace and sleep we had so rudely interrupted, would find a way to report the event to some authority as they certainly would have seen Louis’ startled, very white face in the truck window. Or maybe they would connect this event with news of our abduction. I doubted, though, that either would occur.

Around three in the morning, by my very rough calculation, we stopped for a tea break and brief rest. My back was in spasm and I was not sure I could even exit the vehicle, however much I needed to pee. But I also needed to see Soumana. I had barely been able to discern through the small back window of the cab what I thought were three dark figures in the truck bed but could not tell if one of them was Soumana. Unmindful of whether Omar heard or not, I repeatedly asked Louis whether Soumana was still with us and with mounting frustration Louis pointed him out two or three times. I suppose it was my disoriented state that caused me to obsess about him, coupled with the damage to my back, which made it difficult to turn around in my seat; and without my glasses I could see little. When we stopped and I was finally able to recognize him, I was hugely relieved. Soumana was not, though, in great shape either physically or psychologically. I could only imagine what punishment he had been taking as he was bounced about on the steel truck bed. When we had a chance to speak, he was uncommunicative, confused—nearly catatonic.

The moon had set. Everyone was tired. Nobody seemed to be paying much attention to me. Could I just wander off? We hadn’t seen any sign of life for a long time. There were a few bushes in the stark lunar landscape. How easy would it be for them to find me? How far could I get in the heat of the following day in such vast and hostile emptiness without shelter, food, or water? Aside from feeling confident that I should head south, was I likely to find anyone who could or would help? Wracked with indecision and declining confidence, I just leaned against the truck and tried to rest—the inglorious path of least resistance.

On and on we drove until a couple of hours before dawn we skidded to a stop following a particularly difficult stretch. Omar announced, “I must sleep,” opened his door, and rolled under the truck. Hassan cut the tape binding our wrists, threw a blanket from the back onto the hard-packed sand and told us to rest. He led Soumana away to some other place. Le Sénégalais took sentry duty.

Louis lay down, exhausted, but my back pain was such that I could not stretch out. I was also very cold, clad only in a thin cotton shirt and trousers. I paced a racetrack pattern, taking care to remain well within the sentry’s sight and immediate vicinity.

After some minutes of walking the pain in my lower back subsided and I wandered over to where the sentry was brewing tea. He had a tiny fire going, on which he placed a small metal teapot. I asked him if I should call him le Sénégalais, as had Omar. With a surprisingly good-natured laugh he said, “No, my name is Ibrahim, but I am from Senegal.”

I was terribly thirsty but had got it into my addled brain that I must not drink the murky, sludgy brown water from their large ten-litre plastic container. If I did so, I was convinced, I would contract

dysentery. My state of denial was such that I calculated I must avoid the trots so that I could take my place in the reviewing stand in just three days' time in Tillabéri—an hour down the road from where we had been taken—to participate in the celebration of Niger's fiftieth anniversary of independence. Surely all this unpleasantness would somehow be over by then.

Tea, however, seemed reasonably safe. Ibrahim was dropping handfuls of tea and sugar into the pot and I hoped to cadge a glass or two. It was the Arab version: hot, green, very sweet, and served in minuscule glasses, which would not greatly alleviate my increasing dehydration. When I was standing above him, he looked up at me with a sardonic, fire-lit smile and asked, "So, have you figured out where we are yet?"

I had been dreading this moment for most of the preceding twelve hours and passively avoiding confronting the inexorably dawning reality. I asked, without conviction, "Are you not the MNJ?" When his facial expression suggested confusion and not a little disdain, I added, unnecessarily, "Le Mouvement des Nigériens pour la justice?"

Ibrahim snorted with derision. "I told you I was Senegalese. What would I be doing with a gang of amateurs like that?" I simply stared at him as the fire danced in his menacing black eyes. Finally drawing out the moment with cruel anticipation, he fiercely spat the words, "We are Al Qaeda!" And the bottom fell out of my world.

As I walked away from the fire, reeling from the palpable enjoyment Ibrahim had derived from his revelation, I did not look forward to passing on this news to Louis. When I found a private moment to tell him, while our kidnappers had stopped to pray, he took it stoically enough, simply noting, "I'd rather be in the hands of people who prayed." For my part, however, I estimated that our chances of emerging whole from this ordeal stood at about 5 percent, principally because I could not convince myself to accept a lower number.

CHAPTER 2

CENTRAL STATION

*My lips were wet, my throat was cold,
My garments all were dank;
Sure I had drunken in my dreams,
And still my body drank.*

Shortly after Ibrahim confirmed the worst of my fears by telling me that we had been captured by Al Qaeda, it was time to move after what couldn't have been more than a couple of hours of rest. Omar rolled wide awake from under his truck. Once he had been served a tiny glass of tea and Louis and I had again been bound, we were underway.

Louis had slept a bit and was groggy, but my adrenalin-suffused brain was in search of something to take my mind off the Al Qaeda implications. I had again lost track of Soumana, who must have flopped down on the other side of the vehicle to grab some rest under the ever-watchful eyes of Hassan. And so I resumed my obsessive worrying. Where was Soumana? Had he escaped or perhaps been freed, or more likely, I thought, simply been killed? I was unable to quell my rising anxiety.

As we crashed ever northward through the gradually greying dawn, there was no sign of habitation or cultivation. Eventually, the sun rose to our right, and I drifted in and out of some kind of stupor, returning again and again to the wretched realization that this was no dream.

As the day broke, Omar produced two long pieces of thin, beige cotton material and we were instructed, "Turbanisez-vous." Evidently we were supposed to use the material to create turbans but neither of us knew how to accomplish that, let alone with only one free hand. Omar gave us a brief demonstration while driving. As he unwound his turban, he revealed a closely cropped head with about a week's growth of stubble. Suddenly he looked smaller, frailer, and ten years younger—significantly less fierce and commanding person. Louis and I tried to follow his turban-tying example one at a time, as first one and then the other of us used a bound hand to assist in the process. The result was far from perfect, and Omar found this simultaneously slightly amusing and very annoying.

He then told us sternly and with more menace than he had exhibited to that point, that under no circumstances were we to talk to anybody we might encounter. Were we to attempt to do so the consequences would be cataclysmic for all concerned. Further, we were to avert our (pasty-white) faces without having to be ordered to do so, from any person we saw, no matter how far distant. In such circumstances Louis, by the window, was to bring his bracing arm inside the truck, again so that his telltale white hand would not reveal our identity.

For some hours Omar's instructions about how we had to behave when people were sighted seemed rather abstract. But gradually, as we continued to claw our way north, we began to see the odd low black tent, usually tucked in against some brush and meagre trees, scenes right out of desert nomad central casting. Omar tended to give these tents and any sign of habitation a wide berth, but now and then we would see a young boy herding goats or sheep fairly close by in that vast emptiness.

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